PLAY GUIDE

# A THOUSAND CRANES

**April 6 thru May 6, 1994** **by Kathryn Schultz Miller**

Indiana Repertory Theatre ★ 140 West Washington St. ★ Indianapolis, IN 46204-3465

Sadako Saskai before she was stricken with "the atom bomb sickness."

*A Thousand Cranes* is based on a true story about a courageous young Japanese girl named Sadako Sasaki.

In 1945, when Sadako was two years old, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima where she lived with her family. Sadako's grandmother died immediately, but Sadako was not hurt.

The play itself is set in 1955: Sadako is a runner, and a believer in good luck. One day while racing with her best friend, Kenji, Sadako becomes dizzy and falls. She is hospitalized, and it is soon discovered that she has "the Atom Bomb Disease"—Leukemia.

Her friend Kenji comes to visit her with good news. He reminds her of an old Japanese legend which promises that if a sick person folds one thousand paper cranes, the gods will grant a wish and make that person healthy again. Kenji folds a golden crane which Sadako keeps on the nightstand next to her bed. With faith and courage, Sadako begins folding. Sadako only folds 644 cranes before dying, leaving her classmates to fold the remaining 356.

To remember Sadako and other children killed by the atom bomb, her classmates originated an idea to build a monument. In 1958 the statue was unveiled i the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Sadako stands o top of a granite mountain. She is holding a golden crane in outstretched arms. Engraved on the base of the statue is her classmates' wish:

***"This is our cry,***
***This is our prayer,***
***Peace in the world."***

## CRANES

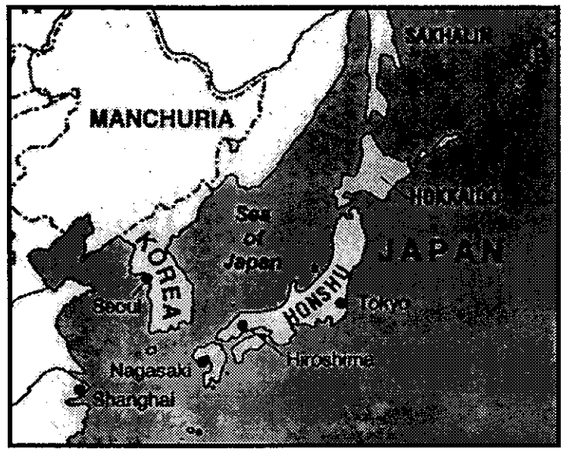
The crane (*tsuru*) has been long regarded as an auspicious bird in Japan. For the Japanese it represents peace, harmony, and long life. All cranes feed on marsh plants, insects, crustaceans, and amphibians. The crane has always been a source of artistic inspiration, and in Japan it is often used as a decorative motif in family crests. Cranes perform a variety of intricate ritual "dances," including stick tossing, bowing, leaping, and threat posturing. These dances have inspired traditional movements in *tai chi* and karate, as well as ballet.

***"I will write peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world."***

**—Sadako Sasaki**

Illustration by: Clare Cooley

# WAR AND THE ATOMIC BOMB




In 1939, Europe exploded into war. Germany and Italy were allies against France and Britain. Japan later joined them when the United States condemned the Japanese for invading China. However, the United States remained neutral until 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Two years previously, on October 11, 1939, President Roosevelt had received a letter from the world's most famous scientist, Albert Einstein. Einstein wanted to inform Roosevelt about a recent discovery in physics, one that might lead to the development of an extremely powerful bomb. Einstein noted that the Nazis were also aware of this discovery.

