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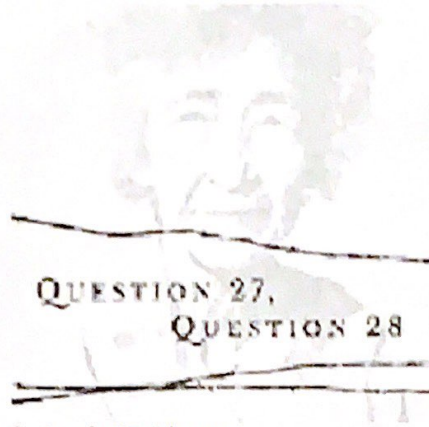
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#### Recent APA Theater Stories

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**ASIA MEDIA**  
The Asia Pacific Media Network



Courtesy of eastwestplayers.org.

## Remembering Japanese Internment

by [Karen Sakai](#)

**Japanese-American Theatre Project remembers the stories from the past to send a message to the present and future.**

February 19th is recognized by the Japanese American community as Remembrance Day, marking the day President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, sending anyone of Japanese descent to internment camps. This injustice is undoubtedly an important part of American History that must be remembered, but as each year passes and the internees get older, who will tell their story?

To commemorate this year's Remembrance Day, the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop, in association with the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) and East West Players brought *Question 27, Question 28* to Los Angeles' Little Tokyo. This play, directed by Chay Yew, surprised audiences with a performance unlike any other. Simplistic, yet very dramatic, four women stood in front of music stands and read first hand accounts found from testimonials, transcripts, interviews and historical documents of Japanese Americans.

Performing to sold-out audiences, the all-female cast took on multiple roles to capture the history of Japanese American women from immigration through post-internment. Tamlyn Tomita, (*Joy Luck Club, Robot Stories*) brought an element of class to the production, while Dian Kobayashi and Shannon Holt also held their own. Holt courageously took on the challenging role as the only non-Japanese woman of the cast, captivating the anti-Japanese racism and Roosevelt's government stance. Emily Kuroda (*Gilmore Girls*) gave a memorable performance and touched the audience with her own emotions as she wiped tears from her eyes during her performance.

While the project spoke of themes of discrimination and discussed the identity struggle of what it meant to be Japanese-American, the performance also included some light-hearted memories of camp. Kobayashi shared a woman's story of a Japanese woman's cure for her sister, using a special camp remedy of broth, made of earthworms. In the row across from mine, a man in the audience, once an internee himself, smiled and whispered with nostalgia, "Yes, that really happened."

*Question 27, Question 28* brought audiences back to the 1940s but also brought audiences together in the twenty-first century. During the intermission, audience members spoke with each other, and some openly talked with strangers. They discussed what they knew about internment and some shared their own memories of camp. Although the tone of the play was solemn, an ambiance of the theater created bonds between patrons.

Now, unfortunately, there are fewer surviving internees to listen to, and it is disheartening to think that one day Japanese American internment may become another memory the younger generation will skip over in their history books. It is important to keep their stories alive because it helps us look at life in the 21st century.

How does Chay Yew think the story affects today's society? "Question 27, Question 28 and all internment camp stories belong to the Japanese Americans as they belong to non-Japanese Americans. As much as we recognize the adversity of these remarkable Americans, we must also be vigilant and proactive when this history revisits us, especially in this time in American history," says Yew. Yes, that is an important message to remember.

The East West Players will be holding encore performances of *Question 27, Question 28* at the David Henry Hwang Theater, starting on March 19th. To learn more about the East West Players and upcoming shows, visit: <http://www.eastwestplayers.org>.

For more information about the Japanese American National Museum go to: <http://www.janm.org/main.html>.

**Did you know...**

- During World War II, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated into camps around the western interior of the United States from 1942 to 1946. Nearly two-thirds of those people were legal, U.S. Citizens. There is still a debate to the correct terminology of the Japanese American camps. While "concentration camps" was the term used by U.S. officials at the time, many feel that it cannot be compared to the concentration camps in Europe. Also, to make the concept more acceptable, the U.S. government's decided to shroud the incarceration in euphemistic terminology. Today, many people, including Japanese Americans, also refer to the camps as "internment" or "relocation" camps. The Japanese Americans were told that they could bring only what they could carry. Some abandoned their property, many hurriedly sold possessions at great losses, and a few were able to find non-Japanese American friends to care for their houses and businesses during the war. The financial losses were incalculable.
- The title of the play, *Question 27, Question 28* refers to the 1943 survey that the U.S. War department distributed in the relocation camps to anyone over the age of 17, to test their loyalty to the United States.
- Question #27 asked: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?
- Question #28 asked: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign government, power, or organization?

