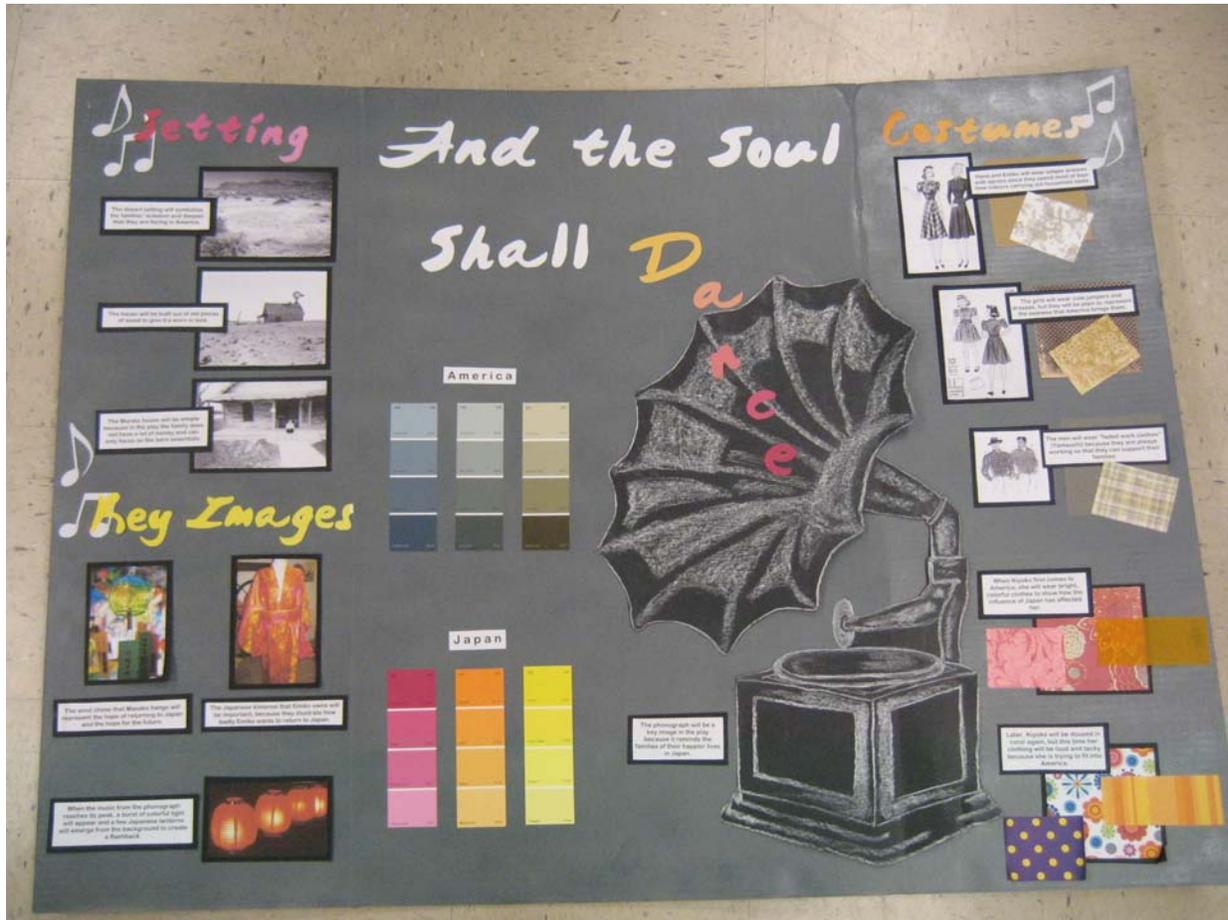


ENGL1102M

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### When Colors Contrast

Prosperity and happiness are what Japanese immigrants were looking for in America in the 1930s; however, they found desperation and isolation. Wakako Yamauchi expresses despondency in her play *And the Soul Shall Dance* by showing the different effects isolation has on two Japanese immigrant families. The focus of my production of *And the Soul Shall Dance* will be to show how the American dream has failed the two families and how the characters' hopelessness increases their longing to return to Japan.

The 1979 version of *And the Soul Shall Dance*, presented by the Pan Asian Repertory Theater and directed by Tisa Chang, was noted not for its acting, but for its memorable script, according to an article from *The New York Times*. John Corry critiqued the play, and his review

consisted mostly of a summary of the plot, with commentary interjected sporadically. Corry considered the script as a strength of the play because it was written “from neither self-pity nor ideology” (Corry). The play was written by a Japanese-American who, according to Corry, made the play a huge success. He did say that some of the acting was a little overdone and unconvincing, especially the Murata family’s reactions towards their neighbor’s failing marriage. He states that the characters played their roles “a shade too earnestly, a shade too wholesomely” (Corry). All in all, John Corry asserted, “[the play moved] with both an odd grace and some unwelcome languor,” making the script a bigger success than the actual play.