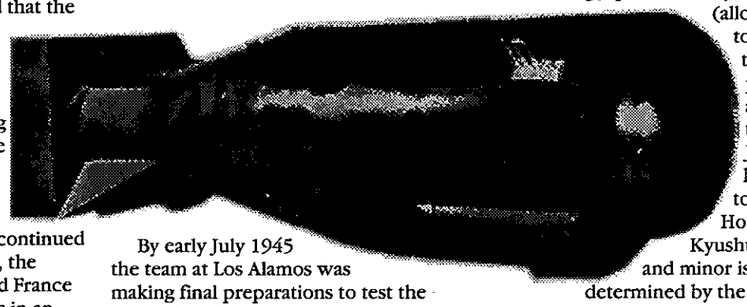
Although in 1941 the American government had not yet made a decision concerning the bomb experiment, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, America's war plan included research and possible development of the bomb. As the war continued to expand into other countries, the United States, Great Britain, and France were strengthening their forces in an attempt to bring a quick end to the war.

On June 5, 1944, the Allied invasion of Europe began. On the eastern front, the Russians continued to drive the Germans back. In the Pacific, the U.S. Navy and Marine forces were closing a circle around Japan. These invasions were becoming costly for the United States, both in terms of casualties abroad and hardships at home.

By 1945 the Japanese had perfected their defensive tactics. They also began Kamikaze attacks against U.S. ships: planes were loaded with dynamite and crashed into American ships by pilots willing to die for their country.

In Europe the Allies had put a squeeze on Germany, bringing the war closer to an end. Meanwhile in Los Alamos, New Mexico, scientists were nearing completion of the bomb.

On April 12, 1945, U.S. President Roosevelt died. Vice President Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency. On May 9, Truman was able to declare victory in Europe, but Japan was not willing to surrender.



By early July 1945 the team at Los Alamos was making final preparations to test the bomb. The site for the test was Alamogordo Air Base, an isolated location in the desert, two hundred miles south of Los Alamos. The test revealed that the bomb was ready.

On July 16th the U.S.S. Indianapolis was ordered to sail from San Francisco to Tinian, a tiny Mariana Island in the Pacific, to deliver a "package." Although the package contained the core for the Hiroshima bomb, the contents were not revealed to the captain of the ship; he only knew that he was to transport the package and that others would unload the cargo when the ship reached its destination. On July 26 when the Indianapolis arrived at the Tinian Harbor, the ship was surrounded by numerous small crafts and the package was taken ashore. (Four days later, on its return to San Francisco, the Indianapolis was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. It sank in twelve minutes; of a total of 1196 crew members only 315 were rescued. A war memorial commemorating these men is being erected in Indianapolis.)

During this time Truman was in Potsdam, Germany, with leaders from the Soviet Union and Great Britain, trying to decide the political and economic future of Europe. Truman, wanting to end the war with Japan, issued the Potsdam Declaration, which demanded Japan's immediate surrender. The terms for the Potsdam Declaration included: removing Japanese leaders from office, dismantling Japan's military forces (allowing them to return to their homes peacefully) and limiting the Japanese homeland to Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and minor islands determined by the United States and its allies. If Japan refused the declaration, the atomic bomb would be dropped. On July 28 the decision was final; Japan rejected the Potsdam Declaration.

Hiroshima, Kokura, and Nagasaki were chosen as targets, with Hiroshima being the primary target. On August 6 the Enola Gay, a B-29 bomber flown by pilot Paul Tibbets, was ready to begin its mission– to carry and drop the atomic bomb.

At 7:25 the Enola Gay's radio operator received a message that the sky over Hiroshima was clear. At 8:15 a.m. the bomb called "Little Boy" was dropped.

The bomb exploded about two thousand feet above the city, giving off a blinding light. The people of Hiroshima called the blast *pikadon* (flash boom). Seventy thousand people died instantly. The intense heat generated by the bomb disintegrated both people and objects, sometimes leaving an imprint burned into sides of buildings and sidewalks. Those who were not killed wandered the city in misery, their flesh hanging from their bodies, seeking water to cool the pain. Fires began to break out. Soon a black cloud covered the city, and within moments rain began to fall. Many believed gasoline was being poured on them by the Americans, although this was not true. The rain was followed by strong winds which uprooted trees, buildings (those that were still standing), and anything else that wasn't tied down. Many were searching to find family members or to help those buried underneath the rubble. Thousands were flocking to hospitals, but only three out of forty-five hospitals in the city survived the bomb, and damage to them was so severe that they were only able to serve as first aid stations. The day after the *pikadon* the Japanese arm began sending troops throughout the city to collect and cremate the dead.