Date Posted: 3/5/2004

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# Repeating the history

CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2004 \$41

Playwright Chay Yew thought the story of the Japanese internment of World War II needed no more telling. Then came 9/11.

By MIKE BOEHM  
Times Staff Writer

Chay Yew's job is to discover what's new and distinctive in Asian American theater and help those stories make their way in the world.

For years, the playwright-director who heads the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop had little patience for one type of play: historical drama about the injustices inflicted on Japanese Americans living on the West Coast during World War II. Starting in 1942, some 110,000 of them were branded without evidence as potential traitors, uprooted from their homes and imprisoned en masse and without trial in internment camps.

The story of how they were summarily deprived of livelihood, property and freedom had been told sufficiently and the blot on American history exposed, Yew thought. Theaters needed to concentrate on newer voices and more contemporary stories.

Now he owns up to the arrogance of youth and says he has learned a lesson. "You think you can walk away from history," Yew says, "and it taps you on the back."

History came tapping after Sept. 11, 2001, and made the relevance of the internment camps obvious to him and many others. Incidents quickly came to light in which law-abiding Arab Americans — or people who just looked as if they might be from the Middle East — suffered abuse ranging from suspicious stares to beatings. Civil liberties issues became ongoing news.

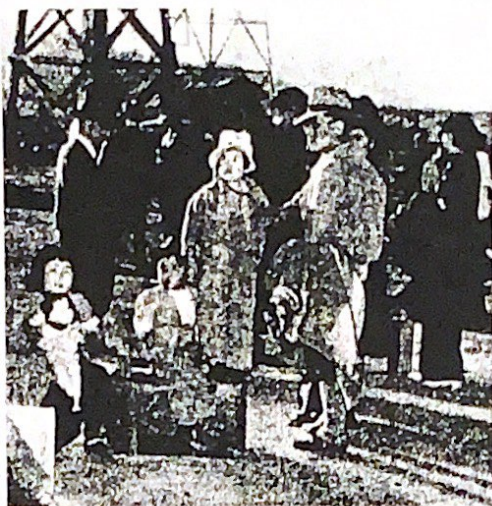
Post-Sept. 11 restrictions have not touched what befell the Japanese American community after Dec. 7, 1941. But Yew could feel freedom's fragility in the face of a national crisis — and he now saw the story of the Japanese American internment as a cautionary tale worth repeating.

## A documentary approach

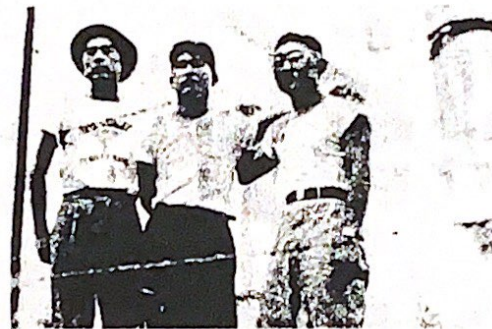
The Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco had commissioned him to write a play. Pamela Wu, then its artistic director, hoped he would do something about the Chinese American experience in San Francisco. She understood when Yew said he wanted to revisit the internment instead.

His play, "Question 27, Question 28," is an attempt to tell the whole story, from before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, through the 1988 bill signed by President Reagan that formally apologized for the internment and provided \$20,000 restitution to each of the 60,000 still-living people who had been held in the camps.

The play's title refers to a questionnaire that adults in the camps were forced to answer. Nos. 27 and 28 asked whether they considered themselves loyal to the United States — which many internees took as a grave



RELEVANCE: Infringement of rights after 9/11, though not on a scale with 1940s internment, brought the topic back to Yew's mind.



LOOKING BACK: "You think you can walk away from history," Yew says, "and it taps you on the back."



