

Box 5:25 Okazaki, Steven

1986-87

86/97c



November 6, 1986

Steven Okazaki  
Mouchette Films  
548 Fifth St.  
San Francisco, CA. 94107

Dear Steven:

I enjoyed so much meeting you in October and am enclosing today some reviews of THE BEST BAD THING which I promised to send you. I have more if you need them.

I also thought you might be interested in seeing the enclosed PUBLISHED WORKS which lists some of the special recognition BEST BAD THING has received.

I recall that you were going to be busy until after Thanksgiving, but when you're ready to think about proposals for a grant, perhaps we should talk about finances and contract, etc. if you still want to go ahead with the project.

In the meantime, I hope all goes well with you.

All the best,

Encl.

Published Works - updated Addendum

Reviews: Instructor - SLT  
SLT Best Blk '83 list  
SF Chron  
Assoc. of Librarians  
Washington Post  
~~Washington Post~~ - Jm

Commonweal

Key Series Happy Ending (mention -BBT)



Dear Yoshiko -

rec'd  
11/24/86

Thank you for the reviews  
of "The Best Bad Thing" and  
the other materials.

We're taking our new  
film to Hawaii right after  
Thanksgiving and I'll  
put out a query to PBS  
when I get back. We  
should talk as soon as  
they respond. Look forward  
to seeing you again.

Best —

Steven Okazaki



Yoshiko Uchida

1685 Solano Ave #102

Berkeley, CA 94707

A FARALLON FILMS PRODUCTION

# LIVING ON TOKYO TIME



AN AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILM

STARRING MINAKO OHASHI KEN NAKAGAWA

MITZIE ABE BILL BONHAM BRENDA AOKI KATE CONNELL JOHN MCCORMICK  
SUE MATTHEWS JIM CRANNA ALEX HERSHSLAG KEITH CHOY JUDITH NIHEI

PRODUCED BY LYNN O'DONNELL & DENNIS HAYASHI  
DIRECTED BY STEVEN OKAZAKI

FARALLON FILMS, 548 FIFTH STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107 415/495-3934



# Mouchette Films

April 7, 1987

Yoshiko Uchida  
1685 Solano Ave. #102  
Berkeley, CA 94707

Dear Yo:

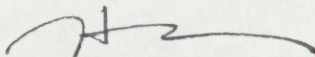
It was nice running into you the other day. I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch with you about producing a children's film from The Best Bad Thing, but our new film has gotten way out of hand. It's good and bad. On one hand, it's very exciting to get a strong national release for the film, but, on the other, we've been running all over the map for three months with no time to do anything but.

Unfortunately, this also means I need to hold off from pursuing the project with you for an indefinite period of time. I hope this is okay with you. It looks as if I'll be committed to other projects for at least another year and a half.

I'm sorry for any inconvenience. It really was a pleasure getting to know you a little. I am looking forward to your book on picture brides. It's a subject I find strange and fascinating. I wonder if you can spare two advance copies. There are two producers I know who are looking for interesting material. I'd really like them to see it when it's out.

Hope to see you again soon.

Best Regards,



Steven Okazaki



April 20, 1987

Steven Okazaki  
Mouchette Films  
San Francisco

Dear Steve:

Many thanks for your letter of April 7. I understand your need to commit full time to your present film and hope it will be a big success.

I'm delighted to know of your interest in PICTURE BRIDE, and have asked my publishers to send you two copies as per your request. It should be off the presses soon.

Shortly after our breakfast meeting last fall, I acquired an agent to handle TV/film rights, so if your two producer friends are interested in my novel, please have them contact Sandra Watt, 8033 Sunset Blvd., Suite 4053, Hollywood, CA. 90046. (213) 653-2339.

Sandra is also trying to place my children's books. I held back BEST BAD THING and also HAPPIEST ENDING, pending word from you, but since you must now hold off for "an indefinite period", I hope you won't mind if I let her try these books as well. Incidentally, she said Wonderworks was no longer producing.

Let's both see what develops in our lives, and maybe one day there'll be an opportunity to work together on something. I surely hope so.

In the meantime, I hope our paths will cross again soon.

All the best,



Aug. 23. 1987

Dear Steve -

So glad your new film is  
such a success! I saw you  
twice on T.V., read some excellent  
reviews, and the cover spread  
in Image were great.

Also belated congratulations  
for the Steve Jatsukawa award

My best wishes for continued  
& well-deserved success!

Lfs

P.S. Hope the 2 cop. of Picture Bride reached  
you safely & that you'll be able to  
read it someday!



---

## REGISTRATION FORM

### Seminar

"Financial and Estate Planning After the 1986 Tax Reform Act"

### Speakers

Moyra Healy, M.B.A., Dean Witter Reynolds

Peter Lippett, LL.B., Attorney at Law, San Francisco

Aviva Shiff Boedecker, J.D., Senior Associate Director,  
Office of Trusts & Bequests, University of California, Berkeley

### Date

Saturday, September 19, 1987

### Time

8:30 a.m.—Continental Breakfast

9:00 a.m. to 12:00 Noon—Seminar

### Location

University of California, Berkeley Campus  
Alumni House

Please complete the following if you will attend the seminar:

*Please Print.*

*Name*

*Telephone No.*

*Address*

Guests Attending:

*Name*

*Telephone No.*

*Address*

*Name*

*Telephone No.*

*Address*

Please mail completed form in the envelope provided or send to Mary Torre, Office of Trusts and Bequests, University of California, Berkeley Foundation, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720

For further information I can be reached at 415/642-6300.



LIVING ON TOKYO TIME

FARALLON FILMS 548 FIFTH STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107 (415) 495-3934

Sept 6, 1987

Dear Go

Thank you for the nice note and for the copies of "Picture Bride". I sent one to a Japanese producer and will read the other as soon as things quiet down a little. I've been on the road for a month now and am a bit weary, but it's been interesting.

Hope to talk with you soon.

