

BUTTERFLY IN AMERICA
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What if Butterfly weren't dead? What if she were in America instead?

Butterfly in America is the inspiring story of a woman who keeps her faith – the Butterfly of Puccini's *Un bel di* – and the lover America who beckons and betrays her. It is the story of a woman and her people striving to unite with a country whose ideals of freedom and equality are all-too-often belied by the brutal reality of racism.

The story of Japanese Americans in the first half of the 20th century has been told, in part or in whole, many times and many ways: in historical accounts, novels, films, even cartoon-like sketches. The story of the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII has also been told as opera and now even as a Broadway musical. But the sweeping drama of immigration and Americanization involving three generations of Japanese Americans -- Issei, Nisei, Sansei -- has yet to be sung. And who better to sing it than Butterfly herself? Butterfly, who would forsake her ancestral faith and leave everything behind for a chance at a new life in America.

Prologue 1907

Three years after Pinkerton's ship first enters Nagasaki harbor and one year after the great San Francisco earthquake and fires, Pinkerton's ship docks in the Port of San Francisco. Pinkerton, Kate and the boy are waiting on deck to disembark. Butterfly, who was stowed below, has already gone ashore and is looking up at them. The boy sees her, breaks free of Pinkerton and Kate and runs to her arms. They walk off together into an unknown future while Pinkerton bemoans his fate—his lost son and Butterfly, his lost love.

Butterfly is thwarted by a customs officer, hurling racist taunts and threatening to deport her unless she can produce a husband (Gentleman's Agreement, 1907-8). She is saved Tak, a gentleman doing business at the port, who translates and buffers the officer's demands. Butterfly boldly proclaims that Tak is her husband. Struck by Butterfly's beauty and grace, and also moved by her plight, Tak tells the officer that Butterfly is his wife and that her half-breed boy, whom he names Akira, is his son. Although the officer is not fooled, he lets Butterfly and her son pass through customs.

Act I 1909

Scene 1. A lively commercial street in San Francisco's Japantown revealing the interior of Tak's print importing business. Church members, Akira's Sunday school teachers, Tak's sister, his business associates, and various and sundry friends and neighbors--in fine, the entire community--are celebrating the christening of Saki, Tak and Butterfly's daughter. The festivities wind down and Butterfly, dressed in beautiful kimono, quietly removes herself and changes into work clothes.

Scene 2 Butterfly is working as a domestic servant for the wealthy Floyds, where she learns to navigate the difficult and often treacherous terrain of white America, including feigning submissiveness and fending off sexual assault.

Act II 1942

The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor and America is preparing for war. The Japanese Americans on the West Coast have been forced from their homes and are being transported to internment camps. Butterfly and Tak, together with their children and grandchildren, assemble at Tak's place of business on the day of departure. Having been given scant notice, they are in a great rush to put their affairs in order. Tension erupts within the family and confusion abounds as they wrench themselves away, anticipating an unknown future and trying to make sense of what the United States is doing to them.

Act III 1942-45 Topaz Internment Camp, Delta, Utah

Scene 1 (1942) The scene opens with the allegiance crisis, in which internees were asked whether they are willing to serve on combat duty, swear unqualified allegiance to the U.S. and forswear all allegiance to Japan. Questions of loyalty, identity and faith surface in the intergenerational conflict between skeptic Tak and believer Akira, and in the complex character of Butterfly's persisting belief in America. The tension is temporarily relieved by the inclusion of a traditional Japanese celebration, the Bon Odori, followed by a nostalgic reverie in which Butterfly sheds her cares and imaginatively enacts a love scene with Pinkerton.

Scene 2 (1945) The war is over, the camp is shutting down and the family is preparing to return to the West Coast. There is great apprehension about the future. Tak refuses to leave: he would rather stay behind barbed wire with his own kind than re-enter a hostile white society. Akira, a half-breed whose outsider status prevents him from being wholly accepted either by the Japanese or by whites, has a stolen moment with Josephine, an African American woman, foreshadowing the passionate love he finally if fleetingly experiences in Act IV.

Scene 3. Two weeks later. Tak has died. Butterfly and Akira are finally leaving. Butterfly is holding Tak's ashes in a pine box as they exit the camp--a bitter farewell to Topaz.

Act IV 1945 Berkeley

Scene 1. The U.S. has dropped the bomb on Butterfly's native Nagasaki, ending the war. She comes home to find that much of what she and her family had worked for is gone: the house has been ransacked, the friendly white neighbors are gone and the new neighbors won't come out to greet her. Once again, she will be an immigrant facing the difficult prospect of resettling and integrating into American society.

Scene 2. Several days later. The house has been swept clean and Butterfly is sitting at a folding table piecing together her scrapbook. She shares happy memories with Akira and Josephine, who look on. They leave and Butterfly continues sorting through loose clippings, including headlines about the destruction of Nagasaki and the triumph of the U.S. over the hateful Japanese. Overcome with despair, she picks up the sword with which her father killed himself, then drops it and has an idyllic vision of Nagasaki in which she rejects both Pinkerton and America.

Scene 3. Akira and Josephine are alone in the front yard of the house, replanting Butterfly's garden. Akira tells of his loneliness and expresses his love for Josephine. They seize the moment and make passionate love, knowing that their relationship is condemned by race on both his side and hers.

Epilogue 1953

In 1952, an immigration and nationality act belatedly permits first-generation Asian Americans, the only group ever to have been denied citizenship on the basis of race alone, to become U.S. citizens. Butterfly is finally united with America, the wayward and still-difficult lover she left Japan in pursuit of forty-five years earlier. The following summer she is celebrating with family, friends and neighbors in the front yard of her freshly painted house. The scene is festive: an American flag hangs from a pole; a banner stretched across the front door reads: "Welcome Home Citizen Butterfly!" A man appears at the gate. No one but Akira knows who he is. Only when he presents Butterfly with the gift of a music box from Nagasaki does she recognize Pinkerton!