AUTHOR: Chay Yew heads the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop.

insult given that their rights had been utterly trashed. "Question 27, Question 28" runs through Feb. 29 at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Thursday night's opening fell on the annual Day of Remembrance commemorating the executive order that Franklin D. Roosevelt issued on Feb. 19, 1942, setting the internment in motion.

Yew took a documentary approach, tapping archives and literary sources for personal testimonies. He decided to tell the

story through the recollections of women, reasoning that it would be a different path into the saga. He wanted to capture a variety of voices and experiences: tradition-steeped women who had come to the United States as adults and assimilation-minded youngsters who considered themselves fully American, not Japanese, until confronted with a crueler truth.

## 'It's quite epic'

Several white American women are among the nearly 50 people whose words are heard; some of them speak racist clichés, others affirm respect and sympathy for the internees. Yew opted for a stripped-down production, with four actresses playing all the roles, standing still while reading from scripts against a sparse backdrop of barbed wire.

The varied mix of non-Asian perspectives brings something fresh to the internment camp play, says Tim Dang, producing director of East West Players, which is co-presenting "Question 27, Question 28" with the Taper's Asian Theatre Workshop. East West Players has produced 14 plays about the internment since its founding in 1966. Dang considers Yew's work unique in telling the story through dozens of perspectives rather than focusing on a single family or individual.

"It's quite epic. He's managed

to thread all the voices into one play covering many experiences."

Yew, who is Chinese American and grew up in Singapore, says he relied on advice from Japanese American theater artists, including cast members, for help with some nuances of performance and certain choices on what to emphasize or include. One of the actresses, Tamlyn Tomita, knew from costarring in the 1990 film "Come See the Paradise" — a sprawling saga about one family during the internment — that getting it right matters deeply to those who lived the history. She had heard their objections about things in the film that struck them as inauthentic.

"It provokes a lot of discussion, a dialogue and debate about who we were and are," Tomita says. It is, she thinks, a healthy development given where matters stood when she was growing up in the 1970s. She first learned about internment camps from a school textbook — rather than as a family legacy passed down from a father and grandparents who lived it.

It was common, Tomita says, for elders to say it was all in the past. "It happened, we survived, we are living for you guys, the children." That's a very Japanese American state of mind. But if the children are curious enough, wanting to know their past, their history, they'll tell them. But they tell it very, very quietly.

## The need to learn

Since his awakening to the relevance of plays about the Japanese American internment, Yew has made the subject something of a subspecialty. In 2002, he directed East West Players' production of "Sisters Matsumoto," Philip Kan Gotanda's Chekhov-influenced drama about a family trying to rebuild its life after the war.

Later this year, he plans to direct "Ben Uchida, Citizen #13559," Naomi Iizuka's stage adaptation of a children's novel about life during the internment. It will be part of a youth theater series at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

For Yew, the internment story is one of resilience, in which Japanese Americans' suffering and perseverance made it easier for subsequent immigrants such as himself to claim a place as Americans. But it also resonates because he can envision an America still capable, in a crisis, of blanketing some group in suspicion.

"We need to learn this history. It tells us, 'Look where we have come, but don't rest.' Because I think when we are sleeping, something happens."

## 'Question 27, Question 28'

Where: Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. 1st St., L.A.

When: Today, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.; Feb. 27, 28, 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 29, 3 and 7:30 p.m.

Ends: Feb. 29

Price: \$10

Info: (213) 625-0414, Ext. 2237

# CALENDAR



From left: Shannan Holt, Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita and Dian Kobayashi are the voices at JANM's Question 27, Question 28.

Photo by Craig Schwartz

BY ANNE KELLY-SAXENMEYER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Writer and director Chay Yew is adept at coalescing different elements into a whole. His latest endeavor is *Question 27, Question 28*, for

**THEATER REVIEW**

which he has quilted interviews, testimonials, transcripts and historical documents to bring the lives of Japanese Americans confined in internment camps during World War II into intimate focus. The thoughtful stage documentary runs through Feb. 29 at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), and true to the spirit of joining components on and back stage, it's a collaboration between the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop (which has heads), East West Players and JANM.

