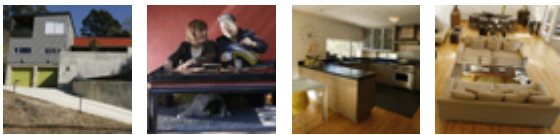


Playwright's house is drama in itself

Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

Carolyne Zinko, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, March 24, 2007



As one of America's leading playwrights, Philip Kan Gotanda naturally has lots of stories to tell. The 57-year-old is best known for plays and films that focus on the Asian American experience, most notably "The Wash," "The Ballad of Yachiyo" and "Yankee Dawg You Die."

His latest work on paper, "After the War," is a study in relations among Asians, African Americans and immigrants who live in a boarding house in Japantown in 1948, but also raises questions about what it means to be an American today and to question the government during times of war. The world premiere takes place at the American Conservatory Theater on Wednesday.

But Gotanda's latest work in the third dimension -- the 2,200-square foot home he and his wife, actress-producer Diane Takei, built in the Berkeley hills -- is a drama, too.

What else to call the project that put stress on the marriage? A dramedy, maybe?

"Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House," joked Gotanda, referring to the 1948 Cary Grant-Myrna Loy movie about a couple who leave Manhattan to build in the country, only to find that everything that can go wrong goes wrong.

He laughs about it now, but it wasn't so funny at the time -- as any homeowner in the middle of a home-building project knows.

Gotanda and Takei planned to do things the linear way: sell their 100-year-old Victorian in San Francisco's Glen Park neighborhood, use the money to pay the contractor and architect along the way, and finish on a 10-month schedule.

But their house didn't sell immediately and they had to take out a loan to pay the architect's bills in cash. Gotanda went to out-of-town film festivals or writers' conferences, leaving Takei to deal with construction delays.

Rains impeded progress, and there were also specific codes relating to hillsides, earthquakes and fires that complicated construction. It also happened that the soil in their vacant lot, primarily clay, had to be removed, reconstituted and pounded back into place.

"The neighbors loved that," Gotanda said.

The 10-month project morphed into a two-year ordeal. They had to move into the Paramount residential tower near Yerba Buena Center because the home wasn't finished. And Takei was acting in her husband's play, "Under the Rainbow," at the Asian American Theater Company nearby.

"If you build a home, it tests your marriage," Gotanda allows. But they passed the test, he said: "We're still madly in love after 21 years."

During a recent visit to the home -- christened only three months ago with a wine-tasting party for friends -- Gotanda and his wife appear the picture of domestic bliss, alternately smiling and groaning at the memories, finishing each other's sentences, and sometimes, blurting out the same thought simultaneously.

The couple describe the home as a modern Japanese design that suits their lifestyle as artists and reflects their ethnic heritage better than either of the two homes they lived in before in San Francisco -- a condominium on Twin Peaks and the Victorian in Glen Park. (Gotanda is from Stockton; Takei is from Los Angeles. They met through a mutual friend when his "Song for a Nisei Fisherman," written in 1982, played at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.)

Their two-story dwelling, where Takei's mother and the couple's dog, Mochi, also live, is built on a hillside double lot. Visitors walk up a steeply sloped driveway and a set of stairs to reach the front door -- a set of sliding glass doors off a veranda that faces a rock garden with basalt stones from China, decorative mondo grass and budding Japanese irises. A trickling water bowl fountain adds a riparian touch, while a stand of Moso (giant bamboo) has been planted in below-ground containers along one side of the home -- influenced by the bamboo ringing modernist architect Rudolf Schindler's "Kings Road House," designed in West Hollywood in 1922.

Their Berkeley lot had never been developed, according to the previous owner, a woman who worked at the chemistry lab at UC Berkeley and acquired the land in the 1950s. She had trouble purchasing the lot because -- although she was an American citizen -- she was Japanese American, Gotanda said. Her boss at work helped her by buying the property for her and allowing her to pay him back, Gotanda said.

It was in the front of the vacant lot that Gotanda's gardener found a hand grenade among a tangle of tall weeds being shorn for fire safety. Gotanda doesn't think it was lobbed as an act of racism against the previous owner but found its way there thanks to a former neighbor, an icon of the counterculture and Berkeley assistant professor who sanctioned the use of LSD.

"See that house up on the hill behind ours?" Gotanda said, motioning upward. "Timothy Leary once lived there. We assumed it came from one of his parties."

The gardener picked up the grenade, which was quite heavy. They couldn't be sure it was real, but they couldn't be sure it was fake.

"The pin wasn't in it," he said. "But we had the police come and take it away."

Moving to Berkeley was difficult for the couple, who had grown to love the vibrancy of San Francisco, where they lived for 25 years. But their three-story Victorian needed constant maintenance, and they were no longer up to the task. They weren't sure that the pair of gentlemen who had lived in it previously had really moved out -- Gotanda and Takei always felt that their spirits were still hanging around. And, thanks to Gotanda's growing body of work, they had literally outgrown the house.

Gotanda would start writing a play in one room and fill it with notes. When he began another project, he'd move to another room and fill it with notes.

"This is significant," Takei said. "He filled all the rooms until they were all used -- the bedrooms, the living room, the dining room, the den, and then it was ... adios."

