

Calgary

High Performance Rodeo solo show Sansei finds personal connection to Canadian history

'If the Japanese internment didn't happen, my dad wouldn't have been born and neither would I'

[Stephen Hunt](#) · CBC News ·

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Mark Kunji Ikeda's solo show Sansei: The Storyteller blends stories, dance and spoken word to tell the story of his personal connection to the internment of thousands of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. (High Performance Rodeo)

Tens of thousands of Japanese Canadians were put in internment camps in 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Choreographer, storyteller and actor Mark Kunji Ikeda learned about it in high school in Calgary, and then he discovered he had a personal connection to it all.

Ikeda explores the connection in his solo show, [Sansei: The Storyteller](#), which opened this week at Lunchbox Theatre as part of the 2019 High Performance Rodeo.

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Ikeda spoke to [The Homestretch](#) Monday.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Can you describe what sort of show *Sansei: The Storyteller* is?

A: It's a play, meets a dance piece, meets a spoken word poetry event. I'm using all those different ways to tell parts of the story. I find telling it that way just allows different ways into my world for different audience members.

Q: What exactly is the story you're telling?

A: It's part family history, part legend, and it's part of the facts of the Japanese internment. And it's really contextualizing it. I didn't know I had

such a personal connection with it. I also didn't know how many other people, really, it resonated with.

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I really started out thinking it was just a personal piece — and more and more people from different communities started to start to tell me how much it influenced them and how much they relate to it.

Q: Tell us your personal story, about how you are connected to the internment camps?

A: If the Japanese internment didn't happen, my dad wouldn't have been born and neither would I.

My grandparents were done having kids ... and then, during the war, they were separated. My grandmother and my aunt and uncle went to the internment camps, and my grandfather went to the work camps that helped build Highway 3 in B.C.

Then, when they finally got back together and had somewhat of a normal life, they celebrated — and whoops, they had my dad.

Q: When did you find out?

A: When I was in Grade 10, there was a little blurb in my social studies textbook about the Japanese internment, and all these other kids in my class asked me about it.

They were like, "You're Japanese aren't you? Didn't you know about this?" And I had no idea.

So it wasn't until I told my father that story and showed him this. He's a fairly stoic fellow, so he had a little chuckle about them. It was like "Oh yeah, if that internment didn't happen, I wouldn't have been born. Neither would you."

It definitely caught me that at some point I want to learn more, but it was a really slow process of uncovering ideas and thoughts from the family. Many of them hadn't spoken about it their whole lives until I started to ask these questions.



Mark Kunji Ikeda's *Sansei: The Storyteller* explores the personal stories behind the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. (Ellis Chloe/CBC)

Q: Did they tell you why they didn't talk about it?

A: My dad kind of contextualized that for me. He was born after the Second World War, when the Japanese were the enemy. It was very uncool to be Japanese, and so a lot of young people in that era really tried to hide the fact that they were Japanese.

And it's well documented how many Japanese Canadians didn't marry other Japanese people. And so that was my family's experience with my aunt, uncle and father. They all married people who weren't Japanese and tried to become as Canadian as possible.

That was the way the political climate was at the time. And it ends up with you not even knowing that your family had been in internment camps.

Q: You mentioned how you started to realize how much the story resonated with people. So are you picking that up and adding it to the show as you go along?

A: As more people are able to connect with it, it's really interesting to slip in ways to make more audience members feel like this story is a part of their history.

That's an important step — both to welcome in the audience, but also to realize that we can all learn something from from the past.

With files from [The Homestretch](#).

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