

The Luck of Daruma:

an Interview with Midi Onodera

Wendy Waring

This interview took place in the fall, at Midi Onodera's home. We discussed her new film, "The Displaced View" which explores the lives of three generations of Japanese-Canadian women. It gave us the opportunity to talk about issues as wide-ranging as politics and history, film-making and sexuality, money and culture. I had to catch her before she left for two festivals, one in Amsterdam, one in Italy, where her last film, "A Dime a Dance" is showing. From what I discovered in this interview, "The Displaced View" should enjoy as much success.

Wendy Waring: Maybe you could start by giving us an idea of when and how you first started thinking about making this film.

Midi Onodera: It's been building in different ways for a long time. About two years ago, I did a piece in *Fuse*; that was, I guess, the starting point of the film. It had to do with the three generations of women, talking about the war, and their experience. It was all written in the first person. On the one hand, I was being the grandmother character, then the mother, and then myself. I took several years to decide how I was going to make it. I'm still deciding!

WW: Can you give me a general idea of what it's about?

MO: The film starts off from my character, the third generation character, on a trip back to the west coast camps as a voyage of discovery. The beginning point for the first generation is also a voyage, her trip to

Canada. The second generation acts as a point of interpretation for the first generation. There is also a part about her childhood. About one-third of the film is a pre-war discussion of discrimination, and things like that that are happening on the west coast. The other two-thirds are concentrated on the internment. I didn't plan it that way, but when you talk to people, it's the major thing that happened in their lives. They knew what they did at that stage; they can remember certain moments clearly. The last part brings it all back together. I guess with the conclu-



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sion comes a feeling of sadness, because the first generation will die, this culture will be lost. The fourth generation, the fifth generation won't know their great, great grandparents. They won't have that connection. They will be on the outside—still Japanese, half Japanese, quarter Japanese—but they won't really have any of the understanding.

WW: Is there a narrative, is it a series of stories? How does the script work?

MO: Interviews were a starting point for the script. There are no interviews in the film, it's almost completely fictionalized. I would say that it is a series of stories that build into a narrative. The three characters belong to one family and their stories definitely interconnect. There are incidents that each generation will tell its version of, or sometimes there are visual references that link one scene to another. It's almost like piecing together all the parts of the puzzle and I wouldn't think that a white audience without knowing Japanese would get the whole film, but that's O.K.

Some of the sections in the script are what actual people said, the way they said it. They were all very personal experiences, and they all had very distinct ways of speaking. For instance, in the first generation, hardly any of them speak English, so in the film, that character will speak nothing but Japanese—with no sub-titles. This is done because I see

myself and possibly other sansei—third generation—as not knowing Japanese. You have your grandmother or a grandfather or whoever sitting there and speaking this language to you and you just kind of sit there and think, “I don’t understand what you are saying.” I want the audience to feel that too, I want them to feel frustrated, but I also want them to listen to the voice and try to decipher what it is these women are saying. That’s what I do a lot of the time with my grandmother: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.

WW: I guess that makes the script almost visual.

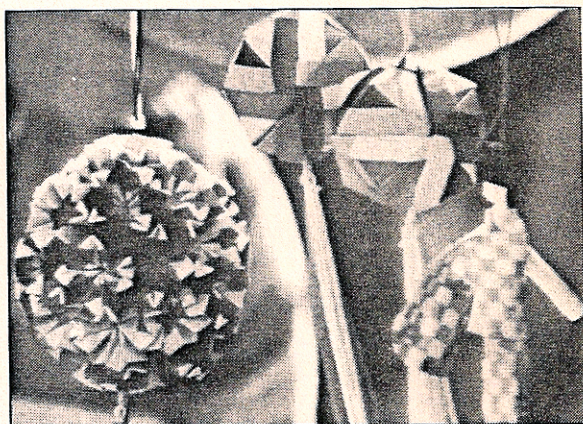
MO: Yes. I had to pay so much more attention to someone who didn’t speak my language; I would have to look at their eyes, their movements, listen to the tone of their voice.

Japanese subtitles are included over the entire film, except when Japanese is spoken. This will make it look a bit like a Japanese print. And the Japanese that is spoken is old Japanese.

