

'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.

a Japanese exodus

"My grandmother's life shows that where a person is born and grows up always stays a part of them," Ohama said. "In recognizing that, we all have a responsibility and connection to each other."

One of the extraordinary moments that follow in *Obaachan's Garden* suggests that Ohama's grandmother may not have been a model parent. Ohama's own mother bursts into tears, complaining bitterly about the neglect she suffered as a child. In addition, Ohama, who is in her 50s, links four generations by introducing her own daughter, Caitlin, Murakami's great-granddaughter, who retraces Murakami's journey from Japan.

"Last summer, I became an obaachan myself—birth, life, death—that's what it's all about," Ohama said. "Everything changes. But I think the Japanese Canadian community will always have a future and continue to evolve."

Ultimately, the small, wizened figure of Murakami herself provides the film's most enduring images. At her bedside in a voice no more than a rasping croak, she confides in Ohama or crankily orders the camera away. Finally, in her old garden once more, Murakami, confined to a wheelchair, is reunited with her surviving daughter from Japan, Chieko, who has flown to Vancouver to meet her. It is a wonderful, touching scene, one unique in film.

"I feel very privileged to have witnessed it," Ohama said. "It was like seeing a 101-year-old woman giving birth to an 80-year-old baby."



From "Obaachan's Garden"

Nationwide screenings through Nov. 30.

For more information go to
<http://homepage3.nifty.com/acchiyo/english.htm>.

Obachan's Garden—Reading Questions:

Skimming and Scanning—Quick Read:

- 1) How old was Linda Ohama's grandmother when Linda discovered her secret?
- 2) When did Asayo Murakami emigrate to Canada?
- 3) How many children did she have?
- 4) What secret did Linda Ohama discover about her Asayo Murakami?
- 5) How long did it take Linda to make the film?
- 6) How did Linda Ohama's grandmother react when she heard about the film coming to Japan?
- 7) Who plays the young Asayo Murakami in the film?
- 8) What happened to Asayo Murakami's old home?
- 9) What makes it seem that Asayo Murakami was not an ideal parent?
- 10) What is the most wonderful, touching scene in the film?

Comprehension

11. In what sense is Asayo Murakami like an overgrown garden?
12. What acts of Asayo Murakami show her independent spirit in the 1920s and in the recent past?
13. What varied materials does the director use to tell the story in the film?
14. What are the challenges in making this type of film?
15. If you were to make a film about a family member, who would you choose and why?