



New York Premiere of NO-NO BOY Adapts Benchmark Novel for the Stage, Examines Human Repercussions of Internment and the Resettlement Era

Q&A with playwright Ken Narasaki and Tamio Spiegel

TS: How did you decide to adapt John Okada's novel, No-No Boy for the stage?

KN: I was first struck by the novel when I read it in the 1970s when I was still living in Seattle. I was really blown away by the characters then.

I had written a play called 'Innocent When You Dream' which dealt a little bit with the no-no boys. There was that storyline in it.

My father was a 442 veteran. It was sometime in the 1990s that the JACL had drafted a proposal to apologize to the no-no boys and the draft resisters. Some vets were opposed to it and my dad was really opposed to it.

I was struck by the passion these guys felt about it sixty years later. I thought it was something to revisit.

It took me a year-and-a-half to two years to write the adaptation that Pan Asian is doing.

TS: What were some of the greatest challenges in adapting the novel to a play?

KN: It was tricky. The most difficult part of it is – the structure of the novel is very internal. It's mostly Ichiro's journey to all these different places. It was tricky to think about how we would put that on stage.

Also, the character of Ichiro was a draft resister rather a no-no boy. We had to address that. Some people felt it didn't matter but some people felt 'No, you HAVE to address that.'

I talked to a couple of the Heart Mountain draft resisters. One of them came to an early reading we did at the Japanese American National Museum and he initially said he was actually heartened by it – that we did try to address some of the differences.

The challenges of adapting any novel to the stage is really editorial. You can't put everything in. What do you cut out? I chose to cut out some scenes for time's sake and the sheer number of characters we can really put on the stage. Originally, I thought 'I'm going to try to put everything in there', and we learned really quickly that that was just impossible. There were too many characters and too many things happening at the same time.

What we had to do in the process was to understand what was absolutely necessary, what we could cut out without harming the narrative, and what we could actually put onstage.

TS: How does the story lend itself particularly well to a theatrical piece?

KN: What attracted me to the novel in the first place was the characters. There's something about theater in which you can form a true kind of passion for the characters when you're watching people on stage in front of you. There's a collaboration between the actors and the director and then there's the collaboration between the actors and the audience, in the moment, which brings those characters to vivid life. That's the thing I really wanted the play to do – bring those characters to life.

The form of theater lends itself to that. You're in the same room as these people and you can't help but feel for every one of them.

TS: The play is not specifically about internment, is it?

KN: Internment hovers over the play. It's where everything springs from. The story starts in 1946 and it's really about relocation, in a way. That comes through in all the characters' journeys. How well are they coming back?

TS: What do you expect or hope that the audience will experience when they are seeing the play?

KN: I want them to come away with a feeling of personal involvement of what happened and a real appreciation for how young some of these people were that were making these life-changing decisions and how similar they are to us, today.

Whenever we think of those times – the internment and the resettlement era – it seems so long ago. So many of those people are dead or very old now and so many of those stories have gotten lost. We read books about the period or study it, it seems almost academic, that this sort of abstractly terrible thing happened. What the story brings to life is that this was not abstract for us. This was real. This happened to young people. It happened to older people as well but the real point of view in the book is of people in their early 20s. They've been to hell and back and don't know how to get back to a normal life. What is a normal life?

What I want people to take away is this sense of how people could react – this is how confusing it could be. This is how much anger and personal dislocation it can create. It's no longer something historical, but, it's something alive. It's not just a 'fact'. It had human repercussions and it resounded in every individual that went through it.

TS: Why do you feel Pan Asian Repertory is the right company for this production?

KN: I sent it to Pan Asian because I knew that they would have the actors for it. There are older characters that really need to be played by experienced actors. There are younger characters that are not easy roles. I knew that Pan Asian had the stable of actors to bring these characters to life.

TS: Any final thoughts on this production of your play, "No-No Boy"?

KN: I hope it gives the play new life so it can be seen by more people. I can't tell you how many people have told me 'I have this book. I thought I read it, but, I never have...' Everyone assumes it's a political tirade, but, it's not. My biggest hope for the play is that it brings people back to the book.

I really hope that the surviving no-no boys, resisters, and veterans come out to see it. I know it's late in the game but one of my strongest wishes for the play is that it be a healing piece for the community - that it can address some of these rifts, that it can get people to see beyond their own positions.

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PAN ASIAN REP's **NO-NO BOY** runs May 14 – 18 at The Studio Theatre (410 W 42nd Street at Theatre Row). Performances are Wednesday through Saturday at 7:30pm with matinees Saturday and Sunday at 2:30pm. Tickets are \$37. Contact Telecharge at 212-239-6200 or www.telecharge.com. For instructions on how to receive discounts for groups, seniors and students, and a schedule of weekday student matinee performances for middle and high school students, call 212-868-4030 or visit www.panasianrep.org. For more information about Theatre Row visit www.theatrerow.org.