

THE GATE OF HEAVEN

(1997)

Members of The "1939" Club attended the opening night production of The Gate of Heaven at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center on November 5, 1997.

The Gate of Heaven is a compelling and poignant story of friendship between two "soldiers," one Jewish and the other Japanese American.

The Japanese American soldier, Leon, who fought with the 442nd Regiment, participated in the liberation of Dachau, saves "Sam" a concentration camp survivor of Dachau. Their wartime experiences create the bond and foundation of their friendship over the next 50 years. The Gate of Heaven is a story that celebrates the differences and similarities of their cultures, the importance of family and of strength of their individual cultural heritage. Theirs is a true friendship not governed by color, and their relationship exposes the differences and similarities of their cultures, pride of heritage and importance of family and their constant battle to fit into a society that both embraces and tortures them.

After the performance, guests were treated to a beautiful reception where many "1939" Club survivors of Dachau and surrounding camps reunited with many Japanese American soldiers of the 442nd Regiment.

Playwrights' Notes By Lane Nishikawa, Playwright

I've spent a great deal of my adult life trying to understand the Nisei (2nd generation), my father's generation, and how they sacrificed for us to be truly accepted in this country. They faced tremendous odds during World War II and their stories are never told in history books. Questions of loyalty constantly followed them and acts of racism against them went unrecorded. I had three uncles who fought with the 442nd Regiment and the M.I.S. (Military Intelligence Service). It amazes me that people today have never heard of them. Maybe it is because not only were the Nisei courageous, but they are also modest. The 442nd was the highest decorated regiment in American history but no one knows of this. Ten years ago I was traveling through France and had to stop in the town of Bruyeres. I had heard the 442nd liberated the town from the Nazis. In the middle of town is a monument dedicated to those men. I talked to a Frenchman who was well aware of their heroic deeds. They teach the children about the men who saved them during the war. He told me some of the Japanese Americans are still buried there. I went to the cemetery to pay my respects and the road name had been changed to "Rue de Honolulu" in honor of the soldiers who gave their lives. That day the seed for The Gate of Heaven was born.

By Victor Talmadge, Playwright

It was the winter of 1993 when Lane first approached me with the idea of developing a piece which was based on an historical incident from World War II, the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp by some of the members of the 442nd Regiment of the U.S. Army. I had a number of relatives who had either been in the camps or had fled from them and their stories were very personal to me. Their lives had reverberated in me since childhood and this was my opportunity to give them a proper hearing. What struck me immediately about the story of the 442nd and Dachau was how it spoke to humanity on the basic level of collective responsibility and cooperation between very different, almost randomly chosen people and at the same time was filled with rich ironies: from the existence of Japanese Internment Camps in the U.S. to the basic fact that the 442nd was made up of men only one generation removed from Japan, and Japan was the enemy.

The message of human solidarity of this singular event even underscores the art form through which it is told here. I had co-authored once before on a project and knew that a delicate balance of talents was required for a successful partnership to take place. It is, as my friend Lane likes to say, "a relationship." At its heart, this marriage of creation requires mutual understanding when the writing begins to be translated by the director, designers and actors, a collaborative process, which is theater, is born. This unique and totally integrating experience is only then, finally completed with the involvement of the audience.

An organic synthesis of inter-relationships permeates every level of Gate. This is highlighted with the friendship that develops between Sam and Leon. As we were writing the play, we found that the characters were learning from each other's culture and family experiences and developing respect for one another in much the same way that Lane and I were learning from each other. Coming from vastly different places, we had specific viewpoints and expertise that not only complimented one another, but allowed the characters, as well, to do the same. As we discovered, the characters discovered. An overlapping of fact and fiction began to surface. Let me cite just one of many examples: just as Leon's savior was Sam, after researching for the play, I learned that my mother had been rescued by a real hero, Japanese Diplomat Chiune Sugihara, who was stationed in Lithuania as the war broke out. In truth then, my very existence is due to the unselfish, heartfelt efforts of a Japanese man. It is this kind of symbiosis that has created a genuinely integrated, personal/public piece.

These are just a few of the aspects that have made the writing and performing of The Gate Of Heaven a true labor of love. It is your presence that allows our story to be told. By bearing witness to each other's lives, we begin a much needed healing process. For as Albert Schweitzer so eloquently and prophetically wrote, "The tragedy of a man is what dies inside himself while he still lives." We are blessed to be able to share it with you.