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PAT O'BRIEN

## “Miné, A Name for Herself”: A Miné Okubo Play

New play explores artist's response to internment

War and prejudice deposited Miné Okubo in an internment camp but her art landed her on the world stage. An unusual play has been written about Okubo by Riverside author Mary Curtin and is being performed at EdgeFest, an annual showcase of new and experimental plays for Los Angeles-based theater artists.

"This is a play that's born in Riverside," said Curtin, who met Okubo before she died in 2001 and was dumbfounded by her life story. Okubo was born in 1912 in Riverside and graduated from Poly High School and Riverside Junior College (now Community). Her mother was a noted calligrapher, and her father was a scholar in Japan who became a gardener in Riverside. After earning a master's degree from UC Berkeley, Okubo won a fellowship in 1938 to study art in France and Italy.

"She came back on the last passenger ship before war was declared in Europe," Curtin said. Broke on her return, she found work doing public art projects through the federal WPA in the San Francisco area.

"She was working on a mural on an army base when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor," Curtin said. Like other Japanese Americans who were suddenly considered enemies because of their ancestry, Okubo and a brother were taken to an internment center where they slept in a stable. The internees were given numbers, rather than names, for identity. Later, Okubo would write and illustrate a book about the camps, "Citizen 13660." It was first published in 1946 and had its sixth printing in 2001. She and her brother were transferred after six months at the first camp to another in Utah.

Okubo did pen and ink drawings of what she saw. She taught art to children there. Eventually she entered a magazine contest with a drawing of a camp guard. Fortune Magazine, discovering her talent, offered her a job in New York that led to her release from the camp. Okubo shipped a crate of her belongings straight to the magazine's offices, and someone found her a Greenwich Village apartment where she would live for the next 50 years, becoming part of the New York art scene and creating paintings and other artworks that would be exhibited from Boston to Tokyo. "Mine, A Name for Herself" is presented as if audience members are visitors to that apartment.

"We set it up as a performance salon. This is something Miné did in New York City," said director Theresa Larkin, a theater professor at Cal State LA and one of the founders of The Artists Collective, a nonprofit group that is presenting the play. The audience will be able to move around. There will be dance and original music.

"It's kind of breaking a lot of conventions," said Larkin, who has been involved in developing the project since Curtin first told her about Okubo.

"When she started telling me about this, I said 'it sounds like a performance piece'," Larkin said. But Larkin insists that the real gift of the piece is Okubo herself.

"She was an incredible, an interesting, a self-possessed woman who never gave up her dignity or ideals despite the camp," Larkin said. "She took all of the hardships life brought her and responded every single time artistically. I think it's a message for all of us." Actress Ren Hanmi who portrays Okubo says she keeps having little epiphanies as she reacts to the material.

"I grew up not knowing anything about my heritage. I have always, as an artist, struggled with my identity. I am American. I was born in Los Angeles and raised in Orange County," she said. "The experience of portraying her life is enlightening and is very fulfilling and enriching."

There is a plan to bring the play to Riverside in February 2006.

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'MINÉ, A NAME FOR HERSELF'

Where: Theatre One, Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles

When: 11:15 p.m. today, Saturday and Oct. 14-15, Oct. 21-22

Tickets: \$ 25 (with food), \$ 15 (no food)

Information: (866) 811-4111

On the Web: [www.edgeoftheworld.org](http://www.edgeoftheworld.org)