

'Obaachan's Garden' chronicles

By Gregory Strong

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After her grandmother refused to attend her own 100th birthday party, Linda Ohama discovered the matriarch harbored a terrible secret. In the months following, the Vancouver-based director coaxed her feisty old obaachan into disclosing the truth on camera.

The result is the award-winning documentary, *Obaachan's Garden*. Ohama lovingly portrays a quirky, music-loving centenarian whose sometimes tumultuous life is symbolized by her beautiful, wayward flower garden.

"As a filmmaker, I have lots of trust," Ohama recently explained in an interview. "Every time my grandmother told me something I just knew she was leading us somewhere."

Her grandmother, Asayo Murakami, emigrated from Japan in 1924 as a "picture bride" and moved to a fishing village near Vancouver. With her newfound freedom, she rejected the man who had paid her passage and married for love, later raising eight children. During World War II, she lived through the heart-wrenching internment of the Japanese-Canadian community and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, where her relatives lived.

But what Ohama discovered was that her grandmother had been forced to abandon two young children when she left Japan. Retelling Murakami's life story and determining the fate of her lost children took Ohama five years. It also brought her to Japan, where she returned last week for the film's Japan premiere. An enthusiastic crowd of several hundred

at the Canadian Embassy theater in Tokyo marked the first stop in a nationwide tour that includes Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, Murakami's hometown.

"When my grandmother heard we were taking the film to Japan, the first thing she told me was, 'I'm coming, too!'" Ohama said. Making the trip proved impossible for Murakami, now 104, but the director described how the spirited old woman laughed and cried while watching the film at its premiere in Canada. Afterward, she addressed the audience and led them in cheering "Banzai!"

"She played her violin and she sang," Ohama said. "Once you give the microphone to my grandmother, she just takes over."

In *Obaachan's Garden*, the director uses multi-layered storytelling to recreate a life representative of many Japanese women emigrants. Family photographs and archival footage of prewar Japan and Vancouver help her tell the story. Interspersed are dramatized incidents from her grandmother's life. However, despite the obvious sincerity of the Japanese-Canadian actors, including Natsuko Murakami, another granddaughter, who plays the young Murakami, these scenes lack the emotional impact of the real events unfolding in the film.

To create some of them, the director organized, then recorded, a replanting ceremony at the site of her grandmother's one-time home and flower garden. The property, confiscated during the war, was never returned. Today, it's part of a national historic site commemorating the Japanese-Canadian community. In the film, Murakami's extended family have the bewildering experience of revisiting the ancestral home and finding it a museum.