WW: What kind of structure does the film have visually?

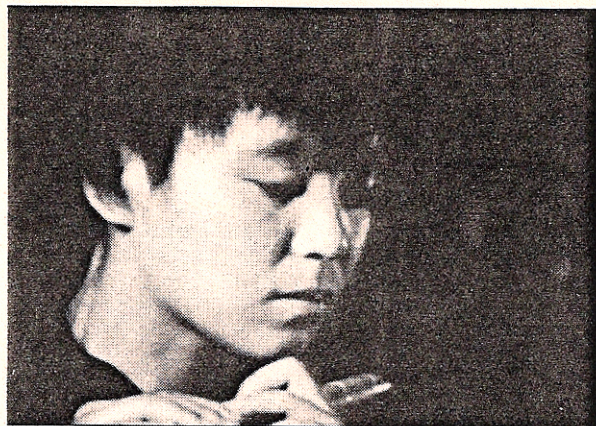
MO: At the beginning when I first started thinking about the film, it was going to have three visual components: there was to be present-day footage, photographs and archival footage. I’ve now decided against the

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archival footage. It’s all present-day footage. There are going to be some photographs, present-day as well as older photographs. There are recurring images throughout the film. There is one scene that has a table of young children sitting and trying to do origami. Of course, they are so young, they can’t really do it, so they drift away and play with their toys. Later on in the film,—a different room, different people—a group of older women are sitting around a table doing origami. The two scenes are linked through their action and the camera movements. There are a

lot of little things in the film that someone might pick up on. There is the whole recurring thing of the Daruma. They're small, roly-poly doll figures, a kind of Japanese folk god. They are sold all over Japan like little trinkets, like rabbits' feet. When you get one you are supposed to make a wish and paint one eye. When your wish comes true, you paint the other. So, throughout the film, there is the idea of a wish trying to be fulfilled. As well, these dolls are weighted and they roll and bob, but they never fall over, so if someone says you have "the luck of Daruma" you're



People don't want to get involved. The Ministry of Citizenship and Culture! You would think that this would be right up their alley, but no. They're suspicious about anything to do with internment. (Photo of Leslie Komori.)

like these dolls that always pop back up. A woman that I talked to in New Denver told me about this in March. The trip out to New Denver was really cathartic for the film.

WW: You said you did a lot of research and you spoke with a lot of people. How did you make connections with them?

MO: Most of the research was done out west, by my cousin who is a writer. She's been out there for several years, so I basically said, "Go out there and do it." She made most of her connections by word of mouth, and through the churches, I think, possibly through the United Church, but I think they have a strong Buddhist following in Alberta. As well, I have a sort of distant aunt in New Denver where we were filming and doing research, and she set me up with everyone there. New Denver is a very unique community, because that was where one of the internment camps was set up during the war. It's the only place where people who relocated during the war remained. There are about forty-five to fifty Japanese-Canadians still living there; some of them live in the original government houses that were built.

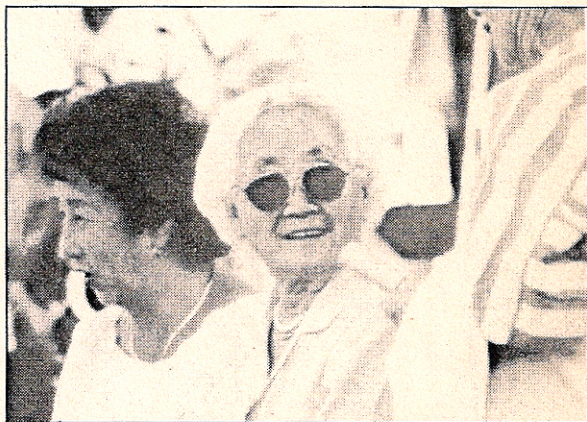
WW: How did they react to your interviewing them?

MO: I think that it would have been totally different if I didn't have that connection through family, if I were just a stranger saying, "Hey, I'm

going to do this thing, so tell me your life story." They definitely would have been more reluctant. As it was I think I had to gain their trust, and I am glad that I did go out there in March and talk to them. Consequently, in August when we went back, it was great.

