The Cocktail Party

a play by Ōshiro Tatsuhiro

Mānoa Readers / Theatre Ensemble Production
Followed by a Conversation with the Playwright

Presented by Hawaii United Okinawa Association and UH-Mānoa Center for Okinawan Studies in Collaboration with UH-Mānoa Outreach College
October 26, 2011, Hawaii Okinawa Center
Fay Ann Chun has a Master of Fine Arts degree in dance from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Scripps College in Claremont, CA. She has studied and performed with Dances We Dance, Bluewater Dance Company, and Tangentz Performance Group. She is very excited to be a part of the Mānoa Readers/Theatre Ensemble.

Dann Seki is a stage and screen actor and storyteller. A member of the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, he has appeared in numerous plays in most of the theatres in Honolulu. His TV and film credits include many productions filmed in Hawai’i including Hawaii Five-0, Lychee Thieves, The Informant, Max’s Special Delivery, Lost, Hawaii, North Shore, Baywatch Hawaii, Magnum, P.I., Crowfoot, And the Sea Will Tell, Savage Beach, and numerous local commercials. A storyteller since 1994, he has performed at various venues on Oahu and the Neighbor Islands.

Ben Moffat is a free-lance performer, storyteller, and writer based in Hawaii’i and Wisconsin. A founding member of the dance-theater troupe Monkey Waterfall, he is often seen on stilts and/or wearing a mask. He taught theater at Windward Community College for over twenty years.

Nyla Fujii-Babb has been a storyteller, actress, voice-over talent, and producer for over forty years in Hawai’i. She is the only storyteller from Hawai’i invited twice to be both an “exchange teller” and a featured performer at the prestigious National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. She has also been a featured performer at Storytelling Festivals across the United States. Nyla has appeared as an actress for the Kumu Kahua Theatre Company, the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, the Japan-America Theatre, and the Emerson Majestic Theatre. She was the voice-over narrator for the KHE/Tom Coffman production of “Nation Within: The Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom,” the Biography Hawai’i Series: “Koji Ariyoshi,” and Tom Coffman’s “The First Battle: The Battle for Equality in War Time Hawaii.” Most recently she has been in the 2010 Mānoa Readers/Theatre Ensemble’s productions of Dharamvir Bharati’s Andha Yug, translated by Alok Bhalla, and “Musings of Mystery and Alphabets of Agony: The Work of Edward Gorey.”

James Phelps, following in the footsteps of his musician and educator father, has been a percussionist and educator for over fifteen years. His music has allowed him to travel extensively throughout North America and Canada. Currently a music specialist at Waiau Elementary in Pearl City, he enjoys sharing his musical talents with kids and loves spending time with his family and two-year-old son.

Doug Kaya teaches Communication at Leeward Community College. He is also a senior mediator with the Mediation Center of the Pacific.

Dennis Nishihara retired from the Department of Education after serving as a counselor on Maui, Moloka’i, the Big Island, and O’ahu for over thirty years. He was named Counselor of the Year by the Hawai’i School Counselor Association in 1979. He received the Ola Pono Award for services to the community from HMSA in 2005. He also received the Hawai’i Counselor Association’s Counselor of the Year Award that year.
The Cocktail Party opens in a home in Washington, D.C., in 1995. Mr. Uehara has recently arrived from Okinawa to visit his daughter, Yōko, whom he hasn’t seen in over twenty years. She came to the U.S. to attend college, then met and married an American. Father and daughter reminisce as they wait for Ben Miller, her husband, to return from his law office.

Shortly after Ben arrives, the conversation is interrupted by a commotion outside. American veterans’ groups are protesting plans by the Smithsonian Institution to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII. A planned exhibit would question the justification for dropping the atomic bombs, and note the suffering of Japanese civilians. The veterans want the exhibit to emphasize America’s patriotic sacrifices during a war started by Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Uehara is troubled that Ben is giving legal counsel to the veterans’ groups. Ben counters that he is simply providing legal advice, and is not personally taking sides in the controversy. Mr. Uehara refuses to accept such neutrality, and alludes to a clash between himself and Ben’s father in 1971.

The second and third acts are flashbacks to 1971, in Okinawa. After more than two decades of U.S. military occupation, relations between Americans and Okinawans have become tense; in response, Okinawa will revert to Japanese sovereignty the following year.

Act two opens in the Millers’ home, where they are hosting a cocktail party. Guests include Mr. Uehara, Mr. Ogawa (a Japanese reporter), and Mr. Yang (a Chinese lawyer). The men meet regularly to practice conversational Chinese. On this occasion, they are joined by a neighbor, Mr. Morgan. Mr. Uehara arrives late, upset that his wife has allowed Yōko to go out with a young G.I., Robert Harris. The party is interrupted by news that Mr. Morgan’s young son is missing.