In the play, four actresses take on a variety of internees and historic figures: a girl struggling to reconcile her American pride with her internment, young women coming of age in the camps, interned mothers with sons serving in the U.S. armed forces, observers on the outside filled with distrust or ashamed sympathy, and the Roosevelts, speaking of "necessity" in wartime sound bites. As the outstanding cast — Shannan Holt, Dian Kobayashi, Emily Kuroda and Tamlyn Tomita — reads the interspersed accounts, one first attempts to seize on the individual threads of story. By the end, however, individual impressions and sharp images merge into a single portrait. To absorb it is a powerfully emotional experience, but its overwhelming message is one of caution.

"We began to speak in whispers," says one woman, recalling hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor while at a

## The Voices in 'Question'

### JANM Play Uses Historical Documents to Dramatize Japanese Internment

church service. After the bombing occurs, the voices refer again and again to their "state of shock." First it's the shock as Americans and victims of an attack, then the shock of being categorized with the enemy and shunned by longtime friends, neighbors and employers, and lastly, the shock of being betrayed by the U.S. government and torn abruptly from their homes, communities and often their families.

It is in the details that this experience comes to life. One speaker's mother digs up her prized flowers, giving them to friends for safekeeping, conceding one to a bold, insensitive neighbor. Entire households of furniture acquired by years of

hard work are sold for a few dollars. A speaker tells of a woman separated from her disabled son, who was deemed unfit to be interned but died without his mother's care. All the while, as curfews and rules are imposed upon the soon-to-be prisoners, one speaker says, they "frantically wanted to do what was American," buying war bonds and wrapping Red Cross bandages even while preparing for their departure.

Inside the camps, we are made to imagine what it might've been like to attempt normal family life inside a horse stall. Beyond the humiliating conditions and the tragedies of inadequate medical care, however, the speakers show the determination of internees not only to survive but to thrive in the face of injustices. There are weddings, empty hours to be filled with classes, and once barren, dusty camps decorated with crepe paper flowers and planted with seeds packed along by the families.

The voices also recall "the days of Question 27, Question 28," when internees were made to sign questionnaires pledging their loyalty to the United States and their willingness to serve on its behalf. Yew shows how the terrible irony behind that request and the residual anguish of internment resonate in the Japanese-American and American legacies. The most resounding entreaty in that inheritance, say the voices, is that we not let it happen again.

*Question 27, Question 28 runs through Feb. 29 at the Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. First St., (213) 625-0414 ext. 2237 or taperahmanson.com.*

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## THEATER REVIEW

## Internment-camp life has resonance today

By DARYL H. MILLER  
Times Staff Writer

After a while, the children forgot what life had been like before the camps. When they played house, they formed lines as though waiting for food in the mess hall, rather than pretend to cook for themselves.

That's just one anecdote from a new documentary theater piece about the roundup and incarceration of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but it reanimates history with breathtaking immediacy. More stories like it are collected in "Question 27, Question 28," presented as a concert reading at the Japanese American National Museum in downtown Los Angeles.

The presentation opened Thursday on the 62nd anniversary of executive order 9066, which — a couple of months after that "date which will live in infamy," as President Franklin D. Roosevelt described it — set in-



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

**CONCERT READING:**  
Emily Kuroda in "Question 27,  
Question 28" in downtown L.A.

ternment in motion. Compiled by playwright Chay Yew ("Porcelain," "A Language of Their Own") from oral history collections, interviews and memoirs and other published works, the piece describes what happened to more than 100,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast. The title refers to loyalty issues posed on a government questionnaire.

"I was red, white and blue when I was growing up," one woman recalls. "I taught Sunday school and was very, very American." That got overlooked after the Japanese attack on America.

Events bear an eerie resemblance to actions against Jews in Hitler's Germany. They also call to mind the treatment of people of Middle Eastern descent here in the United States after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

This is among Yew's goals, achieved subtly yet vividly in this piece that he also directed for the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop, in association with the Japanese American National Museum and East West Players.

The reading is presented in an open, central hall by four actresses — Dian Kobayashi, Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita and Shannon Holt — who are dressed in black and positioned at music stands, reading from the script. Behind them hangs a banner imprinted with magni-

fied strands of barbed wire.

Yew has focused on stories as told by women, a perspective that quickly drives home the idea that whole families were forced from their homes and shipped first to assembly centers, then to hastily constructed camps in remote, often inhospitable inland locations. Internees had no privacy; they were forever covered in dust.

Still, girls continued to put their hair up at night. Weddings took place. Gardens were planted. Crepe-paper flowers were fashioned to pretty things up.