When I was researching, I looked at almost everything that has been done to date on Japanese-Canadians. Most of it has been done by non-Japanese and they have this very distant approach, an, "Oh look at these people, these poor victims" outsider look.

... it was a hideous part of history, a hideous part of my background, of my parents' lives, of my grandparents' lives. But there are still hideous things happening to minorities, to women, to gays, to lesbians.



WW: How did the rest of the community of New Denver respond?

MO: Well, the community is very small. All those places in the interior of B.C. are incredibly small. We landed in Nelson with our forty cases of film equipment; we had to rent a car, we had to rent a large truck. We practically took over a hotel. People from town to small town a hundred miles apart would recognise us.

There was no open resistance, although the reaction from the people living there was very different depending on whether Leslie (Komori) or I were to talk to them or my non-Japanese crew. They would be very polite to Leslie and myself, but if they spoke to someone else on the crew they might reveal their personal feelings.

There used to be an old apple orchard on the other side of the river away from the downtown in New Denver. The orchard section was "the other side of the tracks" and it still is in a way. A lot of hippies and old draft dodgers live there. They were pretty positive.

WW: How did people react to being in a film? Was it difficult to work with them?

MO: The whole filming of it was very much a co-operative effort. I didn't give them lines to say; I would just set up a location and say, "OK, let's have a tea party. Do whatever you want." And basically, they did.

Then I would say, "OK, let's do something over here . . ." By the end of the week, our last scene was so smooth, they didn't even know we were there, they just wanted to continue doing what they were doing. So I think that that rapport was wonderful.

WW: How did your shooting in New Denver contribute to the script? Did you get new ideas while you were there?

MO: There are several stories about people buying houses that were built during the war in New Denver, renovating them, and finding photographs and personal possessions that had been left there. I think I might integrate this into the film. There was an incredible Buddhist shrine that was left in this building. There were old enamel pots that are huge, with scrawled Japanese writing on them. And old wooden benches, brooms, but hand-made brooms, or a dustpan, but a hand-made dustpan. For me, it was seeing all that stuff and saying to myself, "God, they had to make everything—simple everyday things like a dustpan. Moving, they were only allowed to take 150 pounds. I stop and think to myself, "What would I take!?"

WW: How do you see the personal histories, the interviews, the public aspect of the material and your creative narrative working together?



Moving, they were only allowed to take 150 pounds. I stop and think to myself, "What would I take?!" (Photo of Suno Yamazaki and Martha Onodera.)

MO: I think that part of what I am trying to get across in the film is that, yes, this was a hideous part of history, a hideous part of my background, of my parents' lives, of my grandparents' lives. But there are still hideous things happening to minorities, to women, to gays, to lesbians. It might not be on the same scale, but one little thing and it could be. It could happen tomorrow to people with blue eyes. "I'm sorry, we have to gouge your eyes out. This culture does not like blue eyes."

WW: Is your own personal history, specifically your own sexuality, part of the film?

MO: I knew you were going to ask that. Yes. I found a lot of similarities with the process of coming out and the process of reclaiming your culture. I became aware of political issues that encompassed the whole issue of sexuality the more I began to look at issues of minority groups, issues of racism, how that was related to sexism or sexual discrimination. At first, I thought that there was no way that I could say this in the film. It's one of those things that you don't talk about. We are talking about a very, very straight community as far as the Japanese, or any kind of non-white group goes: you are straight and that's it. You have one thing to cope with and that's your colour. Deal with that. Get married, get a husband or a wife. Well, I did a few drafts, sat on it for a while and then said, "No, there is something missing." So yes, it is there, not holding up a banner, but *through* the film. In communicating to my grandmother I found that there are similarities in fighting for something and that there we have a common ground. I can't even begin to talk with my grandmother in person and tell her about that, I have to communicate it in the best way I can and that's film. I'm sort of coming out to the community and to my grandmother in this film.

WW: That must be scary.