The Japanese government was still unwilling to surrender, so on August 9 the atomic bomb called "Fat Man" was dropped on Nagasaki. The destruction was equal to that in Hiroshima.

By this point the Japanese government feared that if they did not surrender the whole Japanese race would be wiped out. They decided for the sake of their nation and their people that the war must come to an end; and on August 15 Emperor Hirohito's voice was heard on the radio announcing Japan's surrender.

## Approaching A Thousand Cranes

The IRT production of *A Thousand Cranes* directed by Andrew Tsao will be unique in that it is a collaborative effort between director, choreographer, designers, and actors. The five actors will play multiple roles representing Sadako's family as well as doctors and ancestors. The desire to involve the audience in this version of Sadako's story is more important to the director than trying to incorporate traditional Japanese techniques and forms.

When approaching *A Thousand Cranes*, the first thing that stands out is a prayer: the simple image of Sadako offering a prayer for peace to the world as she dies of leukemia. She urges us to recognize the truth about war, about what it costs, about who suffers and who pays. As Americans, we must not pretend it was someone else's fault, or just a thing of the past; we must learn about our country and our world, and have the courage to look at our own actions and take stock of them.

Kathryn Schultz Miller is an American playwright. She tells the story of Sadako through her own experience and her own imagination about Japan. The script then comes to Mr. Andrew Tsao, a Chinese-American director, who passes it on to a European-American scenic designer, a European-American costume designer, a Chinese-American lighting designer, and an Argentinian-American composer. Then the text is given to a cast that consists of Chinese-, Japanese-, Vietnamese-, and European-Americans. Why all this genealogy? Because the heart of this production lies in the makings.

The design elements for *A Thousand Cranes* were conceived by dreaming of a Japan the same way Sadako dreams of her grandmother. The ensemble will use their imagination and draw from Japanese Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku theatre, bringing elements from those great ancient traditions to this play. The set "feels" Japanese. The lines are Asian, the colors are from the great Kabuki theatre. Some of the costumes are inspired by Kabuki as well. The production will have music which comes from the great Noh tradition, where percussion and sound mark the telling of the story in dynamic ways. The movement will come from all sorts of Asian dance: Northern Chinese Wu Shu, Malaysian shadow puppet theatre, Japanese doll theatre or Bunraku.

All of these elements will be explored through the director's, designers', and actors' unique positions as American artists. They do not claim to be experts, they only claim to be explorers, respectful of the culture from which they borrow.

During the rehearsal process, the cast will reach into their own lives, their own experiences, their own dreams as Asian-Americans. They will give birth to a story that will live only for the time in which they perform it, but there is the hope that it will live on in the hearts and minds of those who come and experience it. Only then can Sadako's prayer have a chance of becoming real. Peace in the world comes through understanding. Peace in the world comes from stories like *A Thousand Cranes*.

## PEACE MEMORIAL PARK

Peace Memorial Park is a beautiful park in Hiroshima which in some ways might be a park anywhere. But this park is special; it was laid out in the early 1950s to mark the center of the explosion. Every year people from all over the world visit Peace Park on August 6, the anniversary of the day the bombing took place in Hiroshima, to remember those who died as a result of the atom bomb.

Many gather in the early morning hours to pray quietly at the Memorial Mound for the Unknown Dead. By 8:15 thousands of people arrive for the official ceremony. With the ringing of bells, all bow their heads in prayer for one minute. Next, the Mayor makes a plea for peace, dignitaries offer a few words to the living, white doves are released into the sky, and fresh flowers are offered to the dead.

August 6 is a day of protest as well as commemoration. Groups of people can be seen marching through Peace Park with banners that read: No More A and H Bombs! No More Hiroshimas!

Many stop at the Children's Monument erected in 1958 in memory of Sadako Sasaki. There are usually members of the Folding Crane Club gathered around, placing cranes at the base of the statue.