Best Regards  
Steven



San Francisco Examiner August 16, 1987

# Image<sup>®</sup>

The Magazine of Northern California

*In the Emerald Triangle*  
**GROWING UP OUTLAW**

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## RISING SON

Filmmaker Steven Okazaki  
Comes of Age







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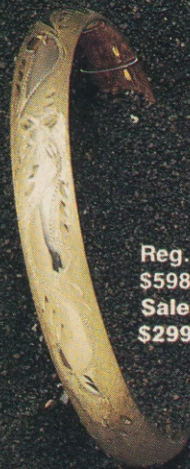
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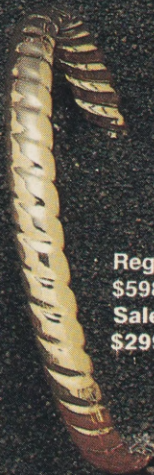
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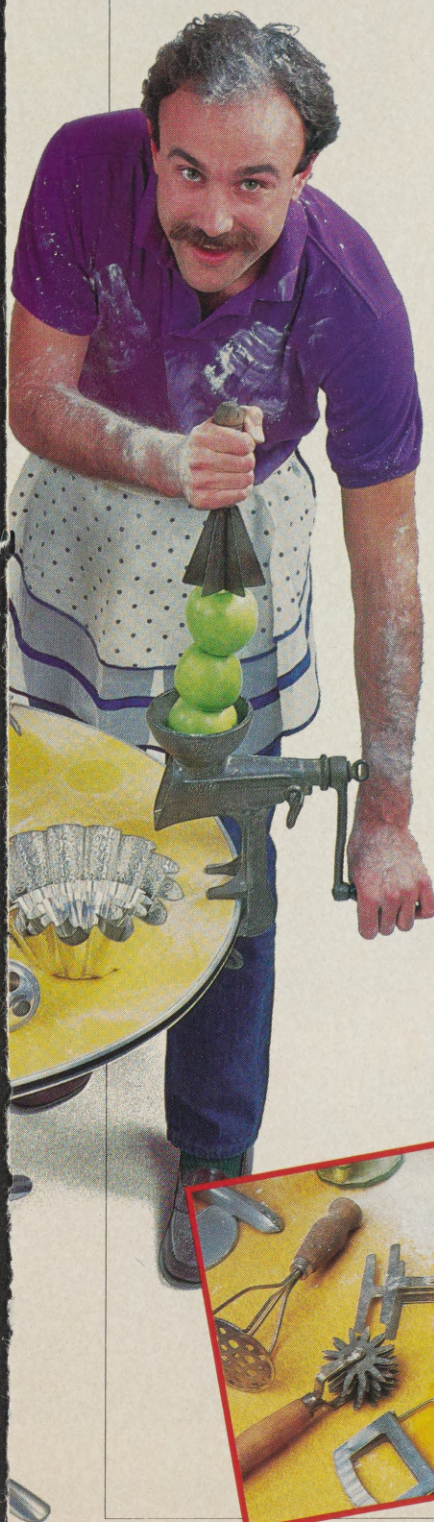
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has the right idea



# C A T A L O G

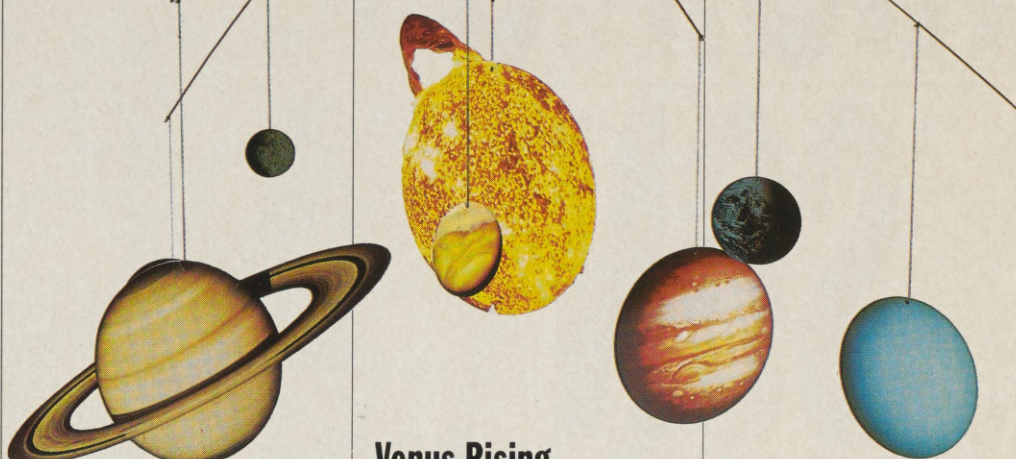
BY JO MANCUSO



## Grater Variety

Whether you're stalking the perfect iron cherry pitter to complement the wheat-grass juice extractor you bought last week or just need to load up on basic graters, mashers, beaters, choppers, grinders and skimmers, this shop, with its continually shifting stock, is crammed with every kind of "recycled gourmet appurtenance" you can imagine—and many you can't.

25 cents for cookie cutters and chocolate molds to \$400 for a copper stock pot at Cookin', 339 Divisadero Street, San Francisco (861-1854).



## Venus Rising

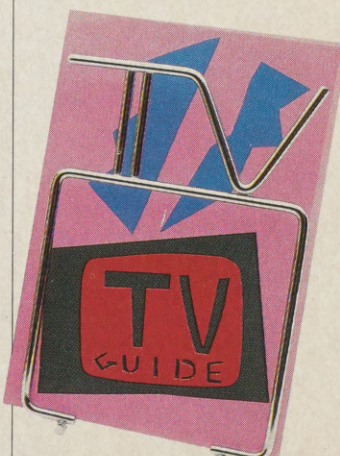
Put a new spin on the planets with this solar system mobile, incorporating NASA color photos for the sun and most planets. More than 40 inches across when assembled, it's packaged flat and comes with a 32-page booklet of instructions and facts about our celestial neighbors.

About \$19 at Natural Wonders, Vallco Fashion Park, 10123 North Wolfe Road, Cupertino (408-252-2460); the Oakland Museum Store, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland (834-2129); and the Nature Company, Four Embarcadero Center, San Francisco (956-4911) and other Bay Area locations.



## Rack It Up

Don't miss another *Bosom Buddies* rerun trying to fish this week's TV Guide from shifting piles of the *Tattler* and *Iowa Grocer Today*. Display it prominently, right by the Zenith, in



this rack finished in black or chrome.

\$3.95 to \$4.95 at Mainline Gifts, 508 Castro Street, San Francisco (863-9811); and de-Lights, 215 Tamalpais Drive, Corte Madera (927-0154).



# RISING SON

**From garage band to film school  
to critics' choice,  
filmmaker Steven Okazaki  
comes of age.**

**BY GARY KAMIYA**

**K**en is a young *Sansei*, a third-generation Japanese-American living in San Francisco. He wears a leather jacket and a "Cramps" T-shirt. He works a menial job, eats jelly doughnuts, displays no enthusiasm for anything and plays guitar in a rock band. In other words, to judge by appearances, he's a cool guy.

Appearances are deceptive. The leather jacket doesn't help. The guitar isn't convincing, and even the jelly doughnut means nothing. Ken is not cool. He is the antithesis of cool, but this is not to say that he is hot. In fact, Ken is a nerd. He has the sentience of a depressed slug.

