

‘Breaking the Silence’ Pioneers Reflect on Play’s Powerful Beginnings

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Photo caption: Herb Tsuchiya and Nikki Nojima Louis reprise “Breaking the Silence” in its 28th year.

Seattle playwright Nikki Nojima Louis and her colleagues are celebrating their 28th year of giving voice to Japanese Americans and their history in Seattle. After 28 years, Louis’ traveling oral history play, “Breaking the Silence” will be debut in Hiroshima, Japan at an English-Japanese Readers’ Theater production in August.

Looking back at the play’s inception, the play has strong and powerful roots in Seattle. After first performing “Breaking the Silence” in 1985 at the University of Washington (UW) as a fundraiser for Gordon Hirabayashi’s coram nobis court cases, Louis created an artistic team that has continued to support the performance and outreach of this oral history play presenting stories of Issei, Nisei and Sansei with monologues, tanka poetry, dramatizations, taiko drumming and Japanese flute.

The audience response was palpable from the start.

“When a member of the cast returned from the men’s room at intermission, he said, ‘There are grown men crying in there,’ ” Louis remembers. “Over \$10,000 was raised for Gordon’s defense fund, and the play launched a new career for me.”

Louis, an arts educator who has taught playwriting at Seattle Children's Theatre, as well as creative writing and Asian American studies at universities, says that the creation of "Breaking the Silence" (BTS), made her into a better teacher. The play has since become as an educational tool to expose its audiences to the true and raw history of Japanese Americans.

"BTS completely shaped and revolutionized my teaching," Louis says. "In fact, it revolutionized my life."

She describes the impact that this one-day fundraising performance had on her future career.

"The day after BTS was performed at the HUB Auditorium, UW campus, I received an invitation to participate in a national playwrights festival at Seattle Center," she says. "I think the energy from putting together BTS — a play I didn't know how to write — fueled this next project, a musical play about Japanese immigrants called 'Made in America.'"

This led to other opportunities.

"Grants, commissions, and an Artist Trust fellowship followed," says Louis. "I was invited to write plays for the Washington Centennial, the Museum of History & Industry and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom." It was all of these projects that led Louis to develop her pedagogy.

"When I began teaching, these plays were used in classrooms from middle school to universities as tools for integrating theater techniques with American studies, history and ethnic studies," says Louis.

Beyond engaging in teaching Japanese American history, Louis and her fellow artists come to the "Breaking the Silence" project from places of personal experience. Louis and fellow actor Herb Tsuchiya both spent time interned at Camp Minidoka during childhood.

"I joined 'Breaking the Silence' about 20 years ago because of my interest and personal involvement with internment," Tsuchiya says. "In fact, Nikki [Nojima Louis] and I have billed ourselves as 'The Children of Camp Minidoka' for our post-play discussions at colleges and universities."

Tsuchiya has been participating in this project through many iterations. "When I first joined BTS in the 1990s, we performed locally in the Seattle area and regionally in Washington state and Oregon," he says. "When we received a

national grant from the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, we were able to travel more widely and began a national tour, expanding our horizons.”

This expansion included returning to the roots of their childhood experience.

“We wanted to begin our national tour at Minidoka and performed at a little museum outside the camp,” Tsuchiya remembers. “In that tiny space, Nikki Louis, Frank Kitamoto and I gave our most memorable performance, and lit candles at the end to pay tribute to our childhood selves and our families who survived the camp.” Louis says these teaching and touring experiences have offered insight into the larger scope of social justice and civil rights.

“For example, our last tours have included an African-American performer and educator, Angie Bolton, who grew up in the segregated South,” Louis says. “She has acted as narrator for BTS, and her participation in workshops and post-play discussions gives BTS a both an inclusive and diverse outreach. BTS’s message is a metaphor for social and world events that are occurring today.”

Next, Louis, Tsuchiya, and the artistic team are planning to take “Breaking the Silence” to Hiroshima in August, and are conducting a series of fundraisers throughout the summer. This opportunity arose out of a journey made by Tsuchiya to Hiroshima for the dedication of the Floyd Schmoe Museum.

“Upon his return, he brought BTS to the attention of the World Friendship Center,” Louis says. “When they emailed me early this year, they asked if the play was written in Japanese and if the actors spoke Japanese. Since the answer was ‘no’ on both counts, I thought: ‘End of story.’”

But that wasn’t the end of the story. An American professor at Hiroshima Shudo University and his students offered to translate the script.

“That is where we are now: I am working on the first-ever bilingual script for BTS,” Louis says, “to be performed by both Japanese American and Japanese reader/actors and using supertitles, slides, music and whatever will bridge the communication gap and bring Japanese audiences the stories of their grandparents and great-grandparents who sojourned to America early in the 20th century.”

Tsuchiya is looking forward to further connecting his experiences on American soil to the experience of his predecessors.

“We are 70 to 80 years of age, and the closest generation to the original Issei

immigrants from Japan," he says. "We are the keepers and storytellers of their experiences. 'Breaking the Silence' is an authentic drama: fresh, true and precious."

The next "Breaking the Silence" Hiroshima fundraiser will be held at 7 p.m. on Saturday, June 29th at the Japanese Baptist Church in Seattle. Call Herb Tsuchiya for more information: (206) 722-4122.