Faith in America's constitutional principles was tested, but patriotism burned alongside the resentment and anger. As one woman states: "I thought maybe this was the way we could show our love for our country."

In this first, simple presentation, the dozens of overlapping stories are easy to lose track of, and at two hours and 20 minutes, the performance is too long for an audience seated uncomfort-

ably on folding chairs.

Still, the people — everyone from young, Japanese American mothers to uncomprehending Caucasians outside — come alive, recalling a history that should not be forgotten and declaring, as one internee so simply yet eloquently states it: "I am going to prevail."

### 'Question 27, Question 28'

**Where:** Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. 1st St., downtown L.A.

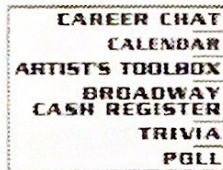
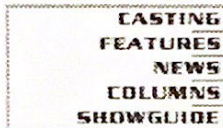
**When:** Today, 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.; Friday and next Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 29, 3 and 7:30 p.m.

**Ends:** Feb. 29

**Price:** \$10

**Contact:** (213) 625-0414, Ext. 2237

**Running time:** 2 hours, 20 minutes



**ALAN WEISSMAN**  
PHOTOGRAPHER



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# Show Guide

Reprint permission

West  
Southern CA March 24, 2004

## Question 27, Question 28

Reviewed By Wenzel Jones

It's one of life's anomalies that xenophobia is generally exhibited by the people who are least likely to be able to spell it. Creator/director Chay Yew's documentary approach to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II certainly gives a nod to that segment of the population, but it's a far richer piece than that, focusing primarily on the experience of females both inside and outside the camps. The work thus has a distinctive voice that is neither didactic nor polemic.

A great deal of the power comes from the sheer simplicity of the production. With nothing more than a graphically stunning representation of barbed wire as their set, four of the finer actors in town simply stand and read Yew's compilation of testimonials and historical documents. On the night reviewed it was the estimable quartet of Linda Gehringer, Amy Hill, Dian Kobayashi, and Emily Kuroda onboard, with Janellen Steininger and Tamlyn Tomita waiting to step in to subsequent productions. Character names are announced in a clipped and efficient fashion before each speaks, keeping things clear for the audience and giving the production an inherent energy and rhythm.

Unless you grew up listening to these stories as family history, it's likely you'll get a bit of an education from the show as well. It never even occurred to me before to wonder, intellectual breadth not being my forte, what Chinese-Americans did during this period. White America has never, after all, been noted for its ability or interest in the discernment of physiological differences among non-white races, so how did it suddenly develop the knack of distinguishing between people of Chinese (ally) and Japanese (enemy) background? Helpfully, the Sino-Americans wore buttons reading "I Am Chinese." It's almost a throwaway joke in the show, but the implications, both for the wearers and the audience of the button, have been churning in my head ever since.

There are much larger stories, of course, from one woman's realization that the gathering and shipping inland of the Japanese-American population wasn't going to blow over and would, in fact, only get worse, to the plight of Caucasian wives and teachers whose association with the camp left them tarred with the same brush of prejudice. There are surprisingly a great many lighthearted moments, as well, as life in the camps went on in spite of the bizarre conditions. It wasn't until the camps were declared illegal by the U.S.

"Question 27, Question 28"

presented by East West Players in association with the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop and the Japanese American National Museum at the David Henry Hwang Theatre, 120 N. Judge John Aiso St., L.A. Fri. 7:30 p.m., Sat 11 a.m. & 3 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Mar. 19-28. \$10. (213) 625-

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Supreme Court in 1944 that a substantial population of American citizens had its basic civil rights restored. I don't know, however, if anyone at the time referred to them as "activist judges," as would most likely happen today.



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## 'Question 27, Question 28'

Created and directed by Chay Yew, "Question 27, Question 28" is a staged reading of documentary theater that illuminates the lives and personal stories of Japanese American women who were sent to internment camps during World War II. Certainly a dark chapter in modern American history.

Somewhat long and repetitive, it's still absorbing — a live version of oral history.

Four women (three Asian, one Caucasian) dressed in black stand and read from scripts on music racks in front of them. The stage is bare. Behind them is the provocative drop design of Christopher Komuro: three strands of barbed wire on a red background.