When we first see him, a gorgeous, half-dressed girl is climbing out of his bed. The girl announces with cool fury that she's taking off for good, and suiting action to words, she pulls on her pants and slams the door shut behind her within 30 seconds. Ken's reaction to this event, which many would consider disheartening, is not dramatic. It is

*Gary Kamiya, a columnist for the Berkeley Monthly, wrote about Survival Research Labs in the March 15 issue of Image.*

**PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL JANG**









## **"The Nisei told their kids to go out and make it, and they did. Now some are afraid to come back. They're cut off. It's sad."**

not, in fact, even noticeable. He stares phlegmatically at the floor.

But it's difficult to know if this represents a reaction. Because through rain and shine, through broken guitar strings, through beautiful women informing him that they dislike everything about him, through jelly doughnuts, Ken is always staring phlegmatically at the floor.

Kyoko is a 19-year-old Japanese girl. She has come to America to escape an unhappy love affair. "I had to break up my plan," she says in broken English. We never learn much about Kyoko, but she likes this word "plan." She works in the kitchen of a Japanese restaurant, rides her bike home to her tidy little room, listens to taped English lessons and writes brave letters home. Her life is clean and uncluttered, an opening to something that hasn't happened yet. She's alone. Her eyes are clear.

Kyoko needs a green card. Marriage is the only way. Ken is available. Ken and Kyoko have a shotgun marriage—birdshot provided by the INS. Now Kyoko is happy, because she has a new plan. She can stay in the United States with this convenient Conceptual Husband. But Ken begins to deviate from the plan. He starts waking up. He shows signs of life. He falls in love with her.

And it doesn't work.

So there he is. Sad, but alive.

This is the plot of *Living on Tokyo Time*, a film directed and co-written by Steven Okazaki, now getting national play and early favorable reviews (it started a run at the Four Star Theater on Clement Street on August 14). From his Bay Area base, Okazaki has further established himself as the best, perhaps the only filmmaker intelligently turning a camera on what it means to be Japanese in America. He started with *Survivors*, a study of a group of aging Japanese women who survived Hiroshima. He followed with the Oscar-nominated *Unfinished Business*, a documentary defying the stereotype that Japanese-Americans shuffled off to World War II internment camps without resisting. With *Tokyo Time*, Okazaki has busted down more stereotypes—Japanese-American kids are not supposed to be ennui-ridden punk rockers, working in dead-end clean-up jobs. They get straight As, don't make trouble and become engineers and dentists; they are—muted trumpet blast—the Model Minority.

In making this latest film, Okazaki has undone one more potentially stifling reputation: his own, as the young, serious and utterly uncommercial ethnographer, intent solely on bringing grim bits of history to the light of day. *Tokyo Time* is funny drama, and it happens in San Francisco, now. In the realm of made-on-a-shoe-string, art-house movies, *Tokyo Time* is well on its way to becoming a hit.

And for the first time, Hollywood, that great factory and storehouse of inane Japanese stereotypes, is starting to ring Steven Okazaki's phone. If anyone can rewrite Hollywood's simplistic script, it is Okazaki.

see some of myself in Ken," Steven Okazaki says.

This is odd, because Ken is a spectacularly unlikely hero, a weird lost guy. Okazaki, who lives in Berkeley, still sometimes plays his beloved Telecaster guitar, but otherwise, if he is anything like *Tokyo Time*'s leading man, it doesn't show. Okazaki is 35 years old, a solidly-built guy with a great shock of thick black hair. His voice is soft, and he frequently breaks into a high-pitched, infectious laugh.

He has a range of interests and moods as wide as Ken's is narrow. He has enormous talent, he can be obstinate and strong-willed in

pursuit of his artistic vision, and he's had a lot of success. Yet there's a kind of friendly reserve about Okazaki that is characteristically Japanese-American. And there's also a lot of hipness there, as befits a former punk-rockers who cut his aesthetic teeth on the Sex Pistols and the Stones.

Also, very much unlike Ken, as one gets to know Steven Okazaki, it becomes clear that he considers being Asian-American an extremely important part of his life.

That may not seem like a big deal. But Japanese-American kids aren't usually brought up thinking in those directions. More, perhaps than any other ethnic group, Japanese-Americans tend to immerse themselves in American values and American life. The Japanese really want to belong; it's a deep national-cultural trait, and the *Nisei*, the second-generation Japanese, passed it on to their kids. Perhaps this helps explain why Japanese-Americans rival Jews as by far the most educated, professional and affluent minority in the country, and why, especially among the Sansei, there is a very high rate of mixed, or what sociologists call "out-marriages." I myself am the child of such a marriage.

But the happy union of Sony and Calvin has its hidden dark side. Who would like to be seen as nothing more than a smart, hard-working, clean-living type? It's OK to be Tom Sawyer, but sometimes you want to be Huck Finn, to light out for the territory ahead of the rest.

The problem, for a Sansei who wants to break the Model stereotype and get back to his roots, is that the first roots he finds, his parents, tend to confirm this stereotype. His parents are indeed likely to be well-adjusted, hard-working, rather quiet individuals. Senator Sam Hayakawa, not exactly the favorite authority figure of many Sansei, nonetheless put his finger on this problem. "The more they [the Sansei] rejected quietness, conformity, discipline and the stereotype of the well-behaved Japanese ... the farther they got from their cultural roots."

And if the Sansei look back further, back to Japan itself, they find themselves in outer space. They're American; most don't even speak Japanese.

The plot of *Living on Tokyo Time* exactly mirrors this dilemma. Ken doesn't have much in common with his parents, but he has even less in common with Kyoko. A definitive anti-Yuppie, he doesn't even like Japanese food. He has to go his own way, learn who he is without bogus cultural props. He's an American with a Japanese face, and a broken heart and a guitar and a life to live. Living that life means accepting all of those things. And not running from the Japanese face.

Maybe that's how Steven Okazaki is like Ken. "I don't want to blame the Nisei, because they always get blamed for everything," he says. "But they told their kids to go out and make it, and they did, and now some of them are afraid to come back. They're cut off from their community. That's sad. For me, and for a lot of my friends, that community means a lot. It's come to be much more important to me in the last few years. We went away, and now we want to pick and choose what we want back."

grew up in Venice. It's a mutt town, the Haight-Ashbury of southern California," Okazaki says as we walk down Powell Street in San Francisco. We've just spent a couple of hours at the advanced class at Jean Shelton's Acting School. Okazaki and his friend and fellow director Jeff Brown (who won an Academy Award last year for Best Short Subject) had dropped in to study Shelton's masterful work with actors and to do a little talent scouting. Over an



Italian lunch, Okazaki reminisces about growing up Sansei in LA.

"I was in the first Japanese-American Boy Scout troop, and I went to Japanese school on Saturday for a few years. I noticed that the Japanese kids were a lot rowdier there than they were when they were with the white kids," he says with a dry smile. "I didn't feel that different growing up. I had white friends, Japanese friends..."