In the next scene, Yōko and Harris are watching the sunset from the cliffs at Maeda Point. He makes unwelcome advances, then assaults her. In their struggle, she pushes him over the cliff. He is in danger of falling, until Yōko rescues him.

The search for Morgan’s son continues. Speaking to Uehara, Yang recalls an incident during the war in which his own small son went missing. Returning to the Millers’ house, they learn that Morgan’s son has been found.

In act three, Uehara has learned that Yōko was attacked, and that Harris has filed criminal charges against her for injuring him. Uehara now realizes the inequality in the judicial system: American servicemen are not subject to the jurisdiction of Okinawan courts. Uehara appeals to Miller for help, but Miller refuses, fearing the incident could escalate.

When Uehara turns next to Yang for help, Yang points out the irony of a former soldier in the Japanese army in China now asking for help from a Chinese citizen. When the Japanese army occupied China from 1931 to 1945, as many as 35 million Chinese were killed. Yang nevertheless agrees to help. Aware of his legal privileges as an American G.I., Harris responds with contempt. Uehara insists that Yōko testify against Harris, despite the pain her testimony will cause her.

In act four, the setting is again Washington, D.C., in 1995. Uehara finishes telling Ben what happened in 1971. Yōko remarks that she came to America to discover the meaning of justice. Now, she has mixed feelings. She, too, is uneasy about Ben’s attempt to remain neutral, and his belief that following the letter of the law will achieve true justice; the conflict between the Smithsonian and the veterans has moral as well as legal complexities. The disagreement threatens to be a repetition of the break in the friendship between Ben’s father and Uehara in 1971.

The characters wonder if individuals and nations can ever overcome historical grievances without first acknowledging their own transgressions. The play concludes with hope that reconciliation is possible, but only when adversaries are able to speak to each other with mutual respect, honesty, and goodwill.
Many people regard Ōshiro Tatsuhiro as a founder of modern Okinawan literature. In a prolific writing career spanning six decades, Ōshiro has created new ways for Okinawans to see themselves through literature. In 2002, his Complete Works (Ōshiro Tatsuhiro zenshū) was published in thirteen volumes, comprising fiction, drama, essays, and writings on Okinawan culture and history. Ōshiro continues to add to this impressive body of work.

Born in 1925 in Nakagusuku village on the island of Okinawa, Ōshiro was educated through middle school in Naha. In 1943, he enrolled in a private university in Shanghai, China, the Tōa Dōbun Shoin Daigaku, established at the end of the nineteenth century. The mission of the university was to foster good relations among students from Japan, China, and the rest of Asia by encouraging mastery of other languages and respect for cultural differences.

After the Japanese were defeated in the war, Ōshiro returned to Okinawa, where he found work on U.S. military bases—at that time one of the few employers on the devastated islands. He later taught high school and worked in the Trade Office of the Government of the Ryukyu Islands. He also served as director of the Okinawa Institute of Historical Collections, retiring in 1986.

Known foremost as a fiction writer and playwright, Ōshiro was the first Okinawan to win Japan’s most prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa Prize. In 1967, he was awarded the prize for a novella titled The Cocktail Party. Two decades later, he updated the events in the novel and adapted it into the play being presented tonight. Ōshiro’s first published work was an award-winning play, Bright Cloud (Meiun), about postwar Okinawa, and he has continued to produce theatrical works using experimental and traditional forms and themes. Ōshiro’s newest play premiered in Okinawa in 2011. His most recent collection of fiction is also scheduled for publication in 2011.

It is a great honor for me to have my play The Cocktail Party produced in Hawai‘i. I would like to briefly explain my motivation for writing it and to give audiences a better understanding of its background and meaning.

After Japan was defeated, it was determined by the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 that semi-permanent American bases would be constructed in Okinawa and the former prefecture would be governed by a U.S. military administration.

The landscape created by mixing American military authorities, servicemen, their family members, and the Okinawan people was always very complicated. When the situation was peaceful, there were many instances of international goodwill. But when criminal cases arose, the peace was disrupted, primarily because Americans had immunity from prosecution by the Okinawan legal system. In contrast, crimes by Okinawans against Americans were punished severely in military courts. Everyone witnessed this inequality time after time.

In the 1960s, I knew very well that it would be easy enough to protest the victimization of Okinawans by writing an angry political essay. However, I chose a different approach. I intended to write a work of fiction about this unjust system, using as the setting a cocktail party where people of various nationalities were toasting international friendship. Thinking it over, I remembered that Okinawans, as Japanese citizens, had once been victimizers, when Japan occupied China during WWII. I decided to write a novella that would question head-on the shifting identities of victims and victimizers.

