

# Nisei

Indie Artists on New Plays Nisei

by Cate Cammarata · August 15, 2014

What I love most about the New York International Fringe Festival is how it uncovers those hidden artistic jewels in our city that deserve our recognition and support. The Covenant Ballet Theatre of Brooklyn is one such jewel. Their production of *Nisei* is storytelling at its best.

This original ballet by CBT's Artistic Director Marla Hirokawa is based on the story of her late father, Lawrence Hirokawa, a soldier in World War II's famous Hawaiian 100th Infantry Battalion. Hirokawa was discriminated against, lost an eye in battle at Monte Casino, Italy, and was later awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star medals in recognition of his service to his country. "Nisei" is a term given to Japanese immigrants' children who were born with American citizenship; we follow one of those "greatest generation" Japanese Americans who bravely served the country that shunned and imprisoned his family back home.

*Nisei* is a truly masculine ballet. From the opening moment when we see the Old Nisei, played exceptionally well by Lawrence Lam, walk onstage with his grandson, we are charmed--and then, the Old Nisei begins to dance! It is captivating. Ballet usually conjures up images of feminine grace, but this is about masculine power, strength, courage and patriotism, amidst discrimination and prejudice. Later we see men in basic training with a Commander (Matthew Westerly) leading the company in their drills while Nick Morrison plays the army chant on his bass. The acting is just as superb as the dancing, with an exceptional performance by Kei Tsuruharatani as the Young Nisei. Tsuruharatani is mesmerizing as we follow his journey from a dutiful Japanese American son to the courageous soldier in battle.

The music is an important element, combining transitional Japanese instruments with more traditional Western music and Big Band-era orchestrations. At the end when Morrison sings "Quiet Heroes," the audience was completely moved. We, too, will never forget what those brave men have done for us, and what it cost them to do so. CBT's ballet *Nisei* is a testimony to the human spirit in times of great upheaval. I look forward to seeing more from this talented company.