"But there were a few funny things. I'm terrible at math and science, and I had this one teacher who gave me As in math simply because I was Japanese. It was like, 'You must be good at this.'"

We laugh uproariously. I was also a left-brain moron, but my math teachers, alas, never practiced this peculiar form of affirmative action on me: Maybe being half-Japanese wasn't good enough.

"But I was always 'the artist' in public school—I painted—and that makes you different," Okazaki goes on. "They tiptoed around me, they let me play music in the art class. I really abused the privilege," he says ruefully. "I started to fall behind, my work lost its chops. I had been pretty serious about painting, and I let it go."

"One day, this art teacher whom I really respected asked me, 'Steve, what do you want to do?' And I said, well, I was thinking about commercial art. She took this can of brushes, and she pointed to the illustration on it, and she said with this total contempt, 'You want to do this?' And she just threw the can. The water splashed out, the brushes flew out all over the place. That kind of made an impression on me."

In junior high, Okazaki discovered the Stones, started playing guitar, bass and drums, and joined his first band. "In high school, I played with some guys who were frighteningly into guitar. I remember going over to these guys' house once, and they were sitting on the couch listening to Clapton's 'Layla,' over and over again. They were so into it they had memorized literally every note. And not just the notes. They'd stop the record and say, 'Listen to that, Steve! You can hear his pick hit the pick-guard!' They had leaned this photograph of Clapton up against the record player so they could look at him while they listened, like a shrine. I just said, 'Do you guys know what you're doing?'"

After high school he moved up to the Bay Area and went to film school at SF State. He was still playing in thrasher and power pop bands. But the thrill was going, if not gone.

"I finished film school, and I was playing in this band. I'd just turned 27 and I felt like I needed a plan of what I was going to do for the next few years. I got sick of the life—carrying around drums, picking up the tab for pizza, waiting around until two in the morning to get paid 50 bucks. So I said, 'I'll get this rock and roll out of my

system before I hit 30—then I'll do something worthwhile.'"

And had he gotten rock out of his system? "Oh yeah. The other day I picked up my guitar for the first time in a long while. But I love to buy records," he says with a smile, "even though I hate most of what's out there now, this synthesizer high-tech Muzak garbage. All I do is work and buy records."

Okazaki's insatiable appetite for vinyl was almost used against him at the crucial final edit of *Tokyo Time*. Co-producer Lynn O'Donnell and Okazaki are old friends and have enough respect for each other to butt heads in time-honored, no-holds-barred, producer/director fashion.

At issue this time was what, in the final edit, would be left on the cutting room floor. O'Donnell, a cheerful, attractive woman in her mid-30s, recounts her ploy with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I tried everything—cajoling, seducing, pleading. I screamed at him, 'Fine! You've got your first shot at a feature, and if you want to blow it, that's fine!' Finally, we got it done. Afterward, Steve said to me, 'Do you know that you have used every form of psychology on me in the last two weeks?' But what he didn't know was that I had gone out and bought \$200 worth of record certificates from Tower Records. And I was going to lay them on the table and say, 'OK, what's it going to cost for this cut? \$40? \$60?'" She shakes with laughter remembering it. "He's very stubborn!"

Okazaki stumbled almost by accident into his first major documentary, *Survivors*. It started when "My mother called me and said, 'You've got to look after your youngest sister,'" Okazaki says. His sister Hannah was also at SF State. "So I called her, and she said she was doing an oral history project on survivors of Hiroshima. I thought that sounded interesting, and I started collecting articles and clippings for her. And I called her later and she said, 'Oh, I dropped the class.' I had this little pile of clippings, and I just thought, well, I should read this stuff before I throw it out. And there was this story in there about this group of survivors who had little coffee klatches in San Francisco. I thought, maybe I'll go to one of these meetings. And as soon as I walked in, they said, 'Oh, you should do a film on us.' They were nice little old ladies who reminded me of my grandmother, and when they said that I felt committed immediately."

But Okazaki wasn't interested in making the anti-nuclear war statement. "I guess I felt like other people could do the politics, and I could just show that these were real people."

Okazaki's resistance to generalized judgments—ethnic, political,

## LIVING ON TOKYO TIME



SHOT ON THE CHEAP IN BAY AREA LOCALES ...



STARRING UNKNOWNNS KEN NAKAGAWA AND MINAKO OHASHI ...



THE FILM IS A FUNNY ATTACK ON MODEL MINORITY MYTHS.



# "It's not in the Japanese to be bitter. I'd ask Hiroshima survivors, 'Aren't you angry?' They'd look at me like I was an idiot."

or whatever—and interest in specific individuals runs deep and forms an essential part of his artistic vision. It informs the quirky and delightful world of *Tokyo Time*, and it led to his involvement in the masterful *Unfinished Business*, the story of three men who resisted Executive Order 9066, the wartime order to round up Japanese-Americans.

The relocation camp experience is an inescapable fact for Sansei. Many, if not most, young Japanese-Americans have parents who were incarcerated. My father, a Nisei farm boy from Turlock, was first shipped off to the Merced Fairgrounds—a temporary holding area for what wartime leaders deemed a bunch of potentially maniacal chicken farmers. Then they sent him to the desolation of a camp in Granada, Colorado. I remember, long ago, my dad driving by a bunch of dilapidated old wooden buildings one scorching summer day and saying, "That's where they kept us at first." Those buildings have probably crumbled into the earth by now. He spoke without bitterness. But you don't forget these things. And when interviewing Okazaki and other Sansei involved with *Tokyo Time*, the subject always came up sooner or later, always in a matter-of-fact way. "Yeah, mine were at Heart Mountain . . . Rohwer . . . Granada." Names dropped in conversation.

"I think because my parents went through the camps I've always had a curiosity about that period," Okazaki says. But Okazaki chose not to retell the familiar story of life for the more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans who endured years in concentration camps here. Instead, he found himself drawn to the tales of three men who fought internment through civil disobedience and flight.

"I thought by focusing on these three men, I could tell three stories, instead of telling the story of 100,000 people. And I could tell the audience something about the other 100,000 through them. What I wanted to know was, what made them different from the other 100,000? Could I do what they did? I learned that two of them had real support groups. One was a Quaker and he had the Quakers behind him, the other had his family behind him. The other guy felt outside, outside his family and community."

Okazaki pauses and looks out intently. "But I don't know if I really got to understand what made them different. Except that they all had a kind of idealism. A sense that what they did did not have to make sense or to work out at the time. At certain times in your life you have to do those things."

When I was a kid my father hadn't talked that much about the camps, and Okazaki says his parents were similarly quiet. Okazaki believes this has been typical of Nisei, and a kind of acceptance rather than a repression.