A later production shown in 1990 by the same theater company placed importance on character development. A *New York Times*’ critic, Stephen Holden, saw Kati Kuroda’s version of *And the Soul Shall Dance* and said that the main focus was on the psychological aspect of the characters (Holden). “Oka and Emiko are the largely helpless victims of the squeeze between the [Japanese and American cultures],” observed Holden. He continued to say that the acting was very detailed and really conveyed the characters’ emotions perfectly. Stephen Holden’s complaints were that the play failed to show the legal and social status of the characters, and that it moved slowly after the first act (Holden). While the attention to details was remarkable, Holden believed that the direction and unity of the play were lost and could have been improved.

Instead of focusing on the development of characters, I want to communicate the families’ despair and longing to return to Japan visually so the audience can actually see how the environment affects the characters’ spirits. My goal is for the audience to empathize with the characters and understand that the characters are influenced by their emotions. Through use of color, I will show the different emotions that are connected with both America and Japan. Since America is an oppressive setting for the families, I will use drab, gloomy, neutral colors to describe anything that is associated with America. Specifically, I will apply these colors to the setting and costumes. Every scene will have white and blue lights casting a dismal overtone on the set until Japan is mentioned. When the characters turn their attention towards Japan, the lights will transform into a mix of yellows, oranges, and pinks. Anything that is associated with Japan will be cast in lively colors because both of the Japanese-American families believe that returning to Japan will bring meaning to their existence once again. As Hana says to her daughter, “everyone does” want to go back to Japan (Yamauchi 843). Japan’s bold colors will be used in key images throughout the play. By associating color and emotion, the audience will clearly understand that the American dream is actually a false illusion and that the characters were better off in Japan.

A precise setting is crucial for my vision of the play because it is the setting that is causing the characters’ despair. In act two, Masako asks if they live on a prairie, and Hana responds, “Prairie? Does that mean desert?” (Yamauchi 845). Hana retorts without hesitation because the desert setting symbolizes their situation in America. Not only are the Great

Depression and Dust Bowl occurring while they are in America, but as Japanese-Americans, they are also isolated from the rest of society. The isolation is making their souls grow hopeless and dry of emotion, just as their land continues to be infertile and void of crops. America is sucking up any hope they have of a better life. To demonstrate this effect, dry, isolated scenery will be shown in the background of every scene and will consist of drab, dusty colors such as brown, tan, and gray. The desert scenery will be included in the interior setting, as well. There will be a few screened-in windows in the Muratas' house that will show the desert to remind the audience of the families' dry setting and anguish.

The actual interior of the Muratas' house will be simple, because in the play the family does not have a lot of money and can only focus on the bare essentials. The outside of Oka's house will also be very simple, since they are in the same financial situation as the Muratas. The houses will be built out of old pieces of wood to give them a worn look. I will only show one room in the scenes that occur in the interior of the Murata's house. It will be the kitchen, and the room will have a beat-up table with accompanying chairs in the center. Off to the side will be a shelf with random items such as cups, bowls, towels, a phonograph, and a bottle of sake. On the floor will be a thin layer of dust to show the poverty of the family. When the characters move around on the stage, they will stir up the dust around their feet, making it more visible. The dust will remind the audience of the families' dry setting and anguish once again.

While the setting is a vital element for understanding the depressing emotions that America brings to the families, key images will be emphasized so that the audience can get a grasp of the delightful emotions that Japan brings without actually visualizing a Japanese setting. The phonograph is an important image because it reminds the families of their happier lives in Japan. When the phonograph is playing, Murata says the records "take me back home. The only way I can get there . . . in my mind" (Yamauchi 840). Since they are stuck in America, the only way to travel back to Japan is mentally. The characters have only their memories, and it is these memories that give them hope, but also haunt the characters. Thinking of Japan motivates them to work harder because if they endure the hardships, they will one day have a chance to return home. At the same time, the memories are a cold reminder of how comparatively awful things are in America. My vision for the phonograph is to have a bright light slowly fill the room as the music begins to play so that the color can correlate with the characters' emotions that the phonograph brings. The music will start out faint and grow louder as the scene progresses. I want the music and lighting to be in sync so that when the music plays softly in the background, the lights will cast a soft glow on the set. As the music gets louder, the colored lights will become more vivid and distinguished. When the music reaches its peak and Emiko begins to dance, I will have a burst of colorful light appear and a few Japanese lanterns emerge from the background to create a flashback. Based on the lighting, the audience will be able to visualize the memories that the phonograph brings the characters. After the music reaches its peak, the colorful lights will

begin to fade slowly along with the music until the music finally stops and the characters have to face the reality of their depressing situation.