My novella was honored with the 1967 Akutagawa Prize. But despite the praise the book received, I felt few
readers truly understood what I was trying to express.

Twenty years later, I read in one of Japan’s national newspapers an essay by a prominent Japanese social critic. He wrote, “We continue to think of ourselves as victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but I think we should now realize that we were victimizers as well.”

I was at an utter loss for words. Was this critic unaware that I had expressed the same conviction twenty years earlier?

Then it occurred to me that if I rewrote The Cocktail Party as a play, and produced it for an American audience, my meaning would be clearer and more widely circulated. However, I never finished the play, because I felt that the chances of getting such a work produced would be very slim.

Almost ten years passed. Then, in 1995, an incident took place at the Smithsonian Museum that caused me to remember why my unwritten play had seemed so important. The museum planned an exhibition to mark the end of WWII, and wanted to use the Enola Gay (the B-29 that dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima) as part of the display. American veterans’ groups, however, vehemently criticized the exhibition, and because of the heated controversy, the exhibition, as it was originally envisioned, was eventually cancelled. The veterans reportedly referred to the bitter feelings that remained concerning the Pearl Harbor attack, and based their opposition partly on their belief that the exhibition should emphasize more forcefully the message that Americans had been the victims in the war.

In writing my 1967 novella, I had paid attention to these sensitivities and had tried to consider how to compare the issue of Pearl Harbor with that of Hiroshima. The novella was translated into English and published in the United States in 1989, but I am afraid it was not read nor understood any better there than in Japan.

Reading in the Japanese newspapers about the Smithsonian incident, I once again felt compelled to write a theatrical version of The Cocktail Party. This time, I decided to write without worrying about whether it would ever be produced anywhere. The novella takes place in the early 1960s, but I set the play primarily in 1971. To be able to discuss the Smithsonian incident, I had the daughter of the Okinawan protagonist go to the United States and marry an American, so I was able to create new scenes that are set in the U.S. in 1995.

After completing the play, I showed it to my friend Dr. Katsunori Yamazato. He translated it into English, assuring me that at some time in the future an opportunity to produce it would arise.

Recently, Professor Yamazato and Professor Frank Stewart, of the University of Hawai’i, compiled an anthology of Okinawan literature in English, Living Spirit: Literature and Resurgence in Okinawa, and decided to include the play. Professor Stewart then proposed that the play be staged in Honolulu. I feel honored to have The Cocktail Party performed in Hawai’i, but I am also nervous. My anxiety comes from my earnest desire that the play will adequately express my belief in an ideal of “universal and absolute ethics,” and that an enduring peace is possible if we can transcend the tendency to see ourselves and others solely as either victims or victimizers. I hope that the American audience will think about The Cocktail Party with an open mind.

Ōshiro Tatsuhiro
trans. by Katsunori Yamazato

Ōshiro Tatsuhiro’s The Cocktail Party is but one example of the resurgence of Okinawan literature and culture today, and can be best appreciated by knowing something of Okinawa’s history. From the twelfth to the seventeenth century, the independent, centralized Ryūkyū Kingdom flourished. In 1609, the Satsuma (Shimazu) clan of southern Kyūshū invaded the kingdom and took control. According to the “father of Okinawan studies,” Iha Fuyū, the invasion transformed the kingdom into “an ingenious organ” of exploitation, and for the next 270 years Satsuma plundered the resources of the Ryūkyūs, using the kingdom for organized smuggling while other parts of Japan were closed to foreign countries. The clan imposed a heavy tribute-tax on the people, and under the severe and uncompromising control of Satsuma, Okinawans became—to use Iha’s word—“slaves.”

During the Satsuma era, Okinawan culture lost its vigor and liveliness, and the arts declined. The invasion and domination by Satsuma, Iha wrote, were the greatest tragedies in Okinawan history, and he believed that even in the twentieth century the people were still suffering from the trauma of three centuries of Satsuma “enslavement.”

Although another act of colonization, the 1879 annexation of the Ryūkyūs by Japan ended the islands’ economic ruin, and the new prefecture was integrated into the rest of the nation; Iha called annexation an “emancipation” from
a bitter period of “slavery.” Iha was of course aware of the parallel he was drawing with the history of slavery in America. He was equally aware that annexation by Japan further suppressed Okinawan culture and language.