"I think that it's just a Japanese way of thinking. Forgive and forget. I just don't think it's in the Japanese to be bitter. There's a lot of Buddhist attitude in that. When I was doing *Survivors*, I'd ask people, 'Aren't you incredibly angry?' And they'd just look at me like I was an idiot. You have a choice of the way you're going to live your life, and people decide, 'I'm not going to live my life being angry for the next 40 years.' And that's a wise decision. When I did meet

## SURVIVORS



OKAZAKI INTERVIEWED EVERYDAY PEOPLE WHO ENDURED AN ATOMIC BOMBING.

people who were survivors and who were angry, they were very unbalanced. You can't live with that kind of anger."

In the 1970s, when ethnic pride flowered and Asian-American art and new ethnic studies programs reflected an aggressive search for identity, many of the Sansei questioned, sometimes angrily or anxiously, their parents' compliance with the order. A decade later, the roles are changed. Apathetic Sansei, with even "some embarrassment about their own culture," are not paying attention to their parents' stirrings, says Okazaki. "The Sanseis started pointing a finger at their parents, started asking ques-

tions and then just walked away. And the Nisei have come out and had a reawakening of what they went through more on their own. It took 40 years to say, 'I guess I can be American about this and talk about it or complain about it.' The most painful thing doing *Unfinished Business* was when we'd show it at benefits with 1,000 people, and the Nisei outnumbered the Sansei twenty to one. I felt this tremendous distance between the two generations."

The distance in his own family is not especially painful, but it is there, and Okazaki does not mind poking some fun at the traditional mindset of his Nisei parents.

"I'm not sure that they understand. I was telling my mom how well *Tokyo Time* was doing, about the interest from studios in doing another film, and she said, 'Steve, it sounds like things are going really well for you. Maybe now you can get a job at a TV station.'"

He chuckles. "If they could see your name on the crawl at the end of a TV show—it could say anything, it could say Production Lackey Boy—they'd see it every day and they'd say, 'He's OK.' Their misgivings about my playing in punk bands and so on—'That's nice, when are you going to get a real job?'—are very Japanese. If you don't follow a typical road, you're always going to feel like you have to prove yourself. It'll seem like there's no support there, but once you've proven something, the support will come. A very Samurai ethic, I think."

In Okazaki's well-lit, comfortable South-of-Market office, we talked about the decidedly un-Samurai-like world of Ken and *Tokyo Time*. The fact that the film exists at all is inspiring proof that the whole business is not yet locked up by corporate giants.

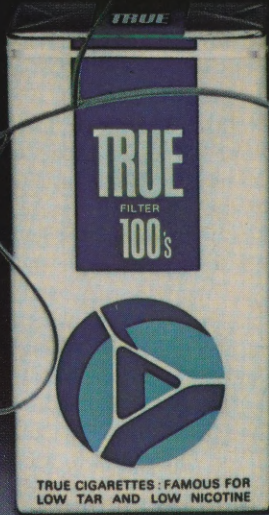
"It really started as just a lark. The American Film Institute gave me \$20,000 to essentially do what I wanted to do. The basic idea of the film was taken from two short films. One I made in school with my writing partner John McCormick, who co-wrote the screenplay of *Tokyo Time*. John's an old friend; we've been playing in bands together for ten years. We made this film about a sloth of a guy who stays in his room, listens to records and plays his guitar. He doesn't even talk, except about his favorite guitarists, but one day this woman comes by accidentally and he falls in love with her.

"And the other film was one I wanted to make, about a young Japanese woman coming over to America. I know a lot of Japanese immigrants, and I really feel like there's this stereotype of the way their lives go, that they come here and go to UC Berkeley, marry a



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## "I was telling my mom how well Tokyo Time was doing, and she said, 'Steve, maybe now you can get a job at a TV station.'"

nice Caucasian boy, and pretty soon they're working in the Sumitomo Bank, then they become PR director and move up. But the fact is, a lot of them came over here ten years ago to be beatniks or Grateful Deadheads or whatever, they started washing dishes and they're still washing dishes. And the hardest thing for them is to go back, go back to their families and admit it's not so wonderful here. So I was telling John that, and he suggested we put the two stories together."

The hilarious and irritating character of Ken is played with monosyllabic virtuosity by Ken Nakagawa, who had been working as a boxboy at the Park 'N' Shop near Okazaki's Berkeley house, and also part-time at the San Francisco offices of the National Asian-American Telecommunications Association. Ken got the role through what was one of the weirder auditions in cinematic history. "I was walking down the hall at NAATA and I saw Ken sitting in front of a video monitor, checking videos or something, and he had this incredibly blank expression on his face. I just burst out laughing. And I went home and thought, it would be hilarious if he were the lead in a film."

Ken's reaction when Okazaki asked him if he wanted to be in a movie was not exactly the ecstatic shrieks of the aspirants in *A Chorus Line*. "He just thought I was kidding. Every time he saw me, he'd say [Okazaki drops his voice into a flat monotone], 'You still want to make that film with me in it?' Ken was a little worried. He'd been involved in protesting the Michael Cimino film *The Year of the Dragon*, and he kept saying to me, 'Am I gonna be like a bad stereotype? Are they gonna picket in front of my house?' He said, 'This character does not sound real appealing.' And what I said to him over and over was, 'Does Robert De Niro worry about how appealing his character is?'"

Okazaki, too, was a little worried about how the Japanese-American community would respond to a movie with a hero like Ken. "We opened in Hawaii. I figured if it bombed there, word wouldn't get back to the mainland." He leans back in his chair and laughs. "It did really well. But at the first screening, there was this waiting line of about a hundred people, and I looked at this middle-aged Japanese-American couple and this grandmother, and I just thought, 'Oh my God, they're gonna hate this film, why are they here, maybe they think it's *Unfinished Business II*, maybe they think it's a new release from Japan.' I was scared!"

"But they just laughed like crazy! They kept turning to each other, making comments, and finally, I realized they had kids like Ken. And now that they're out of the house, they can laugh at what idiots their kids were."

*Tokyo Time* was made on a very low budget, under \$500,000, and Okazaki used time-honored cheapo techniques like renting equipment on Friday, shooting feverishly all weekend and returning it Monday to be charged one day's rent. His cast consisted mostly of local actors, some of whom he already knew and wrote specifically for, from local groups like the Asian American Theatre, the National Theatre of the Deranged and the improvisation group Not My Fault. The acting is generally strong, and the non-glitzy production values give the film a refreshingly informal, gritty, honest quality. Okazaki's documentary eye shows: He eschews quick cuts and close-ups and achieves a quality of detached realism by having his camera "look at" groups of people. And although the film was largely shot in seedy and desolate locales, it is visually striking. Okazaki, as well as co-writing and directing, also shot the film himself, and his eye, his sensitivity to color and his framing, is unusually strong, as you'd expect from a former painter.