BY  
ED  
KAUFMAN

venue  
Japanese American  
National Museum,  
Los Angeles  
(Through Sunday)

the bottom line  
Albert too long,  
this staged  
reading is  
thought-provoking.

A joint project of Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop in association with the Japanese American National Museum and East West Players, "Question 27, Question 28" — a loyalty oath for Japanese during World War II — draws from testimonials, transcripts, interviews and historical documents.

Avoiding political polemics, writer Yew has chosen to tell his tale from the vantage point of ordinary women who went sent to such places as Tule Lake, Manzanar and Santa Anita, where they lived in makeshift barracks and even stalls once used to house racehorses.

While their men were drafted



From left: Shannon Holt, Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita and Dian Kobayashi

into the U.S. Army, the women, children and elderly were shipped to internment camps, whether they were Isei (Japanese-born) or Neisei (American-born, with all the rights and privileges of an American citizen). All Japanese, and this includes Japanese Americans, were forced into internment camps when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order

9066 in 1942.

Yew deftly and adroitly explores their lives, blending bewilderment, anger and acceptance as the women struggle with their uprooted lives, families that are torn apart, suspicion and prejudice — and the aftermath when they are finally released.

What emerges is a simple sort of  
See "QUESTION" on page 19



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## 'Question'

*Continued from page 15—*

dignity and courage on the part of the women as they struggle to make a life for themselves within the barbed wire of their internment camps.

What is most confusing to them is that they consider themselves loyal, patriotic Americans — and not as suspicious “Japs.”

Credit Dian Kobayashi, Emily Kuroda and Tamlyn Tomita for terrific multiple roles as the interned Japanese voices on the “inside,” while Shannon Holt is

equally wonderful as the many American voices from the “outside” expressing a variety of attitudes, including those of FDR and wife Eleanor.

### QUESTION 27, QUESTION 28

Presented by Center Theatre Group/  
Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre  
Workshop in association with the  
Japanese American National Museum  
and East West Players

**Credits:** Creator-director: Chay Yew. Drop  
design: Christopher Komuro. **Cast:** Shan-  
non Holt, Dian Kobayashi, Emily Kuroda, Tam-  
lyn Tomita.

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Internment-camp life has resonance today

A new theater piece about the incarceration of Japanese Americans

during WWII reanimates history with breathtaking immediacy. By Daryl H. Miller, Times Staff Writer

<http://www.calendarlive.com/stage/cl-et-miller21feb21,2,1392193.story>



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as one internee so simply yet eloquently states it: "I am going to prevail."

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Events bear an eerie resemblance to actions against Jews in Hitler's Germany. They also call to mind the treatment of people of Middle Eastern descent here in the United States after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

This is among Yew's goals, achieved subtly yet vividly in this piece that he also directed for the Mark Taper Forum's Asian Theatre Workshop, in association with the Japanese American National Museum and East West Players.

The reading is presented in an open, central hall by four actresses - Dian Kobayashi, Emily Kuroda, Tamlyn Tomita and Shannon Holt - who are dressed in black and positioned at music stands, reading from the script. Behind them hangs a banner imprinted with magnified strands of barbed wire.

Yew has focused on stories as told by women, a perspective that quickly drives home the idea that whole families were forced from their homes and shipped first to assembly centers, then to hastily constructed camps in remote, often inhospitable inland locations. Internees had no privacy; they were forever covered in dust.

Still, girls continued to put their hair up at night. Weddings took place. Gardens were planted. Crepe-paper flowers were fashioned to pretty things up.

Faith in America's constitutional principles was tested, but patriotism burned alongside the resentment and anger. As one woman states: "I thought maybe this was the way we could show our love for our country."

In this first, simple presentation, the dozens of overlapping stories are easy to lose track of, and at two hours and 20 minutes, the performance is too long for an audience seated uncomfortably on folding chairs.

Still, the people - everyone from young, Japanese American mothers to uncomprehending Caucasians outside - come alive, recalling a history that should not be forgotten and declaring, as one internee so simply yet eloquently states it: "I am going to prevail."

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'Question 27, Question 28'

Where: Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. 1st St., downtown L.A.

When: Today, 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.; Friday and next Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Feb. 29, 3 and 7:30 p.m.

Ends: Feb. 29