



Asago Murakami in her garden in Steveson, British Columbia; below, Murakami returns to her garden in Obaachan's Garden.

The Power of Memory: Linda Ohama's OBAACHAN'S GARDEN

"How do we learn about things that have happened before us? And what about memories? Are these memories always real? And what about what we dream or wish for? Can they become real one day?"
Linda Ohama, director of *Obaachan's Garden*

Traumatic historical events carry with them a buffer that proffers, immediately after said event, a certain protection. News reports cover the facts, but the psychological and emotional impact of these events cannot be told for years. Several reasons prevent immediate close inspection: the ripple effect of these traumas cannot be seen without the perspective of time; the facts rewrite themselves in favour of the victors so that certain stories are lost or at least buried in the passage of time; and when anecdotal histories finally begin to surface, the



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Images courtesy of the NFB.

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atrocities take on a politically correct posture, holding victims up as sacrificial lambs, compelling their stories to include cries of injustice and outrage. If in doubt, see Scott Hicks's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which plays paint-by-numbers with emotional clichés.

Now, five plus decades after the Second World War, there are stories that need to be told while the individuals who participated in the events are still alive to bear witness. Fifty years seems to be establishing itself as a watershed point after which histories that could not be told before now must be told. In the case of Linda Ohama's NFB documentary, *Obaachan's Garden*, there was indeed an urgency. The subject of this film, indeed, the inspiration and heart of this film, Asayo Murakami, her grandmother – *obaachan* being the Japanese word for grandmother – was approaching her 100th birthday.

It is the purely organic nature of *Obaachan's Garden* that sets it apart from other documentaries. The project began in 1991 when Ohama, an established documentary filmmaker, began to visit her grandmother in a nursing home, conducting on-camera interviews. This went on for three years as an independent project. There was a wealth of material to cover, as audiences see it laid out in the film: Murakami's

childhood in Japan; her arrival in Canada in 1923 as a "picture bride"; her rejection of her prospective husband-to-be; her eventual marriage and raising her family in Steveston, British Columbia. The biography pivots with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the years of internment and exploitation during the Second World War and how Murakami settled after the socio-political tornado of the war.

Although in the film itself Ohama presents Murakami's life in a chronological through line, the genesis of *Obaachan's Garden* was hardly such a straightforward process. "I was doing other films in the area where my grandmother was staying," Ohama explains from Vancouver. "These interviews were like a notebook. I knew one day I'd probably want to do a piece on her, something about her because she's such an interesting woman. Around 1996, I actively started to focus on her as a subject of a film." It was then, after Ohama had invested her own resources on the project, that the NFB came on line and ramped up the project budget.

At this point, the material seemed tidily wrapped up with Murakami's 100th birthday celebration, which made for a pleasant and satisfying ending. But the celebrant didn't appear at the party. It's at this juncture that the subject became the auteur. "My grandmother was very smart at letting off just a little bit of information at a time, and she did this over a period of five years. Living in a nursing home is not exactly the most exciting thing, sitting in the hallways, looking at your watch, waiting for breakfast, waiting for lunch and waiting for bedtime. She extended this out for five years, asking me questions, having my camera crew hang around, getting attention," Ohama recalls with the humour of hindsight. "It wasn't until 1998 that she told me her secret." The secret was that she had two children she left behind in Tokyo when she came to Canada.

Hook, line and sinker – this would be a fair characterization of Ohama's reaction. But it wasn't a scam. Murakami was 100 years old, wheelchair bound and while she was finally old enough to not fear the reprisal of revealing that she had another husband and another family, she also had to cope with the fact that some people would relegate this "secret" to the dementia of her old age. "I first heard about this secret when I was handed a photograph of two small children," Ohama explains. Her first thought was not of how this would change the course of the documentary, but rather an overwhelming revision of how she viewed her grandmother. "I remember seeing the two little girls and seeing my grandmother as a young mother, a woman, more like me. I could really relate to that. I never thought of her so much as a mother, even as being my mother's mother. But when I saw the two little children, she stopped being just my grandmother. She was, in my mind, a woman who had this deep, deep love and deep, deep loss that she was sharing with another woman."