After the AFI money ran out, co-producers Lynn O'Donnell and Dennis Hayashi, who were both friends and earlier collaborators with Okazaki, went to work on the private investors. Hayashi, a personable 35-year-old attorney with the public-interest Asian Law Caucus, Inc., was a lawyer for Fred Korematsu, one of the resisters in *Unfinished Business*. "When we started approaching investors in the Asian community, a lot of people said, 'They won't put money into the arts—they want a hard return.' We thought nobody had tried them," Hayashi says. "We were right, and I think this is an important thing for Asian-American filmmakers. We got a good response. Of our investors, almost half are Asians."

O'Donnell, Okazaki and Hayashi all agreed that recent Asian films like Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* and *Dim Sum* helped to open doors. "Chan proved to distributors both that you can target an Asian audience and that you can appeal to a broader audience," O'Donnell says. "We showed the film at the major independent film festival, the U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah. A lot of distributors were interested, and none of them ever said, 'This is Asian; it's too small an audience.' In some ways, it helped."

"I think there's an openness now about independent features," Okazaki says. "There's dissatisfaction with the standard Hollywood film. It's a very healthy time. The companies want to make money, and they're willing to take some risks."

**T**he minority artist, however, often still finds himself in a trap. Outright racial discrimination may have waned, but subtle ghettoization and stereotypical ethnic roles and stories limit opportunities for actors, writers and filmmakers alike.

There are fine Asian-American playwrights like David Henry Hwang, Philip Gotanada, and R.A. Shiomi. San Francisco's Asian American Theatre has staged some memorable productions of Asian plays—as well, of course, as some serious clunkers. It's important that such theaters exist, but they're not enough. Why should an Asian-American artist be restricted to any body of work, any theater, no matter how good? Would a black violinist want to be forced to play only Ellington?

On the other hand, the Asian-American artist doesn't want to be forced to hide his racial and cultural identity.

For actors, who sell their appearance, this dilemma can be extreme. Judi Nihei, who plays a tough waitress in *Tokyo Time* and who was a longtime member of the Asian American Theatre Company as director and actress, is a sharp woman with a quick wit that turns caustic when she speaks of such matters. "It's so hard to get work. I'll see Asian actors on the screen playing these unbelievably horrible roles." She screwed up her face into a ludicrous mask, a countenance that seemed a composite of 50 cinematic years of Asian houseboys, spies, evil scientists, deferential gardeners and suicidal maniacs. "Ah, too, was educated in you' country," she intones in an imbecilic fresh-off-the-boat accent. "And I want to scream, 'No! Don't do it!' But it's a job." She shrugs. "It's a catch-22. You don't want to deny who you are, but you don't want to be pigeonholed."

This issue of ethnic pigeonholing raises rare ire in Okazaki, an ire long in building. "I started making children's films. And the way it worked was, I'd write up five possible projects. Well, they always picked the one having to do with ethnic identity. You constantly get bracketed, and you get a little hostile. I've learned a lot about myself and my community background in the work I've done, I've gotten a lot out of it. But at times I've felt I didn't have a choice."

(Continued on page 33)



## OKAZAKI

(Continued from page 20)

Okazaki has a complex attitude towards this subject. Like most Sansei, he didn't start out thinking about his ethnic identity. He was an artist and an outsider. But in the process of making his documentaries, in the course of growing up, he began to turn back to his community, to his identity as a Japanese-American.

It wasn't a political decision. A lot of it may not have been that conscious. In part, it simply resulted from the weariness that comes from always carrying the invisible weight of white preconceptions about Japanese-Americans. "You start to bend to all these preconceptions. That's why it's great to be with your own community. You can be looser. That's the way the Hawaiian Sansei are—they're not a minority there, so they're much cooler. They laugh at us Coast Japanese because they know we're so tight! To be in an environment where you're free of baggage is so great—you can act more individual around Asians. A white friend of mine was doing a film about black gospel churches. He wanted me to go, and I said, 'No, these people ought to be able to let it all hang out at the end of the week.'"

Okazaki found a tremendous liberation when he visited Japan. "It's not just nostalgia, knowing where your ancestors are.

Americans are really rootless. When I went to see the family plot in Japan, I really felt differently.

"Of course, I had to put up with the Japanese," he says with a smile. "They really watch you. One winter I wore white tennis shoes, and everyone noticed. So I switched to black. But dealing with that kind of stuff, in some ways, was easier for me than dealing with some of the things you have to deal with here as an Asian-American."

And yet there is a part of Okazaki that doesn't want to be forced into assuming any identity—even the Asian-American one he explores so delicately. The outsider, the resolute artist—in short, the spirit of a Ken endowed with a central nervous system—lives on in Okazaki.

"I don't really have a cause. All I want to do is make films that appeal to me. I'm working on a comedy right now. I think it'd be nice to work in what I think of as the real world, which is a multi-cultural world. If I could make one of the characters Chinese or Japanese or Korean, that would be great. I don't think of it as a mandate. I don't want to get pegged as someone who only cares about Asian-American subjects. I love the medium. And the film came out of my experience. That's why there's not the small little world that's in some of the ethnic films. The brother-in-law in the film is a white guy—that's what I know. Some of your buddies

are Chinese, some are white guys. That's my experience."

Honesty. It's not a quality that comes first to mind when Hollywood is mentioned. And maybe that's where *Living on Tokyo Time*, an honest movie, has a lesson.

One of the problems with race relations in America is that nobody can talk about it. Most films and TV commercials, for example, rush hysterically into bogus utopias; they won't deal with reality. In its low-key way, *Tokyo Time* does. Hollywood black-white buddy films are sentimental jive that are based on unacknowledged racial tension. In *Tokyo Time*, there's no big deal. It's just what's happening. That's a lesson.

The other lesson of *Tokyo Time* doesn't have anything to do with ethnicity. Or maybe it has everything to do with it.

Ken is standing in front of a pawnshop window. Kyoko is gone; we see a shot of her plane at 30,000 feet. That's *gone*. A guitar is hanging there in the window. He stares at it. For the first and last time, he clicks completely into focus. He's a human being now. It is a frame that closes the film and opens Ken's character forever.

That moment, like a rich, strange, fading chord, holds the essence of Okazaki's vision. It's a vision that sees beyond stereotypes, and that—equally important—sees beyond reactions to stereotypes.

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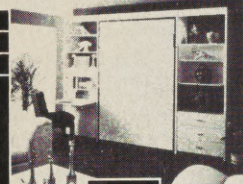
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## POT KIDS

(Continued from page 27)

silence. But the others sitting around the big plywood table talk at times for their benefit.

"It's getting tough out there. Seems you boys ought to maybe lay off for a year, cool your heels," says Billy's father.

