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THEATER

LIA CHANG — THEATREWORKS SILICON VALLEY

Joel de la Fuente stars in the solo play "Hold These Truths," about a man who challenged the Japanese internment camps of World War II in court.

Play details man's fight against internment camps during WWII

By Sam Hurwitt
Correspondent

Jeanne Sakata's one-person play "Hold These Truths" has been produced all over the country in the decade since its premiere with Los Angeles' East West Players in 2007 under its previous title, "Dawn's Light." So it's kind of remarkable that it's only now getting its Northern California premiere at Palo Alto's Lucie Stern Theatre, opening TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's 49th season.

"Hold These Truths" tells the story of Gordon Hirabayashi, a Seattle-born Japanese-American who refused to be sent to an internment camp during World War II in a case that went to the Supreme Court.

"My father's side of the family during World War II had to leave very suddenly, like all people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast, and they went to live in an internment camp in Arizona," Sakata said. "And there were so many unanswered questions for me growing up, because they never talked about that experience. Although I knew something bad happened to them during World War II, when I would ask my father or my aunts and uncles, they would just give very short answers and very quickly change the subject."

It wasn't until the 1990s that Sakata first learned about Hirabayashi's story, through a documentary she saw on PBS.

"I thought it was a fascinating, riveting story,

'HOLD THESE TRUTHS'

Through: Aug. 5

Where: Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

Tickets: $40–$100; 650-463-1960, www.theatreworks.org

'Truths'

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and it meant a lot to me to know about Gordon's resistance, both as a Japanese-American and also just as an American citizen," Sakata recalled. "And I thought, why didn't I know about this man? Why didn't I learn about him in my history books?"

It became a watershed moment for Sakata.

"On a number of levels I had a great need to encounter this story and wanted very much to write a play about it. It was my first play, and to date remains my only finished play. I tell people, I almost felt like I didn't have a choice. I had to write it, even though I didn't know if it would ever be produced."

And of course, it's been produced a lot. The TheatreWorks production is essentially a revival of the 2012 off-Broadway production starring Joel de la Fuente and directed by Lisa Rothe (who also helmed TheatreWorks' "Confederates"). Since then, de la Fuente has performed the play in Seattle, Honolulu, Minneapolis, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and now Palo Alto.

"It's a great joy for me because I am from just south of the Bay Area, and TheatreWorks is the major regional theater that's closest to my hometown of Watsonville," said Sakata, who lives in L.A.

As an actor, Sakata starred in TheatreWorks' production of "Calligraphy" last year and has also performed at American Conservatory Theater and Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Unfortunately, the TheatreWorks production comes at a time when the play's subject matter of putting people in camps for no reason other than their ethnicity has become all too timely.

COURTESY OF JEANNE SAKATA

Playwright Jeanne Sakata says she learned about the subject of her play — Gordon Hirabayashi — from watching a PBS special.

"History goes up and down," Sakata said. "And I tell myself that I'm so lucky to be connected to a story like Gordon's right now. The documentary film where I first learned about Gordon is called 'A Personal Matter: Gordon Hirabayashi vs. the United States,' and that's what Gordon did. He made the Constitution a personal matter. And I think that in times like ours we can look to people like Gordon who made the Constitution a personal matter and say we're going to fight.

"The Supreme Court ruled unanimously against him in the 1940s, and it wasn't until the 1980s that his criminal conviction was overturned. It wasn't until 2012 that President Barack Obama posthumously awarded him the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. So I think we need to dig in in dark times and say justice can sometimes take decades, but we have to do what we can. That is what Gordon's story means to me."

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