Iha made these observations in his 1947 essay, “A Story of Okinawan History.” Okinawa was occupied at the time by the American military, as it had been since 1945. Iha concluded his essay:

When imperialism comes to an end on this earth, Okinawans will then be liberated from the “bitter world” [nigayo] and enjoy the “sweet world” [amayo].

Nigayo and amayo are from the vocabulary of ancient Ryūkyūan sacred poetry. They mean, respectively, “a year of bad harvest” and “a year of abundance.” Nigayo, in Iha’s modern interpretation, seems to refer to the many afflictions that Okinawans endured—not only the Satsuma invasion and Japanese annexation, but also the fierce Battle of Okinawa, which took place in 1945. The battle is regarded as one of the cruelest conflicts ever fought: after eighty-two days of horrendous fighting, nearly one hundred thousand civilians had perished, the great majority of them trapped between the armies of Japan and the United States. The battle had a traumatic and lasting effect on the Okinawan imagination—and we see this reflected in the literature.

By the word imperialism in his essay, Iha was referring to all political and social systems that violate human rights and that use political and military might to enforce policies of discrimination, oppression, or aggression. Seiyei Wakukawa—an influential leader of the Okinawan diaspora in Hawai‘i, and a disciple of Iha’s in the 1920s—wrote that “Okinawa is unblessed with history.” Iha had meditated on this “unblessed history” in his last essay, and how it has shaped Okinawan identity.

Iha believed there are two struggles in the Okinawan psyche: the desire to be free of “imperialism,” and the yearning to reach the ideal state he called amayo. Today, sixty-six years after the Battle of Okinawa, Okinawans continue to be caught between Japan and the United States.

Katsunori Yamazato, University of the Ryukyus

Okinawa was the site of the last major battle of WWII. The battle lasted for three months, beginning in April 1945. Buildings on the island that had survived the American fire bombing of the capital city, Naha, the previous October were almost all destroyed during the fighting. The loss of civilian life in the three-month battle was on the scale of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—combined.

Following the war, Okinawa was separated from the rest of Japan and governed directly by the United States. It was not until 1972, in response to ever-larger but always peaceful demonstrations by the Okinawan public, that the U.S. reluctantly allowed the island chain to revert to Japan. The massive U.S. military presence, however, continues to this day. Typical of this presence is the U.S. Marine Air Station in Futenma, splitting the large city of Ginowan in two and sending forth, at all hours of the day, low-flying training missions that for decades now have frightened and annoyed local residents.

Ōshiro’s 1965 novelistic version of The Cocktail Party ends with the decision by the protagonist to press charges against his daughter’s American serviceman rapist, and to insist that the truth be told in court no matter how unjust the legal system imposed on the Okinawans by the U.S military or how hopeless the chance of getting a fair trial. With his decision the protagonist also exposes the hollowness of efforts to promote international goodwill—symbolized by the party of the story’s title—when not based on a true accounting of the circumstances within which peoples interact across national lines. The story resonated powerfully with Okinawan and mainland Japanese readers alike and established Ōshiro as a leading interpreter of the Okinawan postwar experience.

In the play adaptation of The Cocktail Party, when the main Okinawan characters in the novella come together in 1995, their circumstances have become internationalized in ways unimaginable before. But the same problems persist and call for a new kind of response. The play shows us that a response is needed as much by Americans as by Okinawans. The attitude and understanding embodied in the play’s conclusion is precisely what Confucius proclaimed as the thread running through and supporting all his moral teachings. It is there in the Western tradition as well, had we but the strength and will to see past our imagined innocence to a clear-sighted knowledge of ourselves and others.

David Fahy, University of California at Davis
Okinawan History

The Battle of Okinawa


American Occupation 1951–1972


Diaspora and Okinawans in Hawai‘i


Literature


General


Smithsonian Exhibit Controversy

Websites


The Enola Gay Controversy: History on Trial. Lehigh University Digital Library http://www.lehigh.edu/~ineng/enola/


Books


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Tim Slaughter, Director, Community Services Division, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Outreach College. Slaughter has studied and worked in the performing arts for over twenty years. He earned a PhD in theatre from the University of Hawaiʻi–Mānoa in 1992. He was production manager for Manoa Valley Theatre from 1983 to 1987, taught for Fresno State University in 1988 and 1989, became coordinator of the University of Hawaiʻi–Mānoa’s Statewide Cultural Extension Program in 1992, and became director of the University’s Community Services division in 1999.

Frank Stewart is professor of English at the University of Hawai‘i–Mānoa; president of The Mānoa Foundation; and editor of Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing, a publication of the University of Hawai‘i Press. Mānoa is the preeminent American journal featuring contemporary literature from Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas. Under Stewart’s direction, Mānoa has published forty volumes and presented numerous events.

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