MO: I'm terrified. It's like coming out all over again. Hopefully there won't be a censorship by the Japanese community. Hopefully they will catch on to other things, the parts are so minimal. I think there is a stronger message of continuation, and of respect. And I think they can handle it; I think they should handle it. Maybe their son or daughter has been gay for several years and they couldn't cope with it. Maybe in seeing this film they will try to understand. Maybe it will open up their discussion with their children of what happened during the war. I wasn't very interested in the beginning about what happened during the war. I think that is a definite mistake the second generation has made, negating Japanese roots, although it is more prevalent in Ontario than British Columbia.

WW: How have you gone about articulating your own relationship to your roots?

MO: Dawn Obokata of the Actors' Lab did a performance called "Faces of the Moon." She was trying to come to grips with her relationship to the first generation and how it affects her in a way that I found very interesting. I think generally hers is like mine: one of respect and strong emotional feelings towards the first generation. It almost is like that cliché to respect your elders. I think that Japanese culture is very strong in the first and third generation, for me and for my grandmother, for example. But I think a lot of people confuse Japanese culture in modern-day Japan with Japanese-Canadian culture. The first immigrants came over so many years ago: their Japan is no longer. Japan has changed, so

that if my grandmother were to go back, it would be different; it would be foreign to her. What we have, the third, fourth generation, is almost like the French-Canadian culture.

All the first generation are very, very old. Their language will die with them. It won't be passed on. The Japanese that they are teaching in the universities is modern, present-day Japanese. In Japan, although there is a universal Japanese taught in the schools, there are dialects in the different provinces. So my grandmother still speaks the language of her kin, in Japan.



The Ontario Film Development Corporation has said they don't want to back avant-garde films What does that mean for documentary filmmakers, for experimental filmmakers? (Photo of Rick Shimomi.)

WW: Did most of the first immigrants come from one region or was it dispersed?

MO: From pretty much all over. Usually the third son of a working-class family, someone who had no chance of inheriting land, would leave. The way my grandmother tells her story, is basically that she came over as a picture bride. She decided that she wanted to go to America, "the land of the rich," to make money. When they (picture brides) came over, they were very protected. They didn't go to night school to learn English. Again, going back to what has been done previously in film, it's always the men's stories that are told, like the CBC special last year about the father and grandfather. The women are just standing there like props. That's not the way it was. The women were the ones that helped keep families together during the war when the men were sent off to the work camps.

WW: Do you see your films, particularly this one, as making any overtly feminist statement?

MO: I don't think that any of my work displays an overt feminist tone. I think this film shows a very positive strength in the three generations of women, and a very deep, emotional sense of community.

WW: What kind of audience do you envision for the film?

MO: I would say definitely a Japanese-Canadian audience, people who are interested in the issue of the Second World War, people who are interested in looking back on their own lives, people who are interested in new immigrants coming to this country.

WW: Could you discuss some of the technical aspects of the film? What kind of film stock are you using?

MO: We are shooting in 16mm which is one of the professional stocks. Originally, I wanted to shoot in Fuji stock, which is the Japanese version of Kodak. I had seen there was a slight colour difference between the two. Kodak gives really bright reds, and that's their angle. That's what a North American eye sees: really pop colours. Fuji stock is more sensitive to the greens and the blues, so I wanted to experiment with the cultural difference between the stocks. Unfortunately, there is no Canadian distributor for Fuji stock, so it would have meant too many calls to Hollywood (laughter) . . . but I still have not totally discounted the idea of doing that someday.

WW: How about your crew?

MO: The people that I am working with on the film are quite good. I picked up some good people out in Vancouver. My Director of Photography is Alan Swica. He was a gaffer in the industry for a number of years and is just starting to get into camerawork. What I wanted to do with my crew was to find people that had the technical background, yet wanted to do something creatively that they had never been given the opportunity to do. The people that I'm working with are pretty dedicated. They are working at non-union scale. Some of them are deferring their salaries until I get money to pay them. The labs have been fairly supportive in Toronto, and people with equipment have been good. It's great, but it's not gonna get the film made. So many artists or filmmakers attempt a project and never pay anyone to work on it. I feel that's wrong. We have to make priorities, people have to live off their skills, they can't wait table their entire lives. Even if I have to defer my own salary, I am not going to forget about the salaries I owe other people.

