Steven Okazaki
Helping Emerging Filmmakers Tell Their Stories

By Ben Hamamoto

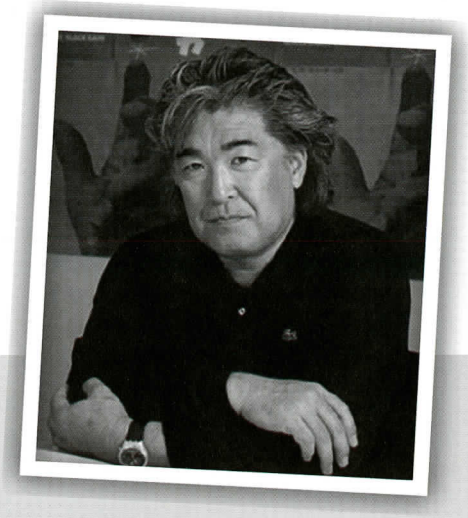
Steven Okazaki is widely known for telling stories that might otherwise go untold. Over the course of three decades, he's brought the experiences victims of atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki to light—from 1982's "Survivors," to his landmark, Emmy-winning documentary "White Light Black Rain"—and ensured their voices were part of the global conversation on nuclear weaponry and power. His films also brought the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans to mainstream audiences. Steven was nominated for an Academy Award for "Unfinished Business," his film documenting incarceration resistors Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, Minoru Yasui's fight to overturn their conviction. And he won an Oscar for "Days of Waiting," which tells the story of Estelle Ishigo, a white artist who went with her Nikkei husband to camp. While his success serves as inspiration for Asian Pacific Islander filmmakers, Steven also supports API filmmakers in more direct ways, acting as a consultant or producer on films ranging from Spencer Nakasako's "Refugee" to more recent efforts like Debbie Lum's "Seeking Asian Female." When Nikkei Heritage caught up with him to ask about this, Steven downplayed his own contributions.

"I haven't done much. I wish I could do more," he wrote. "You see something with heart and talent like 'Seeking Asian Female' and it's so exciting you want to be a part of it." And the Berkeley, California-based filmmaker seems intent to stay involved.

"Right now, I'm co-producing a wonderful short film called 'Giap's Last Day at the Ironing Board Factory,' with Tony Nguyen, a terrific Vietnamese American filmmaker." He also noted that he's hoping to do a film about the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and its aftermath with a filmmaker from Fukushima. When asked about his motivation, he said. "I'm offended by so much of what I see—the same ugly, offensive stereotypes," he wrote. "Or we're invisible... We need to make our own films."

"Steven is currently at work on a theatrical documentary about iconic Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune, tentatively entitled, "The Last Samurai."

"I want to convey to younger audiences how extraordinary Toshiro Mifune was for his time," he told Variety. "Before him there were no non-white movie heroes with stature and international appeal. This was before Bruce Lee or Jet Li or Shaft or Antonio Banderas. In fact, Clint Eastwood's cool, 'take-no-shit' character came from Mifune." ❋



Steven Okazaki on "Okage sama de"

Okage sama de. It's such a meaningful phrase. You hear it a lot in Hawai'i, not so much on the mainland. Most Japanese Americans are very conscious of the generational debt; how the past, good or bad, shapes who we are. When I was young, I saw mostly the negatives of being JA—the harshness, the stubborn inflexibility. It took me a long time to appreciate the positives—the pride and perseverance. Throughout my life, I struggled to understand my father. He rarely talked to me. He went to work, came home, ate dinner, and then went outside to trim the hedges. When I was older, I mentioned this to my aunt Miki, my dad's sister, and she said, "don't take it personally. Your grandfather never talked to your father. He just went to work, came home, ate dinner and sang old Japanese songs." Later, I was doing some research on my ancestors in Mito, Ibaraki-ken, and the person helping me said, "That's what men from Mito are like: very stoic, but loyal." My father was with the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion during World War II, which had a lot of *Nisei* from Hawai'i. I never understood how big that was for him until I meant a bunch of vets at a 522nd reunion. They were so "hang loose" compared to my dad, but I could see how much they loved each other, how unbreakable their bond was. They gave so much of themselves in the war, and then came back to be treated like second-class citizens. I read that in the 1950s, 75% of *Nisei* men were self-employed. They served their country, but couldn't get a job and had to make their own. We talk a lot about the camps and the 442nd, but the post-war years were in many ways much tougher for the *Issei* and *Nisei*. The prejudice was worse after the war. They were treated like *shit*. But they didn't complain; they persevered. A lot of my films, my Asian American work, are a response to that. It is fueled by pride and anger, my sense of "Okage sama de."