

## REVIEWS

***Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the World War II Internment Camps.*** Directed by Shirley Muramoto-Wong. Produced by Murasaki Productions, LLC, 2014. 57 minutes.

War-time narratives often focus on the destructive horrors of the conflict and its impact on people. Less illuminated are the unexpected paradoxes it generates, such as the flourishing of a counterculture. In my examination of radio broadcasting during the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines in World War II, one irony I found was the rise of the use of the Tagalog language on the air, which challenged the prewar dominance of English and the vigorous attempts to make Nihongo the lingua franca in the country. A similar contradiction took place across the Pacific Ocean during the same period. In the Philippines, Americans and other Allied nationals were confined by the Japanese in internment camps. In the United States, particularly in western states, the reverse took place: the US War Relocation Authority rounded up over a hundred thousand Japanese-Americans and detained them in several camps in retaliation for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941. While enduring the curtailment of their freedom, the internees taught, learned, and practiced traditional Japanese cultural expressions. They also adopted American culture, playing baseball and dancing to swing music. The documentary, *Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the World War II Internment Camps* reveals all these and more, portraying a different picture from the images constructed by histories written after the war.

A product of over 20 years of painstaking research by Shirley Kazuyo Muramoto-Wong, the daughter of an internee, the film unveils

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the fascinating lives within the camps. Survivors of the camps rarely discussed with their children and grandchildren the pain of their incarceration and the discrimination they endured, but Muramoto-Wong's persistence coaxed surviving internees and their relatives to talk about their experiences, in particular about the thriving of traditional Japanese music, dance, theater, and other arts in the camps. Historical photos and film footage of the performances help bring to light how the internees expressed their bottled-up feelings—in Japanese called *gaman*—through performance, which was a culturally acceptable medium of such expression because it helped maintain discipline and dignity through suffering.

The camps actually afforded the internees unanticipated opportunities to learn Japanese culture. Over 60 percent were *Nisei*, or US-born Japanese with US citizenship, and their children. Prior to internment, work occupied the parents, and few could afford to send their children to Japanese teachers to learn about Japanese culture and arts. Taken away from their prewar routines, and with Japanese teachers and artists also held in the camps, many studied Japanese arts for the first time. Apart from the performing arts, they learned about Japanese traditional dress, classical painting, calligraphy, and practical crafts like Japanese gardening. For performances, they made props, built stages from scraps, painted fabrics for kimonos, created costumes, and even constructed musical instruments. In some camps, some teachers even received compensation while other instructors and performers were allowed to travel to other camps to perform, hold classes, and procure materials for costumes. As the documentary points out, the young not only learned about Japanese arts but also the Japanese concept and practice of discipline and grace. One of the interviewees points out that life was terrible, but it built up strength and the will to survive while preserving their pride and dignity.

The documentary contrasts the experience of Japanese-Americans in the US mainland with those in Hawaii, who comprised one-third of the Hawaiian population and whose contribution to the Hawaiian economy was significant. As a consequence, very few of them were interned. Ironically, because their loyalty to the United States had to be ensured,

and because they carried on their prewar duties and activities, Japanese-Americans in Hawaii did not have the same opportunities as their mainland counterparts to pause from their routine to learn and practice traditional Japanese culture.

Partly funded by a grant from the US Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and the Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program, the documentary explains how, in the midst of war and prejudice, a marginalized culture survived and flourished. The film allows young Japanese-Americans today to understand the experiences of their parents and grandparents, and to think about their own identities as both American and Japanese. It may be said that the internment recuperated Japanese arts, which continued to enjoy resurgence after the war. But it also transformed the practices of some Japanese cultural expressions. For example, young women learned the dress and movements of the *geisha*, such as classical music and dance, for theatrical performance, and not for male entertainment, which was the objective of learning such practices in Japan.

The documentary, made by Muramoto-Wong, Pauline L. Fong, and Joshua Fong, built on the interviews, oral and visual histories, and artifacts which Muramoto-Wong collected for 20 years from the internees—including the teachers, the students, the performers, and the artists who survived the internment camps—and their relatives. Aired on public television stations in the US and shown via special screenings in both US and Japan, *Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the World War II Internment Camps* uncovers and preserves previously silent memories. In the process, such remembering serves to let the memories celebrate human resilience and fortitude in the midst of war and its ironies.

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