"Not a bad idea," says Gogo's father. "Couldn't hurt to take a year off."

The boys snip, saying nothing.

Gogo's sometime girlfriend, Joan, a pretty sixteen-year-old in bracelets and high-top rubber milking boots, looks up at Gogo, raises her eyebrows and smiles a silent, "Well?" Gogo reaches over and turns on the little portable TV that hangs from a hook scale once used for weighing lambs, but only gets fuzz. He moans something about getting a satellite dish one of these days. Then he glances up at Joan with a quick chill-out-we'll-talk-about-it-later look.

Joan works at the Joneses' drying shed a couple of afternoons a week to earn some spending money. And to be around Gogo.

This very afternoon at her high school, Joan had received an hour-long reprimand from a faculty member who had overheard her explaining to a peer that marijuana, though a potential health hazard, wasn't in the same league with PCP and crack. All drugs are dangerous, the teacher told her.

"Those teachers are losing all their credibility," says Joan, pouting.

"Kids aren't that dumb. They just don't believe it when adults lump all these drugs into one category as though their effects were all the same. Lots of kids are just trying everything that comes along now, and I think it's because they don't believe what they hear. And it's no wonder."

Peter, a middle-aged man sitting at the other end of the table, cracks his gnarled, bulldozer-driver's fingers and says, "Honey, you just do what you think is right. Ain't nobody around here going to hold it against you for telling the truth." Peter has been a part of the harvest and cleaning operation based in the Joneses' barn ever since Gogo and Billy can remember.

"My only problem with all of this," says Billy's mother, "besides the violence of course, is that I think a lot of kids around here are growing up with mixed-up values. All that money comes in such a big wave, they don't know how to cope with it. It gets them into trouble sometimes."

"The whole thing is just getting too weird for my taste," says Gogo's mother. "This cops-and-robbers stuff is bad business."

Billy's mother joins in. "It's just not safe in the woods anymore what with CAMP and ripoffs out there with guns, ready to shoot it out. What about it, Billy? How 'bout taking a year off and seeing how it goes?"

Billy shrugs, looks at Gogo.

"I don't know, Mom, but we'll be thinking about it."

Early summer, 1987.

Gogo spits a stream of tobacco juice into an old milking bucket in the corner of the barn and climbs into his custom-built, hot-rod truck, powered by a big V-8 engine. It can haul up to three-quarters of a ton of supplies up the worst roads in the Coast Range, Gogo says. And its camouflage paint job makes it difficult to spot from the air. It is something Mad Max might well drive.

As they roar down the red-dirt road in a cloud of choking dust, respirators affixed to their faces and 1,200 pounds of pot-growing gear strapped behind them in the pickup bed, Gogo and his reporter passenger scream their dialogue.

"How much longer do you think you can keep this business up?"

"Dunno! Long as we can, I guess."

"And what will you do when it's over?"

"Dunno. Worry about that when the time comes."

Gogo pulls under the overhanging branches of an old fir, flips on the Bearcat police scanner and starts unloading the rolls of irrigation pipe, bags of fertilizer, rat traps and other supplies stashed under a tarp in back.

Billy, who has been waiting for his friend, glides onto the edge of the road from the forest, smooth and silent as a deer, and begins strapping equipment to his pack-frame. Gogo, eager to get the next load, takes off with a blast of his V-8.

Eight miles of exhausting hiking later, Billy and reporter reach the garden, perched on a cliff high above the ocean. Billy checks his timers and sprinklers, re-baits rat traps and gently ties a few tender limbs to a nearby manzanita bush with a length of twine. "Beautiful out here, isn't it?" he says softly.

"What are you going to do when this is all over?"

Billy shrugs and says, "C'mon, let's get going." But then he stops, turns and says, "I really don't know, man. I try not to worry much about it. But I know it's got to end someday. I'll either get caught or go broke, or both. But I don't know how to do much of anything else. So I guess I'll just have to wait and see how it goes."

"What about the moral side? Don't you ever wonder if pot growing is wrong?"

"Look, I just don't believe in good guys and bad guys. The world isn't like they show it on television. There's some of both in everybody. Morally? I don't smoke the stuff, but I don't think it's morally wrong. People have to decide for themselves. I think it's a pretty plant. I like growing it. I like being out in the woods every day. I don't think I'm hurting anybody, and that's a lot more than you can say about a lot of jobs."

"Besides, even if I could get a job, I'd have to go somewhere else. And I don't want to go somewhere else. Like Gogo says, we're a part of this place." □



...first developing a scene-by-scene outline of the story's high points. With the help of her husband and British director Don Sharp, "who has an understanding of characters," she next took a crash course in script writing.

"There were five major points I had to learn," she recounted. "First, forget all my novelist techniques. I needed only to write the dialogue. Camera and actors would convey the rest. Two, underwrite. Stress brevity and simplicity. Three, make the dialogue very short; rapid-fire exchanges of give-and-take. No long speeches. Four, don't explain anything a viewer doesn't need to know; only what will move the story. And five, remember pacing. Plunge head and tell the story, don't dwell. Move move move."

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## Filmmaker Steven Okazaki Talks About His New Film, 'Living on Tokyo Time'

By ESTELA FIGUEROA

"Living on Tokyo Time," Steven Okazaki's anxiously-awaited feature film debut, has been completed. The film made its premiere by opening the Hawaii International Film Festival on Nov. 30.

Okazaki, a recent Academy Award nominee for his documentary, "Unfinished Business," gave the following interview on the project. It has been edited due to space requirements.

EF: Congratulations on finishing the film. Can you tell us something about the soundtrack.

SO: I think the soundtrack is great. We've got some of the best musicians in the world on it: Moebius-Plank-Neumeier from Germany, Circadient Rhythm from Japan, the Love Masters from New York, Robert Sorita from Los Angeles and Melon, the hippest new band from Japan.

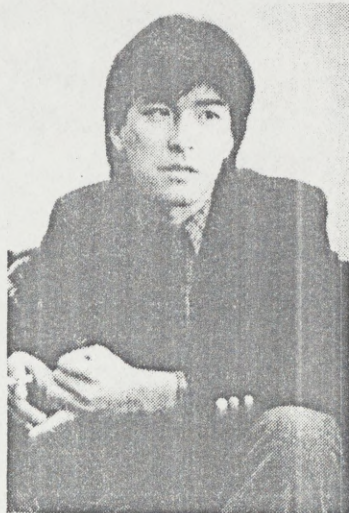
EF: Tell us about the film.

SO: It's about a real glumpy guy who gets dumped, cold turkey, without appeal, by his girlfriend and then turns around and marries a complete stranger after his friend tells him that his humdrum life lacks spontaneity.

