“The Wash” by Philip Kan Gotanda

In only two short acts, “The Wash” by Philip Kan Gotanda voiced a revolt concerning Japanese Americans that people of all nationalities could sympathize with. Throughout the play we see a duality between the 1st generation Japanese Americans and the 2nd and 3rd generation’s will to fit in with their new American culture. The three major issues questioned throughout the play were the submissiveness of women to men, marring out, and the aftermath of World War II concentration camps. In analyzing these three issues brought up, it becomes obvious that Gotanda’s “The Wash” is a theater of revolt type play.

Philip Kan Gotanda is a third generation Japanese American born December 17, 1951. Gotanda’s father, a Japanese American doctor, was placed in a concentration camp during World War II; thus adding first hand experience in many of the dialogs found in “The Wash”. (Chronicler). Gotanda surprisingly holds a law degree from Hastings College of Law, but instead he managed to become a major influence on Asian American Theater after college. (Biography). Gotanda wrote many Asian American related plays and independent films that are known and respected by a very broad range of audiences worldwide.

“The Wash” is set around a small cast of characters, each of which have very individual viewpoints and personalities. The play centers itself around a married, but separated, couple named Nobu and Masi Matsumoto. Nobu is a 68 year old 2nd generation Japanese American who stubbornly refuses to let go of the past and his father’s strong Japanese mentality. In contrast to Nobu, Masi becomes more and more willing to accept
her Americanized surroundings and revolts against her repressed marriage to Nobu. From start to end, Gotanda voices his strong opinions of the Asian American experience through Nobu and Masi’s troubled relationship.

Although the play centers itself on Nobu and Masi, the rest of the cast of characters play an extremely vital role in making this play a theater of revolt type play. First we have Kiyoko Hasegawa, a 55-year-old woman who owns and runs a small Japanese restaurant. Kiyoko is a widow, being once married to an American soldier. Throughout the play she develops a relationship with Nobu. Next we have Sadao Nakasato, a 65-year-old man that is in a relationship with Masi after his wife passed. Although Sadao is also a 2nd generation Japanese American, he is very Americanized. Finally we have Nobu and Masi’s two daughters, Marsha and Judy, whom also have a very rough time agreeing with Nobu’s narrow-minded opinions against American culture.

Starting right out of the first scene, Gotanda expresses a very blatant revolt against Nobu’s view of his wife Masi. Masi dramatically cries out to Judy in Act 2 Scene 7, “Ten, fifteen years he didn’t want me. And he was going on and on about how it was my fault this and my fault that. And I was trying to explain my side of it, when he turned on me, ‘Shut up Mama. You don’t know anything. You’re stupid.’ Stupid. After 42 years of letting him be right he called me that. And I understood. He didn’t even need me to make him be right anymore. He just needed me to be stupid.” (Gotanda). Even though Nobu is a 2nd generation Japanese American, he expects his marriage to mime those found in traditional Japan. Sadao on the other hand treats Masi in a completely opposite way though, and in doing so Gotanda uses Sadao to foil against Nobu’s stubbornness to treat Masi as a Japanese American rather than a traditionalist Japanese woman.
In addition to the way Sadao contrasts with Nobu, Masi also contrasts with Kiyoko. Throughout the play, Masi hesitantly begins to learn and do things that are more Americanized, whereas Kiyoko appears to already set the standard for a fully adjusted Japanese American woman. A perfect example of this is in Act 1 Scene 3 when Masi awkwardly tells Sadao she doesn’t play cards, yet in the very next scene we see Kiyoko and her two employees playing poker very competitively. Kiyoko not only represents the woman Masi wants to be, but also the woman Nobu is afraid of accepting. Throughout the play we see Nobu tempted to pursue Kiyoko, but reluctant due to the fear of giving up the tradition his late father entrusted him with. In setting up these character contrasts between Nobu and Sadao or Masi and Kiyoko, Gotanda shows the audience the culture shock of traditional Japanese relationships versus those found in more Americanized Japanese couples.

