

WEEKEND

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A saga of secret SHAME

FIBER ARTISTS
SHOWCASED

16

THE BEST CHINESE
RESTAURANT IN MARIN

22

'WILD HOGS'
GRINDS GEARS

27

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When LOVE defeated hate

Poignant play tells of racial uproar when white Corte Madera woman married Japanese-American man in 1909

By Rick Polito
IJ reporter

BRENDA WONG AOKI looks down at a sheaf of white paper fresh from the laser printer and reads aloud the headlines of a century ago:

“Don’t Want Aoki In Their Town — Corte Madera Men are Said to Be Planning to Run the Japanese Out.”

“Friend of Emery Family Seeks Medical Advice as to Whether Hypnotism Can Explain Girl’s Wild Infatuation for Japanese.”

The story of Aoki’s immigrant grand-uncle, the scion of samurai, and his love and marriage to an upper-class Corte Madera woman may be a tale of love and scandal from a different era, but for the San Francisco storyteller it is also a story of jarring immediacy. The scandal and “secret shame” of a century ago march in heavy footfalls across the generations.

Aoki will bring that story to the stage March 2 and 3 at the Jewish Community Center in San Francisco. It’s the story of her own heritage, a story she did not know until 11 years ago.

A story she still struggles to understand today.

Aoki will say that everyone is in some way a product of their family history, but she didn’t know her own family’s past until she pried it from a family album, digging through the archives and finding the blaring headlines about the “yellow peril” and perceived threat of miscegenation.

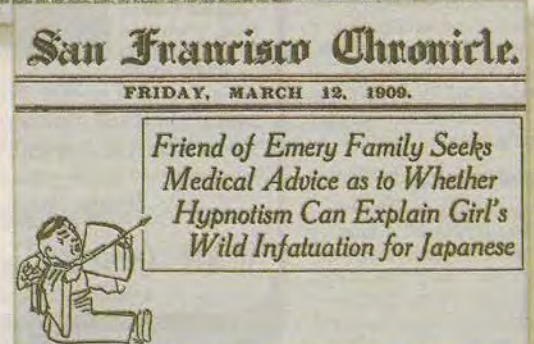
It shook her.

Aoki’s grandfather came to the United States to become an Episcopal priest and was a founder of San Francisco’s Japantown. His brother, referred by Aoki as Uncle Gunjiro, became the focus of scandal when he courted the daughter of the diocese archdeacon. Helen Emery lived in Corte Madera and the



RACIST REMNANTS OF THE PAST: Helen Emery and Gunjiro Aoki (above) had an interracial romance that shocked the nation in 1909. Newspaper clippings (left) and a published love letter from Aoki to his fiancée (facing page) capture the mood of the scandal that led to violence in Marin County.

Provided by
Brenda Wong Aoki





IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel

OPEN ARMS: Brenda Wong Aoki of Corte Madera and her son, K.K., work on their choreography at rehearsal. The performance, based on a true story, is partly in honor of Japantown's 100th birthday.

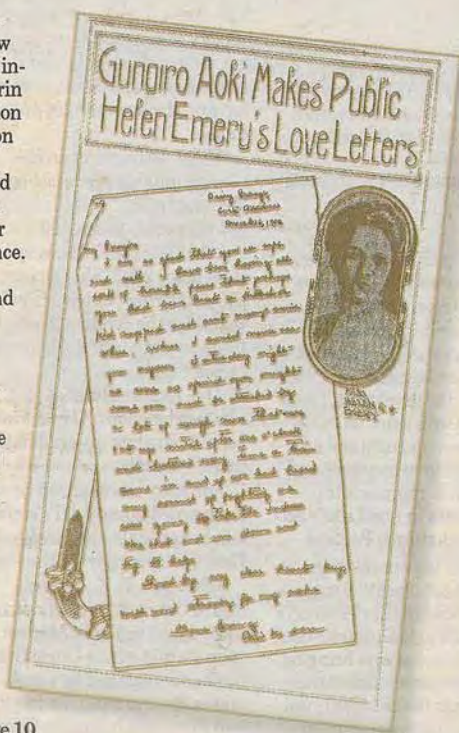
romance raised a racist furor that made it all the way to the front page of the New York Times and had local publications, including this paper's progenitor, the Marin County Journal, calling for miscegenation laws and siding with the Asian Exclusion League.

When Gunjiro Aoki and his fiance fled the Bay Area looking for a safe haven in which to wed, they were greeted on their journey with scorn and threats of violence. Boarding a northbound train in Corte Madera, they were pelted with refuse and threatened with tar and feathers.

They were eventually married under armed guard and the protection of the Seattle mayor and went on to raise children who were initially labeled in the local press as "freaks." In the wake of the scandal, Aoki's grandfather was pushed out of the church and fled to Utah. The storyteller grew up believing her family had never been people of consequence.

"We were dirt-poor sharecroppers," Aoki says.

