

THE PINK DRESS

Art Form: Puppet Theatre

Style: Contemporary

Culture: Japan and the United States

MEET THE ARTIST:

Leslie K. Gray is a writer/director/puppetry artist, Los Angeles native, and artistic director of Triumvirate Pi Theatre. She holds a BA in Theatre from UCLA where she became involved in puppetry. After her mother told her about her experiences as a young girl in a Japanese-American internment camp, Leslie wrote a short story, **"The Pink Dress"**, which she intended to make into an illustrated book (coming soon!). Puppetry's magic took hold, however, and the story of individuality in the face of racism became this puppet show. She has created shows for non-traditional spaces such as "December 12, 1904" at the Fenyes Mansion at the Pasadena Museum of History and "Reds, Whites, and Blues" at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. She received an LA Weekly Theatre award in 2001 for puppet design. Leslie also has a Masters in Special Education and works as an ASL interpreter and teacher of deaf students. The performing group includes: puppeteers *Beth Peterson* (who also created the puppets), *Jamie Kim*, *Jonathan Alvarez* and *Abigail Keever*. Creator *Leslie K. Gray* provides narration and sound effects. The show's recorded music is by *Michael A. Gray* and performed by flutist *Patty Sikorski*, percussionist *Jay Gravatt* and pianist *Michael A. Gray*.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The Pink Dress is about Tsuki and her experiences in a Japanese American internment camp - especially her junior high school graduation that took place there. She and the others experienced fear and upset as their lives were disrupted; they were treated as nothing more than "ants." Many activities of her life continued, though, and she was forced to attend school inside the camp. The adults were also forced to leave their professions and take on more menial jobs inside the camp. While there, Tsuki's sister came from New York and stayed for a short visit, during which she wore a pink dress. Tsuki was so taken with the dress that her sister sent it to her after she returned to New York. As her graduation grew closer, she was told that students were expected to wear their drab green school uniforms. But Tsuki decided to wear her sister's pink dress instead to show she is not an ant, but a human being. Her courage empowers others to feel greater self-esteem, as well.

This poignant puppet theatre piece features traditional and innovative puppetry, as well as original music. Each of the larger puppets has a handler/manipulator who is dressed in black.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in an effort to neutralize American military power in the Pacific, despite ongoing attempts at diplomatic negotiations. Because of an unfortunate series of events, Japan's formal declaration of war was not received until after the attack on Pearl Harbor was completed. The United States immediately declared war on the Japanese Empire and was then irredeemably committed to World War II when Japanese allies Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. This cast an egregious act of aggression into an even worse light and had other unfortunate repercussions as well.

The attack caused an instant upsurge in xenophobia (fear of outsiders) and American military commanders nursed a largely unfounded fear of sabotage - and not one case of espionage was ever proven among the Japanese or Japanese American internees. President Franklin D. Roosevelt then signed Executive Order 9066, which required all Japanese or Japanese-American persons to submit themselves for arrest and relocation. They were taken from their normal lives and moved from 'at risk' areas of the United States to internment camps. Many families were sent to different camps even though they lived within blocks of one another. Indeed this family disruption is counted as the most scarring that the internees faced.

The camps were hastily built and conditions were difficult. Most of the housing lacked running water or heat and there was no basic privacy. The communal mess and laundry facilities meant that internees needed to walk outside, even if there was snow, to eat or do laundry.

The camps did have baseball fields and some had Kabuki theaters. The internees also continued to play traditional Japanese games like *go*. Children - who made up 1/4 of the camp's internees - continued their schooling. But alongside these small nods to normalcy, lurked the specter of round-the-clock armed guards with orders to shoot and kill anyone who wandered too close to the outer fence.

Beginning in mid-1944, the camps began to close and by January 1945, all internees were allowed to leave, ending an unfortunate episode in American history. Despite all of the hardship, there were very few incidences of Japanese-Americans questioning their loyalties. Most remained steadfast in their regard for - and loyalty to - the United States.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What words can you choose to describe your impressions of the performance?
- What characters do you remember? Can you describe one of them?
- Describe the instruments used?
- What impressed you most about the story?
- How many different types of puppets did you observe? Describe a few of them? What did you notice about the way the puppeteers worked with the puppets?
- What is the most important idea that you got from this puppet play?
- Is there anything you learned from this play that can apply to your own life?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIS:

In December 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, people in the United States became very frightened. They thought that perhaps the West Coast would also be attacked. In a state of grave fear, leaders in California, Oregon, and Washington, demanded that the residents of Japanese ancestry be removed from their homes along the coast and relocated in isolated inland areas. As a result of this pressure, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the forcible internment of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, 2/3 of whom were American citizens. They were forced to carry on their lives behind barbed wire fences, leaving their homes, communities and businesses. This Order was not rescinded until 1944; the last camp was closed in March, 1946.

Think about what you would do if this happened to you. Here is a writing prompt: *This morning the police knocked on your door and told you and your family that you were being moved to an outdoor camp in a remote part of California. There was no time to prepare or to tell your school, work or friends what was happening. You had no choice but to do what you were told, leaving the comfort of your home. The policemen were only following government orders, pushing you onto busses which took you to a guarded camp where you were to now live. Think about how you would feel. What are you most worried about? What could you take in a small suitcase – what would you most need? Would you try to escape? If so, what might happen? How could you get help?*

- Legend:
- 🌀 Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▾ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- * Can you recall a time in your own life, or that of a close friend or family members, when you decided to do something that was different than what people expected? Did you do this to make a point? If so, what were you saying or showing with your actions, choices and behavior? What were your feelings before you did this act? What were the reactions of others? What were your feelings afterward?
- ❖ A sock puppet is a puppet made from a sock. When a sock puppeteer fits his hand into the closed end of the sock, the sock puppet can be made to “talk” with the opening and closing of the hand. The puppet’s mouth is formed by the region between the heel and the toe, with the thumb forming a jaw. At a minimum the shape of the hand will instantly form the shape of a mouth, but sometimes the mouth is padded by putting in a fairly hard piece of felt (often with a tongue glued inside. Sometimes the region between the toe and heel is cut open with scissors to form a mouth. The sock is stretched out fully so that it is long enough to cover the puppeteer’s wrist. Felt or googly eyes, a mouth, nose, ears and hair (string, yarn, streamers, etc.) can be glued on. Find a partner and have a conversation with your puppets or pick a subject to discuss. * from Wikipedia
- ▾ Almost every group of people has been picked on at one time. Research your own family by asking your parents, friends and family when they were treated unfairly just because of their color, religion, cultural background or other reason. Ask about what happened and how it changed people’s lives. Bring this story to your class and share with a partner or write about it. What are the similarities and differences between your story and the “Pink Dress?” (historical/cultural context)
- ⇒ Think of sets, puppets and costumes featured in “The Pink Dress.” Can you identify some of the specific choices that were made by the artists who created them. Select one idea and discuss it in terms of how it looked and also how it helped the story to be told. Name something you really felt worked well. Name something that you would do differently.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Baseball Saved Us by Ken Mochizuki

The Bracelet by Yoshiko Uchida

<http://www.jacl.org/education.php> - Japanese-American Citizens League - Curriculum resources

www.no-strings-attached.org.uk - This site gives directions on how to make many a variety of different puppets without strings. There is also information on how to work with puppets and build scenery.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sock_puppet - Wikipedia has information on how to construct simple puppets and suggestions for working with them.