

THE CHIKA PROJECT: MAYU KANAMORI

Interview by Ann MacArthur

A theatre production melding journalism with visual and performing arts tells the story of Chika Honda, a Japanese tourist jailed for ten years in Melbourne on drug trafficking charges. Released and deported in 2002 Chika maintains her innocence. Her heart wrenching struggles and small happinesses are conveyed through music, dance, narration and documentary and archival footage. Ann MacArthur interviews *Chika* creator and producer Mayu Kanamori.

How did a multi-faceted show like *Chika* develop out of your practice as a photo journalist?

I had been doing slide shows and in 2000 completed *The Heart of the Journey*, where I documented the story of an Aboriginal woman in Broome who travels to Japan to find her Japanese father. In addition to still photography, I recorded interviews which became an ABC Radio program and eventually a sound track for the slide show. The show was picked up by Malcolm Blaylock, then executive producer of the St Kilda Film Festival, who suggested that with live narration it could be considered performing art. We took it to arts markets, but it was hard to place since it fell between the categories of film and performing arts. I could have moved towards film, but as my strength is in still photography, in *Chika* I increased the performing arts element.

How did the *Chika* project originate?

Hideko Nakamura, a human rights activist in Melbourne, had been visiting Chika Honda in prison and saw *The Heart of the Journey*. She introduced me to Chika with the view to telling her story. The trouble was Chika didn't want to be photographed! As a photographer I would have let it go, but having researched her case myself and then met her, I became convinced that she could not have been a heroin smuggler. Prison visits were limited to once a month, and over an eight month period I persuaded her to have her photo taken.

How did the other artists get involved?

I continued my relationship with Malcolm, who took on the role of director, and Tom Fitzgerald who had also composed music for *The Heart of the Journey*. I wanted butoh dancer Yumi Umiumare to be involved because, having encountered Chika only at the end of her ten year stay, I felt the photographs couldn't fully capture the pain of her toughest

MAYU KANAMORI, 2008. STILL FROM SYDNEY PERFORMANCE OF CHIKA. IMAGE: MICHELE MOSSOP



moments. Yumi arrived in Melbourne from Japan the same year Chika was arrested and knew the difficulties of language and communication barriers. I wanted to use Japanese instruments but, recognising the story is set in Australia, I needed to avoid a stereotypical sound. Koto player Satsuki Odamura was perfect because of her experience collaborating with Australian composers and musicians.

So it seems like *Chika* grew according to an internal logic rather than external influences?

Yes, one thing leads to another. I first started making slide shows after seeing Nan Goldin's *I'll be your mirror* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Since making *The Heart of the Journey* I have also seen William Yang's work which I greatly admire.

***Chika* seems to have a strong social or political message. What are your intentions?**

The story of injustice draws people to see the show, and Chika does still want her name cleared. Given my own bilingual background, I feel it was important to expose the inadequacies of interpreting. After all, Australians face the situation in reverse when they get involved in judicial systems overseas.

Human rights activists would like the show to have an even stronger message to police and government. Chika became a Christian while in prison and the show opens with a quote from the Bible. Still some Christians have expected more emphasis on that aspect of her story. Ultimately for me, the story is

one about human endeavour and forgiveness. Chika isn't bitter about Australia. She would really just like a chance to come back and meet her friends from prison.

I believe *In Repose* is another project that marries your photography with your Japanese background.

In Repose is an on-going site specific performance and exhibition in Japanese cemeteries around Australia. It is another way for me to combine still photography with the performing arts. In collaboration with Satsuki Odamura, dancer Wakako Asano, visual artist Shigeaki Iwai and sound artist Vic McEwan I have completed works in Townsville and Broome, and we will later visit Thursday Island. The Japanese migrants in centuries past left home with '*hone o uzumeru kakugo*' or the determination to bury their bones. Japanese spirituality like that of indigenous Australians is tied to a belonging to the land. In the midst of struggles over land between indigenous and white Australia, we are looking at our Japanese predecessors who have become part of the soil and thanking those who have looked after their graves until today.

Chika is at the OzAsia Festival in Adelaide 26 and 27 September. Chika Honda's supporters and lawyers are working on an application for a pardon and a visa so she may visit Australia to see the performance. For further information see www.chika.asia

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