The wind chime that Masako hangs will also be a key image because it represents the hope of returning to Japan and the hope for the future. In the play, Hana is afraid to hang the wind chime because she does not want to get used to hearing it and allow the wind chime to lose its value. What Hana really is afraid of losing is hope. She does not want to be reminded of Japan everyday and become depressed because her family is not making any progress towards returning home. Because Hana has not seen the wind chime in awhile, it makes her happy and gives her hope that she will get to return to Japan one day. Also, when the wind chime is hung, Masako says, “it makes me feel something, too” (Yamauchi 853). Masako can see the beauty of the wind chime. She can feel the joy that it gives her mother and is comforted by that feeling. Masako, being a child, is literally the future, and her being able to “feel something” (Yamauchi 853) shows that there is hope in the future. In the play, the feeling of hope will be shown once again through color. The wind chime comes from Japan so it will be very bright and beautiful. It will also make a lovely sound that will echo throughout the whole scene to remind the audience of the hope that it brings Hana and her family. When Masako looks upon the wind chime, a bright, colorful light will shine on her, showing the audience that she is filled with hope and that she will carry that hope to the future.

Along with the phonograph and the wind chime, the Japanese kimonos that Emiko owns will be important, because they will show the audience how badly Emiko wants to return to Japan. For Emiko, the kimonos help remind her of a different time and place. The kimonos are the only thing that she has that came from Japan and are her prized possessions. The way she “keeps her hand on” (Yamauchi 853) her kimonos shows how important they are to her. Because Emiko is willing to sell her most precious possessions in order to escape America, she is showing the audience that getting back to Japan is more important than any physical treasure. Emiko shows that living in America is not better than living in Japan, and that she will do anything to escape and be happy. To emphasize the importance of the kimonos, they will be in bright colors that will reflect on Emiko’s face when she reveals them to Hana and Masako. Imprinted on the kimonos will be floral imagery to contrast with the barren land in which the characters live and emphasize how Japan can bring fertility and life. Pink and orange lights will be shown on Emiko’s face to show the reflection of the kimonos. I will have these lights flicker slightly to make a shimmering effect on Emiko’s face. When Emiko learns that she cannot sell the kimonos, the color will fade out of her face and out of the room quickly as she wraps the kimonos back inside their box. The audience will know that Emiko is now without hope because she has to face the reality that she will never be able to return to Japan. Just as Emiko is stuck with the kimonos, she is stuck in America as well.

The costumes will be important visuals as well, because they will express how the characters are feeling. The clothing will be fairly simple and drab since the characters wear mostly American-style clothing of the era and cannot afford expensive apparel. The dull colors and simplicity of the clothing will represent the sadness that America brings upon characters. The costumes will consist of mostly neutral colors, with touches of dusty blues and greens. The men will wear “faded work clothes” (Yamauchi 836) because they are always working so that they can support their families. The older women, like Hana and Emiko, will wear simple dresses with aprons since they spend most of their time indoors carrying out household tasks. The girls will wear cute jumpers and dresses, but they will be plain.

In some instances, however, the clothing will be less drab to show a contrast in a particular character’s thoughts or actions. When Kiyoko first comes to America, she will wear bright, colorful clothes to show how the influence of Japan has affected her. As the play goes on, her clothing will diminish in color to show the negative effects America has had on the child. Later, Kiyoko will be doused in color again, but this time her clothing will be loud and tacky because she is trying to fit into America. Kiyoko will “feel strange in colors” (Yamauchi 851) because she is putting on a false persona with which she is not happy. Since the color has slowly faded out of Kiyoko’s clothing, the audience will be surprised to see so much on her so fast. A bold color shift will excite the audience’s eyes, showing them immediately that color in the play is being associated with emotions and that America is the cause for the characters’ emotional downfalls.

While America may not be causing Japanese-Americans grief as it did in the 1930s, the emotions they experienced are still very real today. My hope is that the emotions expressed in the play will come alive through the use of color. I want to provoke an emotional awakening of the audience’s hearts so that they can see what makes the characters’ spirits yearn. The audience’s discovery will lead them to a place where emotions reign and everything seems within their grasp. Desire and hope will consume the audience, and these feelings will allow them to experience what it is like when their souls dance.

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