

Playwright draws on her experiences for 'Tea'

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By A.K. Whitney, Staff writer

It's Friday afternoon at the Center Theater, and the cast of International City Theatre's newest production, ``Tea," is taking a break from rehearsal.

The show, which previews tonight and opens Friday, tells the stories of five Japanese war brides who came to live with their GI husbands at a military base in Junction City, Kan.

Five actresses, all Asian, stand at a table in the wings, and their beverage of choice, naturally, is tea.

But ``Tea" playwright Velina Hasu Houston, who has come down from Los Angeles to drop in on a rehearsal, is not with them. She and director Peggy Shannon, the stage manager says, are likely on a hunt for some tea, and will return shortly.

When Houston finally shows up, however, there is no cup in her hand.

The product of a Japanese war bride mother and an African-American/Native-American GI father, Houston is an interesting mixture of both. She has long, dark, thick hair, coffee-colored skin, and a very slight Asian cast to her eyes.

It is a combination, she says, that befuddles Japanese people she

meets while on visits to her mother's native country, particularly since she speaks fluent Japanese without an American accent.

“They ask if I'm from Ceylon (Sri Lanka)," said Houston.

Or tell her, she adds, since they are so sure that must be the case.

But Houston was born in Tokyo, then raised on a military base at Junction City, the setting for her show. Her upbringing, however, was anything like that of a girl from small-town America.

“I grew up in an international community," she said. “The area was composed of not just Japanese war brides, but also European, like German, English. I grew up around a lot of immigrant women.”

And Houston listened to the stories they had to tell.

“I acquired an incredible education in the kitchens of these women," she said.

They not only had war stories to tell, Houston said, but stories of coming to a strange country and adjusting to a strange culture. And for those brides whose native countries were Axis powers during the war, there was also plenty of prejudice to deal with.

The education started, however, in her own mother's kitchen.

“My mother wasn't American, she didn't know Mother Goose; she told me about Japanese folklore," Houston said.

That folklore often involved the collision of the natural and supernatural world, and crafted Houston's future approach to storytelling.

Though telling her daughter Japanese fairy tales was OK, teaching

her Japanese was not. The women on the base were encouraged not to speak anything but English to their children, lest the children never learn to speak English properly. So though she spoke Japanese with her mother when she was very young, Houston said, her mother was intimidated enough by the so-called experts to stop when she got older.

Or at least, she stopped until Houston was 11. That was the year her father died after a three-year illness.

“He was a Southern gentleman,” Houston said, remembering her father's strict ideas of propriety, and his firm, yet always polite approach, so similar to that of the Japanese. “I think that's what drew her to him.”

Houston's father was a military policeman stationed in Kobe when he met a young village girl who had come to the big city to stay with her cousin and study dressmaking. His helmet fell off, she picked it up for him, and that began a nine-year courtship that culminated in marriage, a move across the Pacific, three children, and a transfer to a base in Kansas where the military placed most of its members who had foreign wives.

Marrying a Japanese woman didn't endear Houston's father to his family.

“Most of his siblings were quite put off that he would marry a Japanese woman,” Houston said, adding that one brother in particular felt her father was betraying his race by marrying out of it.

There was also opposition from her mother's side. The cousin her mother came to visit in Kobe, Houston said, also wound up marrying a GI. But he was white, and his view of black GIs helped cause a rift between the women, Houston said.

In spite of all that, the couple married and were together until Houston's father died.

That same year, Houston wrote her first play, though she had been exposed to very little theater. She was encouraged by a teacher at her school, who told her she had talent and encouraged her to read plays. She read classics such as Ibsen and Chekov, and was hooked.

“I felt (about theater) like I walked into a room and it was my home,” Houston said.

Her mother, however, was not encouraging.

“She told me the daughter of a Japanese immigrant cannot become an artist,” Houston said. “That made me even more determined.”

After graduating with a degree in journalism and theater from Kansas State University, Houston came to California to attend UCLA. She felt quite at home in the international environment, with people telling her she seemed far more sophisticated than the average small-town girl.

That would prove true as Houston went on to become a prolific writer, producing dozens of plays, screenplays and academic pieces. She earned a doctorate in cinema and television from the University of Southern California and has taught writing there for 15 years.

But the idea to write a play about the women she had grown up with started when Houston was in college.

“I had to go back and make sure their stories weren't lost,” she said.

Instead of just eavesdropping on her mother's friends sipping tea at

the kitchen table, she actively interviewed them. The women agreed to talk to her, but wouldn't let her take notes or tape them.

But as they got more comfortable, they told Houston she'd better start writing things down. Word of Houston's interviewing spread, and by the time she was done, she had interviewed dozens of war brides.

The interviews led to a trilogy of plays, including ``Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)," ``American Dreams" and ``Tea."

``Tea" premiered in 1987 at a theater in New York, and has become the most performed of the series, not just in the United States but also in Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan.

``When I wrote it, I never dreamed it would have such a long life," Houston said.

The play tells the tale of Himiko, Setsuko, Chizuye, Teruko and Atsuko, five Japanese women who married Americans and came to rural Kansas. The five women become fast friends, and when Himiko dies, the four remaining women gather to drink tea and share stories and commune with her ghost.

Many of her own mother's stories are dramatized in the show, Houston said, something that becomes very important considering her mother, now 76, was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

``This production has become very sentimental to me," Houston said. ``Who will remember there were Japanese in Kansas after these women are gone?"

But Houston shouldn't worry. As long as there's ``Tea," there won't be much danger of that.

