

One-act plays breathe life into W.W.II stories of 'enemy aliens'

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In a darkened high school theater, a tale of hope, loss and disillusionment is poignantly unfolding on stage before its still-marveling playwright.

It is winter 1942 and Italian fishermen are up in arms about the sudden seizing of their boats at the wharf in Santa Cruz. The sheriff is threatening to arrest any Italian national who crosses the white line that runs down the middle of the highway, a move that could get them sent to internment camp in Montana.

"It's got me split in two," a character named Angelo says to the sheriff. "This side used to live with Mama and my boy Geno, gonna be president some day. But this other side has to live over here, ashamed to be Italian." Belmont writer John Christgau gets chills watching the second of his three one-act plays come alive in rehearsals under the sure hand of director Hal Gelb. This dramatization of what happened to "enemy aliens" during World War II was nearly 30 years in the making. It is a free performance I think everyone should see tonight.

The stories about the 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans who were interned by the War Relocation Authority are widely known, but this one is not. In the days and months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, about 30,000 German, Italian, Japanese and various European nationals in this country had their livelihoods taken, or were arrested and forced into Department of Justice camps in Bismarck, N.D., Missoula, Mont., Crystal City and Segoville, Texas, among many.

Even more amazing, in Latin America, thousands of people of those nationalities were kidnapped in collusion with those governments and transported to U.S. internment camps for use as prisoner-of-war barter. Christgau and internee families hope that tonight's production of his plays at Hillsdale High School's Little Theater will encourage more productions across the country. His 1983 non-fiction book, "Enemies," about the same topic, was in print for only two years. The development of these plays, however, came from state funds created to teach about the World War II internment. Christgau, who taught English at Peninsula high schools for more than 20 years, designed the plays to be minimalist so

that students can easily perform them as teaching tools about the balancing of civil liberties with national security.

"It will bring it home in a way that a panel or a lecture or a symposium can't do," Christgau, 73, said. And yet, there will be panels, too: The plays are preceded by a small conference this afternoon at San Mateo Public Library.

From a chance conversation with a neighbor who had been a guard at an internment camp in Fort Lincoln, N.D., Christgau gathered documents from the National Archives through the Freedom of Information Act and tracked down internees. A Midwesterner of German-Swedish ancestry, Christgau chose to focus his book on Fort Lincoln, just 200 miles from where he was born, which held secrets he had never guessed.

Karen Ebel's father was one of them. The New Hampshire woman had always seen his collection of arrowheads, and in 1999 when she finally got to asking about them, the story had stunned her. He had collected them during his time as an "enemy alien" internee in North Dakota.

"It upset me to watch him tell the tale with tears in his eyes 50 years later - a man I'd never seen cry in his life," Ebel said.

Interest in Christgau's book suddenly revived in 2001, after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, when people noted the parallels between the passage of the Patriot Act and the assertion of broad powers to detain "enemy aliens." The enemy alien act is still on the books and is what formed the basis for the mass internment of Japanese-Americans.

Since 2001, she and others in a small coalition have worked for the Wartime Treatment Study Act, Senate Bill 621, which would establish commissions to review the facts and circumstances of such government abuse, which caused "so much misery" for so many people, Ebel said. They could use help.

The first of the three plays - "Zip" - tells the story of a German-American teen in Cincinnati, whose parents were taken away by the FBI, and how the authorities came for him in the middle of class months later.

The second play - "The White Line" - is an amalgamation of the line that divided Italian families in Arcata, and the taking of Italian fishing boats in Santa Cruz. The third, "The Master Tailor's Wife," is about Peruvian-Japanese, who eventually ended up in Crystal City, Texas. All the dramas, Christgau said, are based on historical record.

The real Zip - Eberhard Fuhr - living in the Chicago area, will be on hand, as will San Jose resident Art Shibayama and Santa Cruz resident Heidi Gurcke Donald, both originally from Peru and Costa Rica. It was the stories from former internees like them that tugged at Christgau's heart all those years. And the efforts of Ebel.

Her octogenarian father, suffering from emphysema and diabetes sustained a mild heart attack Tuesday. Ebel almost canceled her flight from New Hampshire to participate in the conference. She feared he would not be alive when she came back.

"He told me to go," she said, voice cracking. "He wants me to do this for him."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Hidden Stories of World War II: A Conference on Enemy Alien Restrictions and Internment is at 1-4 p.m. today, San Mateo Public Library, 55 W. Third Ave., San Mateo, (650) 522-7800. Freedom Lost: Three One-Act Plays on Enemy Aliens in World War II is at 7:30 tonight. Little Theater of Hillsdale High School, 3115 Del Monte St., San Mateo. Admission is free. See **www.gaic.info**.

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