But the chief reason to build a dream house was to create a place that was both work space -- where they could conduct readings, rehearse productions, write plays and paint -- and refuge.

The hillside location, where deer and wild turkey roam, is quiet; the interior of the home serene.

Their living room with neutral colored furnishings is high-ceilinged and spacious, with a track of barn-door theater lights overhead.

A pair of low-slung, modern couches the color of white clay are easily moved aside for rehearsals. In fact, last week Gotanda invited a troupe of Asian American improv performers to rehearse comedy sketches he'd written, which they're performing in San Jose.

"We've fashioned our lives so I don't have to go to L.A. and do screenplays," said Gotanda, though they do make films. Their 1999 feature film, "Life Tastes Good," the tale of a dying Japanese mobster who comes back to San Francisco to make amends to

his children and falls in love, was recently shown on the Independent Film Channel and is now available on DVD.

The couple enlisted feng shui specialist Arlene Ono of Berkeley to help make the place tranquil. She installed a yin-yang sign under the wood floor of the living room, put flutes and firecrackers inside the walls, painted the subflooring red in the bathrooms (to protect rooms below from garbage leaving the home) and changed the position of a stairway to the second floor so that it no longer exits out a front door.

Other furnishings in the living room include a dining table for dinner parties at which Takei likes to serve Italian food -- pasta with lemon and parmesan -- or Japanese food, including "hoto," a stew native to her mother's village of Yamanashi, which contains thick noodles and vegetables such as gobo (burdock root), shiitakes, yamaimo (mountain potato), pumpkin and miso.

Several tansu chests are found along the walls as well as two wood sculptures carved by Japanese Americans held in internment camps during World War II. One of them, an eagle on a perch, was given to Gotanda's father, a doctor at an internment camp in Rohwer, Ark. The wry message -- liberty, democracy, in the face of imprisonment -- is not lost on Gotanda or his wife.

His play at ACT, he said, "deals with the intersection of Asian Americans and African Americans in San Francisco's post-World War II Japantown. The issues of interracial conflict are seen from each side's point of view, more of a 'right versus right,' so even if the exchanges are heated and controversial, one understands the overall context within which these clashes are taking place."

Takei shows off the kitchen -- a study in sleekness, with a Wolf dual fuel range, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, a Gaggenau steam oven ("a fun toy," she said) and counters of Absolute Black honed granite. Dishware is stored in two 1930s-era stainless steel medical cabinets, and the eating area contains a Deneb table, lime Eames Eiffel chairs and an Artemide Logico light fixture.

Meanwhile, Gotanda goes to work on revisions to the play. He likes to write in coffeehouses, but he also likes typing away on his Vaio laptop in the living room, the sliding doors open, allowing a breeze to waft in on an 80-degree day. There is a soothing burble from the fountain in the rock garden, and a view of neighborhood treetops, the sky, a bit of Berkeley down below, and Mount Tamalpais in the distance, for a blend of inside and outside.

He loves the rock garden, designed by Bill Castellan, a Berkeley landscape designer, because it intentionally departs from tradition. Some of the stones' edges are broken, not smooth, cleanly shorn surfaces.

Gotanda said this lends an "apocalyptic undercurrent" to the stones and a "contemporary, subtly nuanced violent tension to the rounded, contained surface of the rest of the stones."

At night, in the distance, the sound of a train can be heard running through Berkeley. Gotanda finds it comforting because it reminds him of his childhood, when a train ran near his home in Stockton.

Far from being pretentious, the home is a comfortable space.

"When we built, we wanted a sanctuary away from the city," said Takei, "and a home that had good energy -- a modern design, but with a Japanese spirit."

"We wanted a place where we could work," Gotanda added. "A place that would be functional."

They also wanted a home that would not cost a lot.

"It didn't work out that way," Takei said, "but we're happy with what we have."

E-mail Carolyn Zinko at czinko@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/24/HOGUKOPG4R1.DTL>

This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



[Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships](#)

The Berkeley hills home, built by Philip Kan Gotanda and his wife, Diane Takei, sits on a formerly empty double lot. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

The couple take tea on the veranda near the front entrance. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »

« PREVIOUS NEXT »

Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

The sleek kitchen and dining area include a Wolf range and Eames Eiffel chairs. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



« PREVIOUS NEXT »

Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

he spacious living room in the Berkeley hills home of playwright Philip Kan Gotanda and Diane Takei works for both improv rehearsals and dinner parties. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



« PREVIOUS NEXT »

Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

The front entrance of the home includes a set of sliding glass doors off a veranda that faces a rock garden with basalt stones from China and Japanese irises. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



« PREVIOUS NEXT »

[Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships](#)

Above: A portrait by Diane Takei of the couple's dog, Mochi, and a Buddha statue decorate the guest bathroom. A feng shui expert helped make the home tranquil. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »



« PREVIOUS NEXT »

Playwright's house is drama in itself / Philip Kan Gotanda's new home and new play are both studies in relationships

Philip Kan Gotanda's pottery, pieces he made while studying in Japan, decorate the couple's new home, which is modern and functional but also reflects their Japanese ancestry. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



Chronicle / Eric Luse

« PREVIOUS NEXT »