Many pause at the Cenotaph. This is a large granite arch which is a replica of an ancient clay house. Beneath the arch, where the souls of the dead are believed to reside, lies the registry of these who perished from the bomb. As *hibakusha* (survivors of the bomb) die over the years their names are added to the sacred list. The plaque where the names are engraved reads: "Rest in Peace. The mistake will not be repeated."

Many join in the Die-In at the Atomic Bomb Dome–a building destroyed when the bomb was dropped, leaving only the steel frame. They lie for moments in complete silence where the victims fell.

At night many go with the people of Hiroshima to float paper lanterns down the Ota River to console the spirits of the dead. Each lantern has the name of someone who encountered the bomb. They sing the words of poet Sankichi Toge, who died from delayed radiation effects:

*"Give back my father, give back my mother,*
*give grandpa back, grandma back,*
*give our sons and daughters back.*
*Give me back myself, give mankind back.*
*Give each back to each other.*
*So long as this life lasts,*
*Give peace that will never end."*

Children's Memorial Statue

## OBON

In the play *A Thousand Cranes,* Sadako questions her mother about the lighting of candles on the table. Sadako's mother answers by reminding her that "soon it will be Obon."

In Japan on July 13 one of the most important annual events takes place–Obon, or the Festival of the Dead, or the Festival of Lanterns as it is often called.

The purpose of Obon is to remember the ancestors and invite them to join in the celebration of life. People clean their houses and set aside a table with gifts and offerings for the spirits of their ancestors.

On the eve of the 13th the "welcoming of the spirits" takes place. Families go to the graves of their ancestors, burn incense, and invite the spirits to return home. In some cases a small fire is lit outside the gate as an invitation to the ancestral spirits. At home, the spirits are treated as if they were still alive.

Many communities celebrate Obon with dances–*Bon Odori*–which are usually held on the grounds of the local shrine or temple. The dances often last until dawn.

"Bidding the spirits farewell" takes place on the night of the 15th or the morning of the 16th. Special farewell rice dumplings (*okuri-dango*) are presented to the spirits. The offerings (*omiyage*) are wrapped in straw bags or placed on leaves and cast into a stream outside the village or into the sea. In some cases, a small boat is made for the spirits and the offerings are set on board, together with a lantern made of attractive paper, then set afloat on the water. In the minds of the Japanese, the lighted boats floating downstream toward the sea symbolize the souls of the ancestors going off once more to the "other shore." Finally, families light bonfires in front of their homes, to help guide the spirits back to the world of the dead.

## JAPANESE THEATRE

There are three forms of Japanese theatre: Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku. Noh originated from a blend of dance, music, and mime. In its early history Noh became associated with shrines and nobility and was frequently seen as a part of political and ceremonial occasions. Noh uses a raised platform upon which the actors perform. Underneath the polished cypress wood floor are empty jars to increase the sound of foot-stomping. There is also a bridge or passageway, with three small pine trees placed along it, used to connect the back of the stage to the offstage area. There are only male performers in classical Noh. The audience sits in front and next to the stage-right side. The actors wear colorful costumes with elaborate brocade, masks, and wigs.

Kabuki began as a commoners theatre. It originally took place outdoors, later moving indoors. Kabuki uses a raised platform which allows the closest possible relationship between actors and audience. The stage revolves to assist in difficult scene changes and three large trap doors aid in the movement of the set as well. Again, the actors are all male. They do not wear masks but paint their faces. A narrator, who sits stage left, assists in the telling of the play, but the main attention is on the actors. There are also musicians that play the samisen (a stringed instrument similar to a mandolin) and a flute.

Bunraku shares many elements with Kabuki, but uses puppetry. The puppets are one-third life size and require three operators. The chief actor wears black; elevated shoes make him taller than his assistants. He controls the head and the right arm. The two assistants are also dressed in black but wear hoods. They control the left arm and legs. In Bunraku the narrator and samisen player are more than assistants; they are essential to the storytelling.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