

BETTY GARRETT AND JEANNE SAKATA may never go up for the same role in a casting call but they have a lot in common. Both hard-working actresses love the theatre and both have received LA Stage Alliance Ovation Awards. Currently they are performing in new theatre offerings they created themselves.

Betty Garrett's Songs and

By Tom Provenzano

Being honored with the Career Achievement Ovation Award in 2004 has not capped Betty Garrett's lengthy career in film, television and theatre as she has been working continually ever since. After more than 80 years, she is finally coming out of the closet. With her new show *Betty Garrett: Closet Songwriter*, the star introduces the best of the songs she has been writing throughout her life. She explains, "It seems like I have been writing poems and lyrics all my life. I look back when I was four years old my family stood me up

CHRIS KANE

on the landing and said, 'Recite your poem.' I was doing it even then. Whenever something happens to me I write a poem or song. They have been sitting in my closet for a long time."

Though she has sung a few of them publicly (examples include bits on *All in the Family* and *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*) most of them were just outlets for artistic expression. So why did she decide now to share them? "It has been in my mind for several years. I think it is the birthdays reminding me to hurry up."

The lyrics are hers with an array of composers, including son Garrett Parks. She admits, however, her favorite is one she composed herself. "It is 'There Must Be a Rainbow' and it's being sung by Debra Armani, a wonderful soprano. I think it is my trademark."

This is far from a one-woman show. She brought in several members of her beloved theatre family. She says, "I teach a musical comedy workshop on Wednesday nights at Theatre West. People bring in songs and I critique them. I have gathered seven of the most faithful as part of the cast. Lee Meriwether is one and is wonderful; she is still Miss America.

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"There is narration between songs explaining why I wrote them or how. Most come out of my personal experience and observations. Some of the stories are funny, some touching and all are entertaining. I directed the show up to a certain point. For years whatever I did at Theatre West was directed by a wonderful man called John Carter. He moved to New York but I talked him into coming back the two weeks before we opened because I trust his judgment so much. I needed him to come in and clean up everything."

Garrett has been entertaining for decades. She and her late husband Larry Parks toured Britain and America with vaudeville and night club acts and performed in scores of plays together. She fondly remembers the earliest days: "In vaudeville there were movies with variety shows between them. It was exhausting; you'd do four shows a day."

She and her husband relished their time on stage together. "We were rare in show biz. Most couples don't like working together. Larry and I had a rule that we did not critique each other. We had so much fun. We did every summer stock play you could think of. We took a musical to Broadway which did not succeed unfortunately. We tried to work together as much as possible."

In the more than 30 years since Parks' untimely death, Garrett has refused to slow down in her career. "I have been very fortunate to move from one medium to another. I started on stage, went into movies, then when that sort of died out I did television. Now I am back where I really love to be—on stage."

Is retirement an option? "It never occurs to me; I can't imagine what I would do. Someone will have to retire me. She jokes, "I always say my body is in good shape, it just needs a good pressing. I



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and Jeanne Sakata’s *Light*

am 86 years old. My son told me, ‘Ma whenever you do a public appearance, always tell them how old you are. You’ll get applause.’ It’s true. He also reminded me there are 86 keys on the piano. So I felt this was a good year to bring the songs out.”

As Betty Garrett reveals her theatrical writing, Jeanne Sakata, Ovation Award winner for Best Lead Actress in a Play for her portrayal of male Beijing opera star Master Hua in Chay Yew’s *Red* at East West Players, is making her debut as a playwright. Sakata, who last year wowed audiences and critics with her performance as Maria Callas in the EWP’s *Master Class*, is returning to that venue with her play, *Dawn’s Light: The Journey of Gordon Hirabayashi*. She explains, “I have always written on the side but this is the first dramatic piece I have completed.”

The journey to playwriting began in 1994 when she saw a chilling PBS documentary on Gordon Hirabayashi, one of the few Japanese Americans who defied the WWII era evacuation orders that would have sent him to a concentration camp. The story became an obsession with her.

“I was so fascinated that I called him. He was living in Edmonton but it turned out he was coming to California to visit his brothers. He said, ‘Maybe you could give me a ride and we could talk.’ So my husband and I drove to Mill Valley and gave him a ride to his other brother’s place. I interviewed him there for an afternoon. I realized there was so much more I wanted to know so I visited him in Edmonton for a few days. There is a wonderful collection of letters he wrote from prison in his 20s. Also I was researching other angles about the internment camps.

“I was absolutely fascinated by the story and by the man. I am Sansei, third generation Japanese. My parents were Nisei. In so many ways Gordon sounded like my father and uncles in the way he spoke, the intonations. But I had never heard a Nisei man speak about the internment as a violation of civil rights and how he had to take a stand. He was a Quaker. His mother was a brilliant woman who had to act like a Japanese woman of the time, deferential and demure. But she was fiery and brilliant and a huge influence on him. The more I found out, the more excited I became and decided to try to create this play.”

One of the great influences and inspirations in her theatrical life has been playwright Chay Yew,

with whom she has worked several times. He mentored her on her path to playwriting. “I experimented with different formats. I tried a screenplay, I tried a multi-character play but I got the furthest with the one-person format. At each stage of the process I would encounter someone who would tell me what to do. I came up with a three-hour draft and didn’t know how to cut it. A wonderful dramaturg Len Berkman said I should put a chart on the refrigerator: ‘Gordon’s Choices.’ He said, ‘When Gordon is making an active choice that moves the story forward, then keep it. If pages are going by when he is not doing it, cut there. So pages of court trials got cut out because it was about the lawyers and judges, not about him. [Director] Jessica Kubzansky was also a tremendous help in bringing it to home plate.”

Sakata can only concentrate on one aspect of theatre at a time. “I can’t act and write at the same time. They seem to come out of different parts of the brain. I found when I wasn’t acting I would turn to writing. Then if I got an acting job I’d put it aside. Right now I am trying to learn how to do both. I would never give up performing.”

Interestingly she didn’t begin her life in the theatre until she was 30. Her first role was a walk on in *Romeo and Juliet* at Will Geer’s Theatrum Botanicum. Since then she has acted at many regional theatres. Still she found some of her most joyous work at home with East West Players. She beams when talking about *Master Class*. “Playing Maria Callas was a dream come true. I never imagined I would be allowed to play her. I’d seen the play on Broadway and walked out of the theatre simultaneously exhilarated and sad because I would love to play that role. It was a very

CHRISTOPHER KOMURO



BETTY GARRETT, CLOSET SONGWRITER

Plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; through Nov. 18
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Opens Nov. 7; plays Wed.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; through Dec. 2
Tickets: \$30-\$35
David Henry Hwang Theatre
120 Judge John Aiso St.,
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