

Certaines n'avaient  
jamais vu la mer

(The Buddha in the Attic)

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# Synopsis

**LA COMÉDIE  
DE VALENCE**

CENTRE  
DRAMATIQUE  
NATIONAL  
DRÔME-ARDÈCHE

Some women come on stage before us and give personal accounts of a time now past. As they do so, they put on their costumes and little by little take on the appearance of the Japanese women they will embody.

Employing the first-person plural, they tell us about their boat journey from Japan to America. They are anxious to meet the husbands who at this time they still know nothing more about than what these men have been told in their letters. The country they will soon discover seems worryingly foreign to them. The impatience and fear they all feel brings them closer together. When they arrive, they soon find out that the letters and photos that had drawn them to America were full of lies.

### 1907-1925: COME JAPANESE!

On the very first night after their arrival they are confronted with the harsh reality of meeting their husbands in the flesh, and the sexual demands that mark this meeting. Over and over they recount how they were possessed by these men they had never met before, some brutally some gently, with experience or clumsily, by surprise or calmly, with respect or violence. They also describe the places where these acts took place, and how they felt. The morning after, they belonged to their husbands.

Now they discover the hardships of working in the fields and the harsh rule imposed by their employers. They begin to learn a few words of English necessary for their survival. They work relentlessly, throwing themselves into their labour out of desperation. They grow thin, their dreams evaporate. They must also face up to the powerful prejudices, jealousy and even violence that Japanese workers are the victims of.

Some of the women leave the countryside for the city, becoming servants in rich American households and learning how to keep house. They look on, astonished or amused, at how their American employers behave in society and with their families. Sometimes this behaviour inspires their tenderness, other times hatred. They learn to respond to the new names they've been

given. Things don't always go well. Conflicts with the lady of the house, the master's unwelcome attentions, dismissal. The Japanese do their best to imitate Americans and melt unnoticed into city life, but they are often stigmatised, excluded and victims of violence. They aspire to a better life elsewhere, but proudly assert the utility of their labour.

### 1926-1940: BABIES

In a sewing workshop, another common workplace, the Japanese women talk about the birth of their children under the watchful eye of a foreman. They describe how they gave birth, where and in what conditions: in the compounds, on a farm, in tiny settlements, alone or with a midwife or doctor, whether it was easy or arduous. They tell us what effect having children has had on the relationship with their husbands. They are proud to announce the names of their babies who, contrary to them, will be American citizens. And finally they reveal the complicated childbirths, the ones leading to sick or stillborn babies.

### THE CHILDREN

The children are growing up and families expanding in the towns and country. Father-children relationships are difficult. The parents try to inculcate their values and culture, set their children to work, advise them on the paths they should take. But the teenagers, adopting the customs and values of their American peers, change their names and oppose stubborn resistance. Even though they are not fully accepted by all Americans, the children dream of a better future that Pearl Harbour will suddenly cast a dark shadow over.

### 1941: TRAITORS

On the second day of the war, the Japanese hear news of lists dividing members of their community into three categories: "known as a dangerous element", "potentially dangerous", "sympathetic to the enemy". There are also rumours of people being taken from their homes or arrested. Americans

become wary of them, they are accused of collaborating with the enemy or suspected of constituting a Fifth Column. The air of suspicion penetrates the Japanese community itself and with it the fear of being denounced. The Japanese finally accept to leave, but while making provisions for the journey, they already see themselves coming back.

They depart, carrying their memories and parts of their life with them, alone or with their family, resigned to their fate or combative, desperate or joyful. All have a white identification label attached to their collar.

## 1942: A DISAPPEARANCE

The Japanese have vanished. An American woman tells us that she has just become aware of this disappearance. The radio and the written press spread information and opinions that shine a troublesome light on what has happened. The American people are torn, as divided as the brother and sister on stage before us. The American woman gives her account, in first-person plural, of what she knows and what she doesn't know: the children are upset by the disappearance of the Japanese, the sick and mentally deranged have been left to fend for themselves, people are stealing and reselling things that belonged to the Japanese. Some Americans hope they will come back, some rise up and demand an explanation, while others believe the conspiracy theories that imagine their enemies in hiding, secretly preparing their attack. Rumours are heard here and there about the existence of special trains. Gradually, though, people get used to their being no more Japanese, over time their presence and subsequent disappearance is forgotten. One year later all trace of their presence has vanished. All that is left are rumours and resignation.

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