The young bride, played brilliantly by young Japanese actress Minako Ohashi, is an individualistic, but somewhat naive, Tokyo woman on her first trip to America. The guy, played by first-time actor and National Asian American Telecommunication Association (NAATA) staffer Ken Nakagawa, works as a janitor and plays in a mediocre heavy metal band called The Romaniacs. He falls for her and things go on from there. It's kind of a romance and it's quite funny.

EF: Who else is in the film?

SO: It's got loads of other wonderful actors. It's more of an ensemble piece than a two-character show. It has Judi Nihei, who played the sarcastic attorney in "Chan is Missing";



STEVEN OKAZAKI

Jim Cranna, one of the original members of The Committee; Bill Bonham of the Round Table pizza commercials; Lane Nishikawa of "Life in the Fast Lane"; Keith Choy, who had a small part in "Dim Sum"; Kate Connell, who dresses windows at Macy's; and several other actors from the Asian American Theater Company and the National Theater of the Deranged. They're all terrific.

EF: How hard was it to make the movie? How was it funded?

SO: It wasn't. We've still got a box full of unpaid bills. It's very scary, but what the heck. We got some initial funding from the American Film Institute and decided to just go ahead and shoot it. The two producers, Lynn O'Donnell and Dennis Hayashi, are raising additional funds from investors and the crew was all volunteer. Zand Gee, Judi Nihei, Jane Kaihatsu, Giovanni di Simone, Cheryl Yoshioka and a bunch of others worked for free. Everybody had other jobs and we shot on weekends. I told them not to bother trying to have a social life.

EF: This is your first feature-

length dramatic project. Do you feel any pressure?

SO: It's a nice film. I hope it does all right. I hope that the people who worked on it will look at the film and feel it was worth their time and energy, but it started as a whim and it's a pretty kooky film, if I can use that antiquated term. If it works, great.

I wrote it with John McCormick who's an up-and-coming screenwriter in L.A. (John is currently writing and developing scripts for United Artists. He also plays the role of Richie, the over-the-hill bandleader in "Living on Tokyo Time") and we never worried about people "getting it" or not. Don't get me wrong. The film has audience appeal factors, but at times it gets a tad obscure, particularly with all the rock-and-roll references in it.

EF: People are already saying "Living on Tokyo Time" is autobiographical. Is this true?

SO: Actually, there are similarities between the character in the film and myself but they're just coincidental. I mean, everybody wants to play in a rock-and-roll band, get dumped by their girlfriend and meet a nice woman from Japan. Don't they?

Seriously, the film is about being a certain age. It's about a young woman who can see her life being mapped out for her by other people and she decides not to go along with the plan. It's about a young man who can't see any future for himself. He has a crummy job. He sits around all day eating pork and beans and listening to rock-and-roll. Then one day his life collides with hers and he falls in love. He's not the most appealing character in the world, far from it, but he has some qualities. As one of the characters in the film says, "He'll grow on you... like a fungus."

(Reprinted with permission from the National Asian American Telecommunications Association Publication, Asian American Network.)

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## Steven Okazaki's New Film —

## 'Living on Tokyo Time' to Debut



Ken, played by Ken Nakagawa (right), orders a snack from The Manju Man, Lane Nishikawa, in Steven Okazaki's latest film, "Living on Tokyo Time."

After scoring full houses and critical praise at the Hawaii International Film Festival and the United States Film Festival, Steven Okazaki's "Living on Tokyo Time" will have its Bay Area debut at the San Francisco Film Festival, at the Kabuki 8 Cinemas, on Tuesday, March 31 at 7 p.m. and Wednesday, April 1 at 4:30 p.m.

"Living on Tokyo Time" is a fresh and funny "change of pace" for the director, who last year was nominated for an Academy Award for "Unfinished Business," his compelling documentary on the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

The San Francisco Film Festival showings come four months before the theatrical release of the film this summer. Skouras Pictures (Belizaire the Cajun, X: The Unheard Music, The Good Father, Waiting for the Moon) will release the film this August in theaters across the country.

"Living on Tokyo Time" is a fun-filled drama about Kyoko (played by Minako Ohashi), a beautiful 19-year-old Japanese girl who comes to America looking for an "independent experience" and for an escape from an engagement gone bad back home.

In San Francisco, she is introduced to a deadbeat, would-be rock and roller named Ken (Ken Nakagawa). Just as Kyoko's visa runs out, Ken is dumped by his girlfriend (Brenda Aoki) and

he agrees to marry Kyoko so she can get her green card. Neither of them expects love to be part of the bargain, but they're in for a surprise. Tokyo Time offers a warm and touching view of two young people discovering each other and themselves.

Thus far, with only a handful of screenings under its belt, Tokyo Time has already stirred up considerable enthusiasm. The U.S. Film Festival stated that the film "has the earmark of a real hit" and the Los Angeles Herald Examiner called it "a little gem in the rough."

In a cover story on the film, The Oakland Tribune wrote: "Tokyo Time is a delightful little comedy... We have love, we have rock music, we have funny foibles... it was an instant hit."

In addition to Ohashi and Nakagawa, both newcomers to movies, Tokyo Time

features a wealth of familiar Bay Area talent including Mitzie Abe, Bill Bonham (Mister Round Table Pizza), Kate Connell, Judi Nihei, Keith Choy, Alex Herschlag, Jim Cranna and Lane Nishikawa.

The film was written by Okazaki and John McCormick, produced by Lynn O'Donnell and Dennis Hayashi, and shot by Okazaki and Zand Gee.

The film was awarded the festival's Special Jury Award.

Tickets to "Living on Tokyo Time" are available through all BASS ticket outlets or by phone at (415) 762-BASS. For the latest information on the film festival, call (415) 221-FILM.

(Note: The Tuesday, March 31 screening of "Tokyo Time" is sold-out but seats are still available for April 1 at 4:30 p.m.)

### AAAs for Community Involvement to Hold Education Seminar March 25

SAN JOSE — Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI), an Asian American mental health agency of Santa Clara County, announced that its professional education seminar will be held on March 25.

The topic for the day is "Effective Treatment of Compulsive Behavior: Sexual Deviancy and Aggression." The speaker is Dr. Stewart B. Nixon, a licensed psychologist

in private practice in San Jose and Palo Alto.

The seminar will be held from 12 noon-1:30 p.m. at AACI, 516 Martha Street, San Jose 95112.

All mental health and human service professionals are welcome. Admission is free. Beverages will be provided.

For further information, contact William Masuda, AACI, (408) 998-1544.

### Florin JACL 'Remembrance' to Feature Dr. Peter Irons

SACRAMENTO — Dr. Peter Irons will be the keynote speaker at the Florin Japanese American Citizens League's fifth annual Time of Remembrance. The event will be held at the Florin Buddhist Church, 8320 Florin Blvd., Sacramento, on March 25, 7 p.m.

Dr. Irons

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