The next major revolt theme found in “The Wash” is marrying out. Judy, Nobu’s daughter, marries an African American man and has a little boy named Timothy. Throughout the beginning of the play, Nobu ignores and somewhat disowns Judy for marrying out. In Act 2 Scene 6, Nobu and Judy begin arguing and Nobu says, “No, no. Japanese marry other Japanese, their kids are ‘yonsei’ [4th generation Japanese American] – not these damn ‘ainoko’ [biracial person].” (Gotanda). It isn’t until later in the play that Nobu acknowledges his grandson Timothy, but Nobu’s initial disgust with Judy marrying a non-Japanese man voices a huge revolt against racism. Gotanda used the damaged relationship of Judy and Nobu to show that although it’s alright to be proud of your nationality, it’s wrong to be prejudice against people just because they are of a different nationality. Nobu’s refusal to accept other cultures caused him to lose sight of what it
means to be a loving father to both his daughters and also cause him to neglect his own grandson.

Nobu’s racist view of Judy’s marriage eventually passed, but by that time it was already too late. It wasn't until the end of Act 2 Scene 6 when Judy revealed to Nobu that Masi is moving out that he decided to hold his grandson Timothy for the first time. It’s at this time we begin to see the foundation of Nobu’s stubbornness crumbling. In Act 2 Scene 14, we see Marsha holding Nobu’s cherished kite and flying it around Timothy’s head as Judy holds him. They have a very brief dialog where Judy and Marsha are shocked that Nobu gave the kite to Timothy despite how much it meant to him. Unfortunately, Nobu never fully accepts the direction his family is turning and ultimately ends up alone in the final scene. The fate of Nobu in the end of the play is very depressing, but in ending the play this way Gotanda shows his audience the reality of Nobu’s actions and how they lead to him losing everything.

The final and main issue throughout “The Wash” has to do with Nobu and Masi’s experiences of being held in a concentration camp during World War II. Surprisingly, Gotanda mentions a few very brief stories about the camps only four times in the entire play. When the stories about the camps did arise though, they were in scenes that were very emotionally intense. Gotanda hints to the audience that although Nobu and Masi’s experiences in the camp were very different, it was a very sensitive subject to both of them. Although not emphasized in the main plot of the play, the camp Nobu and Masi were placed in had a strong effect on their acceptance of American culture later on in life. Masi’s experience in the camp seemed to be more social despite the circumstances, whereas Nobu’s memories of the camp only consist of when his feelings were hurt.
In Act 2 Scene 11, Gotanda drops a bomb and dramatically shows Nobu’s reason for being so bitter towards conforming to American culture. Nobu frantically tells Masi the secret he kept from her concerning his trip to the bank in order to get financial help after being released from the camp. He then describes how apathetic the bank was towards him and how ashamed he felt for making a scene when they told him to come back another time. Gotanda expressed that even though Nobu was treated badly, he was the one that felt guilty after making a scene and throwing their magazines on the floor. In revealing this, we see that Nobu felt dominated with no control over his own circumstances. This crushed Nobu’s honor, thus creating a bitterness inside that would later cause damage his relationship with his own family.

So in the end, Gotanda voiced his revolt concerning Japanese Americans through the broken relationships caused by Nobu’s refusal to adjust to an Americanized society. First, we see Nobu’s patriarchal view of marriage being contrasted with Sadao’s more Americanized approach. We also see Masi’s revolt against her repressed marriage to Nobu and her lean towards Kiyoko’s temperament. Next, Gotanda expresses how painful racism can be and how it severely damaged Nobu’s relationship with his daughter her family. Finally, we see that although Nobu’s past was filled with hardship during his encampment, the bitterness he buried inside himself ultimately lead to his own solitude in the end. “The Wash” by Philip Kan Gotanda is not just a story about a stubborn old man, but is the voice of thousands of new generation Asian American’s dealing with the ups and downs of adjusting to their new surroundings.
Bibliography