WW: I know that the film has stalled a bit at this point, for various reasons. What kind of problems are you having?

MO: Primarily, finding funding. My first grant was from the Ontario Arts Council, and then I got some money from the Canada Council. We decided that the project was too big to go only to the arts councils, so the film is co-produced by my company and another company called McKenna Film Marketing. It is a non-profit organisation built up solely for the purpose of doing individual projects. We put this company together so that we could apply for funds from the Toronto Arts Council, and

so that we can eventually apply for charitable status to encourage people to invest in the film. The film is also sponsored by The Music Gallery, which is a charitable organisation, so anyone who wants a charitable receipt can donate to them and give the cheque to us. We also have Canadian Film Certification which is supposed to be an incentive for private investment because they get a tax write-off. The Ontario Film Development Corporation—the new government body that's supposed to fund all these wonderful productions in Ontario—have said they



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don't want to back avant-garde films. They want something that will give them commercial success and the only films they are interested in funding are like "Joshua Then and Now." You know, these really bad Canadian films with very straight narrative. There is no room for experimentation. What does that mean for documentary filmmakers, for experimental filmmakers? We will just have another hundred "American Cousins."

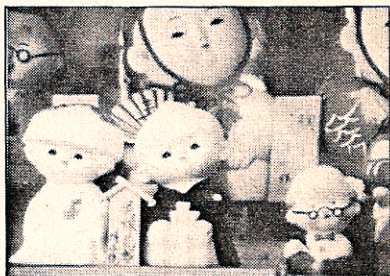
WW: What about other difficulties? Have you had problems shooting?

MO: Another problem is political. I think that because of the political climate in recent months over the situation of redress, the film is rather touchy. People don't want to get involved. The ministry of citizenship and culture! You would think that this would be right up their alley, but no. They're suspicious about anything to do with internment: "That's a very political issue. What are you saying about it?" One of the first shoots we wanted to do was during Caravan. Now I didn't know that Caravan was a privately-owned company. It is not a public organisation. Someone set it up to make some bucks off multiculturalism. The different pavilions are usually located in different community centres. We had contacted the Japanese-Canadian cultural centre and they said, "Fine. Go ahead." We showed up with our rented video equipment and the Caravan people wouldn't even let us through the door. Finally we talked to Mrs. Kossar,

one of the directors/owners of Caravan, and she refused to give us permission to shoot. We explained the project to her, that it wasn't a political statement, that it was about three generations of Japanese women. She said that anything to do with Japanese-Canadian women is political, but she meant this in a very negative sense. I was incredibly disgusted.

WW: How did the people at the centre react to this?

I became aware of political issues that encompassed the whole issue of sexuality the more I began to look at issues of minority groups, issues of racism, how that was related to sexism or sexual discrimination.



MO: The community centre has had problems with Caravan, but like any centre, they are in desperate need of money. Caravan is one way they can get that money, so it's a Catch 22. They don't like it politically; they don't like it personally. It's a rip-off, but they want their centres to survive. I am sure it's like this in every centre in Toronto that participates in Caravan.

Ever since then I have been very careful about where I film, who I film, what I am saying. I am not making a "political statement." My past happens to include the internment of my family in Canada. It's an issue, it's part of history, but one way or the other, it happened.

WW: You don't see yourself as taking a particular political stand?

MO: I have my own personal opinion, I don't know if it comes through in the film. As you might know, there are two sorts of factions in the community. I don't align myself with either one on the issue of redress. This is a personal film and a gesture of respect to the older people. That to me is important. I feel like the redress issue has circled around nothing but money, and it could go on and on. What is money when the people who suffered the most will disappear, they'll be gone.

WW: Do you see your film in part as a document of preservation because of this?

MO: Yes, in a way, for if I waited five years, I couldn't make this film. The people wouldn't be there. My grandmother is 96; ever since I was young she was old. I certainly don't have the funding for this film, but we have to make it now or it won't get made, so I have a definite sense of preserving something. It's convincing everyone else that's hard.