The compassion in the director's reaction speaks to her bias in the making of this documentary. Putting aside the accepted understanding that objectivity is impossible in documentary filmmaking, as well as



Linda Ohama

the expected dissenting opinion on the subject, Ohama came at *Obaachan's Garden* with a different objective. Her direction came from a wish to follow the events of her grandmother's life as her grandmother experienced them – no overlay of righteous indignation about the injustices endured nor academic fact-first History Channel lust. This was meant to be the grandmother's story first and foremost. "I tried to be true to my grandmother's feelings and the way she saw her world through all those years. I can't pick out a moment when I had to watch out for my own agenda because this film is an expression of me, too." And it is precisely because of Murakami's religious orientation that the subject of bitterness, which some viewers experience for the main character, is not a factor in the film.

The calm with which the central figure accepts her life seeps out to affect the audience. If this had been a story about a woman from any number of other cultures, this would have ended up being a "victim" documentary. But there is no anger, no bitterness, nothing of the sort. "I have no explanation for it except that my grandmother is Buddhist. It's just a way of being, nothing religious, but just a way of using your energy. My grandmother never said, 'this is the way you should do things,' but she taught us all by example. And what we learned from her was that there are different ways of being in a situation and it's not like we don't get angry, but anger is not the number one motivator."

Time and place. Some things cannot be forced. They must wait for their moment. *Obaachan's Garden* is the fruit of this tree, and the tree is in season. "I think my story, or my grandmother's story, could not have come out any earlier because she had no way of expressing it and she was still digesting it inside," Ohama says. At the age of 50 herself, Ohama recognizes the influences of an era on a culture. "She was still very much acting like a first-generation Japanese woman, whereas my generation has learned to express our feelings."

The ingenious irony of *Obaachan's Garden* is that while it was supposed to wrap up with the birthday party, it was the birthday itself which opened the door to the revelation. "I think my grandmother wisely manipulated the situation. She knew I was a filmmaker; she knew I wanted to tell her story; and she led me into her story for two-and-a-half years before she revealed the other half. I was in so far at that point, I couldn't turn around."

In a purist's sense, this kind of action coming from the subject of a documentary has to influence the process itself. The bigger question is, does it taint the process? Is the tail wagging the dog? From Ohama's perspective, the spontaneity of this revelation signalled the integrity of her objective. As opposed to being consumed by the project, the project was flourishing, much like the garden her grandmother had originally planted in Steveston before the war, which her family replanted for her 100th birthday. "My grandmother knew she wanted to find out how her daughters grew up and she knew she was in a wheelchair and too old to do it herself, so she passed that on to me, knowing full well what she was doing and knowing full well I was the only person who would take it and do something about it." Ultimately, this revelation is symbolic of the trust between documentary subject and filmmaker.

Obaachan's Garden crowns a highly acclaimed career of filmmaking for Linda Ohama. Her first independent film, *The Last Harvest*, won the 1993

Antoinette Kryski Canadian Heritage Award at the Yorkton Film Festival, the 1994 Chicago International Film Festival Silver Plaque and the 1994 Philadelphia International Film Festival Silver Plaque. Ohama produced *Neighbours: Wild Horses & Cowboys*, which won the 1997 Chicago International Film Festival's Gold Plaque. Her other film credits include *Watari Dori: A Bird of Passage* and *The Travelling Reverend*. So when she diverts from a documentary's classic format, she does so with deliberate intent.

Half of *Obaachan's Garden* is in traditional narrative and half is dramatized. Young Asayo is played by Natsuko Ohama (*Speed, Flatliners*) who, like Linda, is a granddaughter. The split between the dramatized portions and the narrative is fundamental to Ohama. "I decided to dramatize the portion of my grandmother's life before I was born," Ohama says. "We only imagined what her life was like from photographs and from what she says and what my mother says. It's only our interpretation. From the point when I was born, and Natsuko as well, it goes strictly documentary because we eye-witnessed that. I wanted to play with that reality, with what people's memories and recollections are compared to what really happened. It was a challenge, but it was also going against the norm. I could have easily been right out of the documentary zone of what is accepted into screenings."

Her worries were groundless. To date, *Obaachan's Garden* has shown at the Montreal World Film Festival, Calgary International Film Festival, Festival International des Films de Femmes in Creteil, France, as well as in Berkeley, San Francisco and Los Angeles. It received a Genie nomination for Best Documentary and won the Federal Express Award for Most Popular Canadian Film Vancouver International Film Festival.

Returning to the thoughts at the very beginning of *Obaachan's Garden* about memories and dreams and making things real, these puzzles are perhaps the only ones that clearly come from the director herself. The rest of the film is devoted to exploring the content and, by virtue of making the documentary in the first place, making real the dreams.

TAKE ONE