Aoki grew up sensing a "secret shame" and came to recognize it as a force in the family's "downward mobility." She saw herself as a "ghetto girl" growing up in Long Beach and



See Uncle Gunjiro, page 10



IN TUNE: Mark Izu, who plays bass and participates in the show, makes notes on his script during rehearsal for 'Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend,' which will be on stage March 2 and 3 in San Francisco.

IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel

UNCLE GUNJIRO:

Bigotry, which was accepted at the time, boiled over in Marin

From page 9

wondered why.

When she became a performer, studying in the Japanese Kyogen and Noh disciplines, she found herself attuned to the stories around her. "I always feel like stories are given to me," she says.

She had to ask for this one.

Yearning to find the source of the shadow she sensed in her family, Aoki traveled to Sacramento to meet her then 106-year-old cousin, Sadae. When the centenarian opened an album and identified a very Caucasian face as "Uncle Gunjiro's girlfriend," Aoki was intrigued.

She peered deeper, searching the Episcopal diocese archive and pulling microfilm at the San Francisco public library.

One of the people she met along the way was Father Jim Rawlinson of the St. James Episcopal Church in Oakland, and an archivist for the diocese.

The story Aoki sought, Rawlinson says, is a compelling one. It is a century old, but it has resonance today.

"This one story shows the depth to which the ripples touch widely and therefore provoke our own thinking of how our own actions today will affect people 40, 50, 100 years from now," Rawlinson says.

The past isn't as distant as many would hope. "Californians forget, if they ever knew, that California had racially discriminatory laws and that we have a history of racism in a way that we'd prefer to ignore and forget," Rawlinson says.

Jim Hirabayashi knows about that urge to sweep aside the past. The retired Mill Valley professor spent World War II in a Fresno internment camp and decades later became the chief curator at the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles. For too many, the history of the Japanese immigrants goes back no farther than the internment. The years before the war, as revealed in

"Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend" are also marked by anti-Japanese discrimination. Even the internment gets short shrift in textbooks.

"A lot of people don't know about that, either," Hirabayashi says.

Hirabayashi traveled to a "Day of Remembrance" at the site of the Fresno camp last weekend but he says works like Aoki's can do more to educate people than monuments and history books. It's history in the voices of real people, long dead but immediate voices. Theater allows those voices to be heard.

"In the theater you just put out the stuff based on emotion and then the audience reacts to it," Hirabayashi says.

Told that way, the stories become impossible to ignore, or forget. Aoki cannot forget her family's stories. She sees the effects. She feels the footfalls.

The more she found, the more Aoki saw the tale as a story she could tell. She developed "Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend" as a one-woman show and debuted it in 1997. She toured the show and was chosen to represent the United States in Australia's Adelaide International Festival.

The story is a complex one, not easy to tell. Jael Weisman is directing Aoki in this weekend's version of "Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend." Weisman says bringing the audience on a journey that jumps across the decades is not easy. The photos and the reproductions of the archived newspapers are projected on the screens and Aoki uses those headlines along with letters written by the lovers.

"There is so much documentation here," Weisman says. "There is a kind of journalistic approach that comes out."

The challenge, he says, is to help the audience see the contrast of the eras past and present without losing sight of the immediate impact those events have on the lives of Aoki's family today.



THE SOURCE:

Brenda Wong Aoki's 106-year-old cousin, Sadae, had a treasure trove of clippings about the 1909 incident.

IF YOU GO

What: "Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend"

When: 8 p.m. March 2 and 3

Where: Kanbar Hall, Jewish Community Center, Presidio Avenue and California Street, San Francisco

Tickets: \$25

Information: 929-1233 or www.maven.jccsf.org

"What is the effect on the second and third generations?" Weisman asks. "The challenge is getting people to see that."

Aoki hasn't told the story on stage since 2002. She felt compelled to bring out the script last year after the ceremonies for the 100th anniversary of Japantown in San Francisco.

"One hundred later at the commemoration of Japantown, I could reinstate my grandfather there," she says.

The story has changed as she has learned more. Aoki's son will join her on stage this weekend. He has become part of the story.

Aoki's son, K.K., attends Marin Country Day School, not so far from the Corte Madera train station where Uncle Gunjiro was threatened by a mob. He makes the trip from the family's San Francisco home five days a week.

He understands that trip a little better now.

"We always had a big pile of stuff in the corner that was 'Uncle Gunjiro's story' and I never knew what it was," he says. "Now I feel that I really understand what Mom's talking about."

When K.K. leaves for school, Brenda Wong Aoki will sometimes remember how her grand-uncle left San Francisco. "One hundred years later, K.K. is

making that same journey," Aoki says. "It's such an irony." It's also a reminder of the toll that the past demands of the present.

Aoki's son is one of only two Asian students in his grade. She says the school has "been really supportive," but she cannot mistake a sense of otherness. "I don't even know how to articulate it," she says.

The culture is not completely healed of the scars from the era when her family was driven from San Francisco. They run too deep, across families, across generations, stories.

The story in "Uncle Gunjiro's Girlfriend" was played out nearly 100 years ago and Aoki will tell it on stage this weekend. But she will have to keep telling it.

The story's not over.

It might never be.

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