



SPECIAL EVENTS PICK OF THE WEEK

GILA RIVER

While bias against some minority groups seems to have waned, a recent national poll suggests that prejudice against Asian-Americans has increased. (Not convinced? After the U.S. spy-plane incident in China, a talk-radio host advocated putting Chinese-Americans into camps.) With that in mind, a play about anti-Asian discrimination has particular relevance right now. In its Los Angeles premiere, Lane Nishikawa's *Gila River* focuses on the ordeal of the Wakabayashis, a Japanese-American family interned on an Indian reservation in the Arizona desert during WWII. The heat and the dust are captured expertly by the script, as is the spirit of those who survived the camps. While one son is studying in Japan as war breaks out, another son chooses to fight in the Pacific, a decision that ends his dream of playing professional baseball. In developing *Gila River*, Nishikawa interviewed Japanese-Americans who were interned and Native Americans who worked in the camps. Though the drama focuses on the Wakabayashi family's ordeal, some of the most moving scenes are between the Japanese-American and Native American children. A shared love of baseball helps bridge the cultural gap. According to Nishikawa, the Pima-Maricopa Indians were extremely suspicious of the internees because they had been brought to the reservation by the government, so any friendship was hard-earned. Nishikawa, who also directs and performs with the ensemble, served as artistic director of San Francisco's acclaimed Asian American Theater Company. Though he's performed numerous times in the Southland, he may be best known for his solo show *I'm On a Mission From Buddha*, which he adapted for PBS. And what might account for the fresh upsurge in anti-Asian sentiment? "It's often fueled by global or economic downturns," Nishikawa says. "People forget that Asian-Americans couldn't own land, were routinely denied citizenship and were treated as foreigners who were less than human. Barriers won't fall until we embrace other cultures — an enterprise which live theater promotes in a way that often eludes film and TV." Japan America Theater, 244 S. San Pedro St., dwn.twn.; Thurs.-Sat., May 17-19, 8 p.m.; Sun., May 20, 2 p.m. (213) 680-3700. Special student perf. Wed., May 23, 2 p.m., as part of the "Fine Day for a Field Trip" series; call (213) 628-2725 for additional information.

—Sandra Ross

GILA RIVER

Japan America Theatre
Directed by Lane Nishikawa

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