Why did you choose to write a play about Gordon Hirabayashi?

I am a Sansei—a third-generation Japanese American—so the tragedy and trauma of the WWII Japanese American prison camps was part of my family history. As I grew up and went to college, I wanted to learn more about what had happened to my family during WWII. However, because of my family’s resistance to talking about their experiences, I was having a challenging time.

I happened to see a documentary called *A Personal Matter: Gordon Hirabayashi vs. the United States* made by John de Graaf. I was shocked that I had never heard this story of defiance and resistance before. I was determined to meet Gordon and, as luck would have it, an acting job brought me to Seattle where he lived at the time.

I asked permission to interview him and write a solo play about him. Gordon was gracious and welcoming. He was such a fascinating storyteller. Those conversations with him filled in a lot of psychic gaps in my own family’s story.

Why do you think Gordon was able to stand up against the US government?

When I first discovered his story, I was initially fascinated and deeply moved that someone so young, a college student, would have the courage and vision to openly defy and legally challenge the United States government over Executive Order 9066, especially when the vast majority of the Japanese and Japanese American community at that time were—out of fear—against any kind of opposition.

As I began researching more about Gordon, his personality shone through the letters he wrote. He had a wonderfully engaging, everyman quality that audiences can easily identify with, a keen intellect, a zest for adventure, and a great sense of humor. He seemed like an ordinary person in so many ways and yet so extraordinary in his vision and his courage.

Jessica Kubzansky
dangers of the racist times they lived in, it never occurred to them to attempt that. But Gordon said he had some “icebreakers” in the example of his mother and father, who in their own way were going against the religious grain of many of their fellow Issei immigrant friends. They shunned denominational liturgy, hierarchy and dogma, worshipping on chairs in their living rooms instead of in the big Seattle Japanese American Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist churches. So Gordon said the idea of carving one’s own individual path in life, and the idea of resistance on principle, was first put into his consciousness by his parents’ example.

Is there anything that you can share with us that is not in the play?

After the events of the play, Gordon earned a PhD in Sociology and went to teach abroad for years in Lebanon and Egypt. He became head of the Sociology department at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, and lived there for many years, raising his family.

In January of 2012, after a long battle with Alzheimer’s Disease, Gordon passed away at the age of 93. Though that was a very sad day for our country, the news that followed later in April was a great comfort: President Barack Obama posthumously awarded Gordon the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation’s highest civilian honor. It’s truly an amazing paradox that after being persecuted by the White House in the 1940s for standing up for the Constitution, he would be so honored by our country’s first African-American President.

Do you think this act of internment could repeat itself in the future?

I think, with the election of Trump, we have seen that anything is possible in terms of this administration’s relentless attempts to resurrect inflammatory language and encourage hostilities against immigrants today. At the border, we are seeing detention camps where hundreds of children are being forcibly separated from their parents and often held in horrible conditions. If the situation worsens, as well it might, I personally would not be surprised at some point if we heard calls for the forced removal of an immigrant population. But it’s my fervent hope and belief there would be a much more passionate and powerful resistance then there was in the 1940’s to that kind of governmental abuse of power.

How has writing this play and its various productions across the nation impacted you?

It is been a life-changing experience to share Gordon’s story in so many cities for the last twelve years. One thing that has been especially gratifying is to see theaters and audiences across the country embrace Gordon’s story as a vitally important American story. That would have meant so much to Gordon himself. For me, it has been a healing experience, addressing my family’s own trauma in living through the difficulties of the camp and the painful aftermath. It has reminded me over and over of the necessity, the power, and the beauty of community, of breaking down the walls that divide those communities, and of the importance of looking out for one another. It has also reminded me of the power of the individual voice as well as of the power and responsibility we all have to leave the world a better place.

PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTE:

This play is based on a true story, inspired by many hours of interviews I conducted with Gordon Hirabayashi and several of his friends from the 1940’s, by numerous letters written by Mr. Hirabayashi during his imprisonment and by contemporary articles written by and about Mr. Hirabayashi. It is a work blending historical fact with fiction, and certain actual events have been compressed or altered in terms of chronology or content for dramatic purposes. In Act II, Gordon’s letters are works of fiction inspired by his actual writings from the Ring Family papers in the University of Washington Special Collections, Accession Number #4241-001. Dramatic license has been taken with the actual historical texts. In May 2012, Gordon Hirabayashi was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama.