



HALVING THE BONES

A film by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury
1995, 70 minutes, Color/BW 16 mm

Skeletons in the closet? *Halving The Bones* delivers a surprising twist to this tale. This cleverly-constructed film tells the story of Ruth, a half-Japanese filmmaker living in New York, who has inherited a can of bones that she keeps on a shelf in her closet. The bones are half of the remains of her dead Japanese grandmother, which she is supposed to deliver to her estranged mother. A narrative and visual web of family stories, home movies and documentary footage, *Halving The Bones* provides a spirited exploration of the meaning of family, history and memory, cultural identity and what it means to have been named after Babe Ruth.

- Sundance Film Festival
- International Documentary Association Award Nomination
- Montreal World Film Festival
- New York, San Francisco and Seattle Asian American Film Festivals
- Margaret Mead Film Festival

"An intensely personal and lyrical exploration of family history.
Beautifully shot, blending black-and- white and color images with music
to create a lilting, tranquil feeling "
Brian Lowry, *Variety*

"A wonderful new film...a rich exploration of what it means to be a
daughter and what it means to be of mixed blood."
Edward Guthmann, *San Francisco Chronicle*

A blithe, fresh, gentle look at identity, personal and ethnic.
This a Valentine of a film."
Sheila Benson, *Cinemanía Connection*

"Halving The Bones"

written, produced and directed by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury
October, 1995 , color /black & white, 70 minutes

Skeletons in the closet? **"Halving the Bones"** delivers a surprising twist to this tale. The film tells the story of Ruth, a half-Japanese filmmaker living in New York, who has inherited a can of bones that she keeps on a shelf in her closet. The bones are half of the remains of her dead Japanese grandmother; the rest are buried in a cemetery in Tokyo. In a narrative and visual web of family lies and stories, home movies and documentary footage, **"Halving the Bones"** traces one hundred years of Ruth's maternal family history, from Japan to Hawaii to a suburb in Connecticut.

On one hand, Ruth's quest is a simple one: to bring the bones of her grandmother home to her mother, who has become alienated from her family and her past. The film thus becomes a vehicle for the reuniting the three generations in more or less corporeal form. But Ruth, who is "half," has a problem with integrity, and nothing is quite as it seems. As the film unfolds, she leads us in an equivocal inquiry into the shifty nature of memory and the documentary genre itself.

The story is told in three parts. The first part is Ruth's "fantastic" trip through her family archives to tell the turn-of-the-century story of her grandmother's journey to Hawaii, as a picture bride, to marry an eccentric photographer and poet. In a humorous turn-around, Ruth introduces part two by debunking these fantastic stories as a product of her own cultural confusion. As she drives home to her mother's house with the bones, she constructs a wry yet compelling depiction of her alienation from her Japanese ancestry as a child growing up in Connecticut. The third section of the film is "pure" documentary. Ruth and her mother unpack a box of the grandmother's effects and in so doing, reopen a channel of communication that had been lost to them. Ruth's mother accepts the bones and, in a strangely moving climax, makes a decision about how best to set them to rest.

Like Ruth, her film is "half." Neither documentary nor fiction, it rides the edge between the two, searching for a more integrated way of imagining the world. In a zone it defines between genres, cultures and moral stances, the film raises questions. How do we reconstruct a history, be it national, cultural, or personal, from the often contradictory fragments that we inherit? What do we owe our histories, and what do they owe us? How do we, or how should we, deal with our dead? In the age of the nuclear family in a country like the United States, most of our families are insular and imported, and histories end with the death of the living. How do we remember the dead, revive them to augment our small, quick, fractured sense of self? **"Halving the Bones"** can be seen as a act of remembrance, of self-conscious mythopoeia.

About Ruth L. Ozeki

Ruth L. Ozeki was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, by an American father and a Japanese mother, both of whom taught at Yale University. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Smith College with degrees in English Literature and Asian Studies, then received a Japanese Ministry of Education fellowship and emigrated to Japan to do graduate work in classical Japanese literature at Nara Women's University. She worked in Kyoto's "water district" as a bar hostess, studied Noh performance and mask carving, and taught English at Kyoto University before realizing that none of these were viable long-term career options.

Ozeki returned to New York and began a film career as an art director for low-budget horror movies, making sets and props for films with names like *Robot Holocaust*, *Mutant Hunt*, *Breeders*, and *Necropolis*. She then switched to Japanese production work, trading blood and prosthetics for the more subtle horrors of network TV. After several years of coordinating and directing "documentary-style" television programs, she started making her own films. "Body of Correspondence," made in 1994, won the "New Visions" Award at the San Francisco Film Festival, and was screened at the Sundance Film Festival and on PBS. Her most recent film, "Halving the Bones" (1995), traced her mother's Japanese roots and offered an exotic portrait, partly factual and partly speculative, of her maternal grandparents and their lives in Hawaii. *Variety* described it as "an intensely personal and lyrical exploration of family history...*Roots* with a little *Joy Luck Club* thrown in," and it aired at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the 1996 Asian American Film Festival in San Francisco, the 1996 Sundance Film Festival, and many other venues, as well as being shown on PBS.

During an interview at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival, a journalist remarked, "So I suppose you've always dreamed of becoming a filmmaker?" to which Ozeki replied, "No, I've actually dreamed of becoming a novelist." That year, dead broke like her hero Jane, she started writing *My Year of Meats*. Ozeki says that she "was testing a hunch that even in literature, point of view, as we traditionally experience it, has been turned on its ear by MTV editing and multiple camera angles." She is very much interested in the cross-over between documentary and fiction, paralleling the subjective/objective shifts in voice that occur in her novel. "I have worked in commercial television long enough to know that these are somewhat specious distinctions," she says. "In order to 'work' in a visual medium, issues must be so radically edited and simplified as to belie complex truths, as though the introduction of images switches off the intellect. I wanted to make a book that could really exploit what a *book* could do: it could be full of complexity; it could shift points of view even while it talked about shifting points of view; it could transgress simple categories; and it could travel around the world and have a big cast and lots of interesting locations, without costing a fortune."

Currently Ruth is working on a second novel, and divides her time between New York City and an island off the coast of Vancouver, British Columbia.

VARIETY

90th ANNIVERSARY 1905-1995

THE INTERNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY ■ NOVEMBER 13-19, 1995

HALVING THE BONES

(DOCU)

An Ad Limina Pictures production. Produced, directed, written by Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury. Executive producer, Sara Diamond. Camera (color), Jim Fealy; additional camera, Lounsbury; editor, Spiro C. Lampros; sound, Jennifer S. Lewis. Reviewed at Hawaii Film Festival, Honolulu, Nov. 9, 1995. Running time: 70 MIN.

An intensely personal and lyrical exploration of family history, filmmaker Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's "Halving the Bones" delves into the lives of three generations of women through a mix of niftily shot recreations, photos and home movies. Lounsbury has produced for PBS, which, after whatever theatrical life it may possess, would be the logical destination for this engaging production.

Half Japanese, half Caucasian, Lounsbury uses the death of her grandmother and the woman's cremation to do her own version of "Roots," with a little "Joy Luck Club" thrown in, albeit on a much diminished level.

Presented with some of her grandmother's bones as a memento, Lounsbury recounts the grandmother's history — leaving Japan as a teenager for an arranged marriage in Hawaii — leading into the

birth and life of her mother as well as her own feelings about growing up of mixed lineage.

Intriguingly, however, Lounsbury goes beyond the family stories to debunk them, suggesting that her grandmother — a photographer's assistant, who tinted pictures for a living — may have brought the same shading technique to reflections on her own life.

Similarly, through interviews with her mother, Masako, she finds a woman who lives for the here and now, unlike her daughter, who's compelled to rummage through the past. In addition to disarming humor, then, there's even some suspense as to how the mother will react to receiving her own mother's bones, which Ruth (who attended the funeral in Japan, which her mother did not) has kept in her closet for five years, unsure what to do with them.

Beautifully shot by Jim Fealy (who has worked on commercials as well as the feature "The Doom Generation") and Lounsbury, pic blends black-and-white and color images with music to create a lilting, tranquil feeling while using newsreel footage and other devices to explore the Japanese-American experience, from World War II internment to assimilation.

Whatever the cultural nuances, though, the best thing one can say about "Halving the Bones" is that it's the sort of personal document that everyone, regardless of their background, would probably like to have.

—Brian Lowry

DAILY NEWS

50c

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Friday, July 19, 1996

■ **ASIAN AMERICAN FILM FESTIVAL** — Florence Gould Hall this weekend and July 25-28 — Now in its 19th year, the Asian American International Film Festival opens tonight at the Florence Gould Hall at 55 E. 59th St. The lineup is terrific, beginning with the New York premiere of a martial arts adventure from Hong Kong master Tsui Hark ("The Blade," at 9 tonight), and concluding on July 28 with the complete 188-minute version of Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton's stirring documentary on the Tiananmen Square uprising, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace." Tomorrow at 7 p.m., Yoshifumi Hosoya's "Sleepy Heads" brings together a full catalogue of Japanese emigrants — including a student, a singer, a would-be samurai and an East Village druggie — for a comic look at the varieties of Japanese experience in New York. Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's "Halving the Bones," screening on Sunday at 7:30, is a beautifully made, highly personal documentary about Lounsbury's attempts to break through to her distant, self-contained mother, a Japanese woman married to a Connecticut businessman. "Mee Pok Man," screening July 27 at 5 p.m., is an ambitious existential drama from Singapore about a feeble-minded fast-food cook. The equally ambitious "Lulu," from Canadian director Srinivas Krishna, considers political exile as a spiritual state through the figure of a Vietnamese refugee who has become the mail-order bride of a Toronto man. For sheer pleasure, it would be hard to beat Ann Hui's Hong Kong comedy-drama "Summer Snow," showing at 7 on the festival's closing night. For a complete schedule, call (212) 925-8685.

— Dave Kehr



OZEKI: Search for Roots

BY JOHN O'HARA/THE CHRONICLE

Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury explores her roots in the documentary 'Halving the Bones,' showing at the Asian American International Film Festival

Sifting the Ashes for a Legacy

Film maker traces Japanese lineage

BY EDWARD GUTHMANN

Chronicle Staff Writer

In Japan, when a person is cremated, the body isn't reduced to ashes, as it is in the United States, but instead to a collection of bones. And so, when film maker Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury went to a bleak Tokyo suburb to collect her Japanese grandmother's remains, she found a fragment of skull, a bit of rib and another unidentified bone.

In her wonderful new film "Halving the Bones," which plays tonight at the

'HALVING THE BONES'

"Halving the Bones" plays at 7:30 tonight at the Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Avenue, Berkeley, and at 7:30 p.m. tomorrow at the Kabuki in San Francisco, as part of the Asian American International Film Festival. Lounsbury will appear at both screenings. Call (415) 863-0814.

Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley and tomorrow at the Kabuki, Lounsbury turns those bones into a metaphor for family legacy and memory, and offers a rich exploration of what it means to be a daughter and what it means to be of mixed blood.

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disturbed at how my mother and I had gotten out of touch. So I thought, since I'm such a workaholic and the only thing I pay attention to is what I'm working on, the best thing I could do is make my mother the center of my work ... give her a chance to see what it is that I do."

Exotic Portrait

In "Halving the Bones," which showed in January in the Sundance Film Festival's documentary competition, Lounsbury traces her mother's Japanese roots and constructs an exotic portrait, partly factual and partly speculative, of her maternal grandparents and their lives in Hawaii.

She says she barely knew her grandmother, who had been sent from Japan to Hilo, Hawaii, as a "picture bride" in 1909, and had met her grandfather, a gifted photographer, calligrapher and haiku poet who spent four years in a Japanese American internment camp in New Mexico, only once before he died.

In her grandfather, Lounsbury found a soul mate who shared her artistic sensibility and passion for record-keeping. "I spend a lot of time poking around in the past or imagining the future," she says in her narration, adding that her mother, a straightforward pragmatist, "lives entirely in the present."

When Lounsbury's grandmother died, in fact, her mother didn't go to the funeral in Japan but sent Ruth in her place. "Over the years," Lounsbury says, "she had forgotten what it was to be a daughter. I didn't want that to happen to me. That's why I gave her the bones."

By presenting her grandmother's bones to her mother — an event that became the centerpiece of "Halving the Bones" — Lounsbury established a bond with her mother and retrieved a sense of family that assimilation and geographical distance had buried.

"So much gets discarded and forgotten in a lifetime," Lounsbury says in the film. "I think family relationships are like family stories: You have to practice them to

It's that conviction, combined with her grandfather's legacy, that made Lounsbury turn to documentary film making. "I think a lot of documentarians are closet archivists," she says. "We want to fix it, hold it in place; we want to preserve it."

Asked what she learned about her mother while making the film, Lounsbury thinks for a long time, and says finally, "I learned who she was. I had left home at 14 so in some way, during that interim period, she had retained the quality of a 14-year-old's mother — which is very different from the person she is now.

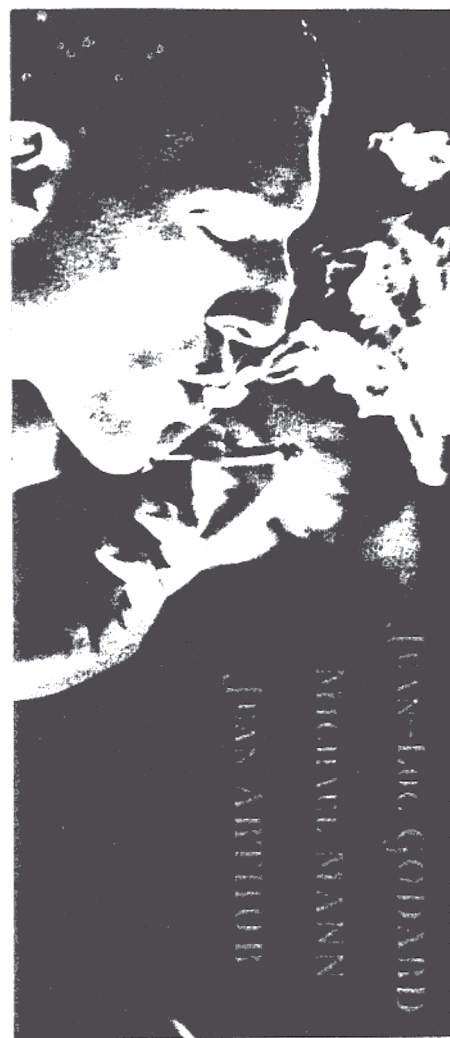
"So to know her as an adult was really stunning, a remarkable experience. I never knew she was funny — it never occurred to me as a child. Also, I didn't grow up speaking Japanese, and now that I do I've found there's a very different side [of my mother] that's accessible in Japanese that's not accessible in English."

Meaning of 'Half'

In a sense, Lounsbury's life has been, and will remain, an exploration of what it means to be "half," to never fully belong anywhere.

"One of the things about being 'half,'" she says, "is always objectifying the other side. You have a very voyeuristic relationship with yourself that's embedded inside you. The two sides are constantly watching each other."

That dichotomy, she adds, is particularly complicated when you're half-Japanese. "You grow up with the idea that World War II — with the occupation and the postwar environment — is part of your genetic inheritance. One of the things I encountered in Japan was people thinking I was the daughter of a prostitute and a GI. There's all this history you carry around with yourself, even though you didn't experience it firsthand."



SUNDOCS By Rachel Rosen

IS IT THE PRESSURE of funding constraints, or could there be such a thing as appropriation anxiety? Narrative filmmakers of all persuasions—Abbas Kiarostami, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Stanley Kwan, Oliver Stone, and the lesser-known directors of indie efforts like this year's Sundance offerings *Dadetown* and *American Job*, to name but a few—are experimenting in every imaginable way with documentary, growing strange and fascinating hybrids. Yet judging by the docs in the '96 Sundance competition, nonfiction filmmaking may be retreating back into the hard, proven shell of conventional styles. Many in the crop were beautifully photographed, well crafted, and genial—if not particularly daring or provocative.

Among the standouts, both good and bad, were: *Buckminster Fuller: Thinking Out Loud*, a freewheeling biopic of the unorthodox man of ideas best

known for his geodesic domes, recounted with the warm spirit of an affectionately bemused gathering of friends; the 21-years-in-the-making *When We Were Kings*, a chronicle of the '74 Ali-Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle" in Zaire that is a valentine to Muhammad Ali as an athlete and political figure; and the misguided *The Battle Over Citizen Kane*, which attempts to corset history into a false dramatic construction by positing the making of the revered classic as nothing more or less than the real heavyweight bout of the century, between filmmaker Orson Welles and Kane-inspiration W.R. Hearst.

It all turned out right in the end with *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern* landing both the Jury and Audience prizes, a vote of confidence for the enduring popularity and strength of the personal documentary. Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan's chronicle of a crisis on Jordan's family's farm in southwest Iowa plays, in her words, like "a Reader's Digest condensed version of the farm crisis." The auction at which her parents gamble the sale of their possessions to save their land is the dramatic center of the film, but it is far from a straightforward recounting of a battle for survival. With highly (sometimes overly) crafted first-person narration delivered in a familiar chatty tone, Jordan stitches together facts, corrections of misconceptions about modern farm life, colorful family anecdotes, and comparisons to Hollywood Westerns. The last are especially evocative in the case of her pokerfaced father Russel; the boisterous start of the cattle drive in Howard Hawks's *Red River* is set against a shot of him astride a tractor, wrangling a lone cow onto a truck. Even while it has some trouble tying up all its threads, *Troublesome Creek* manages the difficult task of balancing the personal and the universal, succeeding as both a vivid illustration of harsh economic realities and a lovingly sewn memory quilt.

Family and memory recur, along with ethnicity, in another of the more stylistically adventurous entries, Ruth Ozeki Loundsbury's *Halving the Bones*. The film is an exploration of its maker's matriarchal line—three generations of women who have all, in some way, been alienated from their Japanese culture, and sometimes from each other. Loundsbury's grandmother made her living hand-tinting photographs, and

Halving the Bones boldly attempts similar techniques to color its version of history. Fake family movies substitute for real ones confiscated after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, family pictures are intercut with anti-Japanese propaganda films, and voiceover narration is delivered in a mock-accented voice. The inclusion of the filmmaker's pragmatic mother adds balancing perspective to the self-examination and flights of fancy in this modest but artfully executed family offering.

The most controversial film of the competition, and arguably the most difficult to watch, was Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, the story of a hate-filled murder trial that quickly becomes a witch hunt. On May 6, 1993, the naked, hogtied corpses of three young boys were discovered in a creek in West Memphis, Arkansas. Based on their penchant for black T-shirts and Metallica, three teenagers were brought in for questioning and, after a grueling interrogation by police convinced of their guilt, charged with the crimes. The team that brought you the fest's 1992 Audience award-winning *Brother's Keeper* again use lurid subject matter (murder! sexual mutilation! satanic worship!) to create a devastating portrait of how the justice system treats square pegs, and how societal pressures play on the legal process.

The filmmakers walk a tightrope, attempting to put across their point of view without narration or overt comment. The most uncomfortable moments arise from the depiction of subjects who are not intelligent, articulate, or media-savvy. (Informed consent, anyone?) Parents of the victims spew forth shocking amounts of hatred that their religious and support groups can't begin to quell, and the filmmakers judge, if not encourage, them. But *Paradise Lost* is more than a geek-show; it captures thought-provoking moments with serious implications. On the basis of what is shown of the trial, the verdict seems unimaginable, and I found myself in the strange position of hoping that Berlinger and Sinofsky heavily weighted the evidence to make their point. But, just in case, festivalgoers may want to add some pastel to their wardrobes.

The Strategies behind Mock Docs

THIS PAST FALL THE MARGARET Mead Film Festival marked two historic occasions: the 20th anniversary of the documentary festival, and the introduction of a special sidebar featuring documentary parodies, fake documentaries, and invented biographies and autobiographies. Originally dedicated to films and videos that explore cultural traditions and diasporas, crosscultural conflicts, and human rights issues, the Mead festival now also celebrates a subversive subgenre that has blossomed of late and challenges the basic notion of documentary-as-truth.

"This kind of genre seems to be flourishing cross-culturally as mediamakers internationally are beginning to experiment with these blurred genres," notes Elaine Charnov, organizer of the festival. "Because it was the twentieth anniversary, I wanted to program work that would be reflexive about the documentary film. This genre is one

"I'm trying to create a Frankenstein. And I want to let the seams show. But that doesn't lessen his power."

— Marlon Fuentes

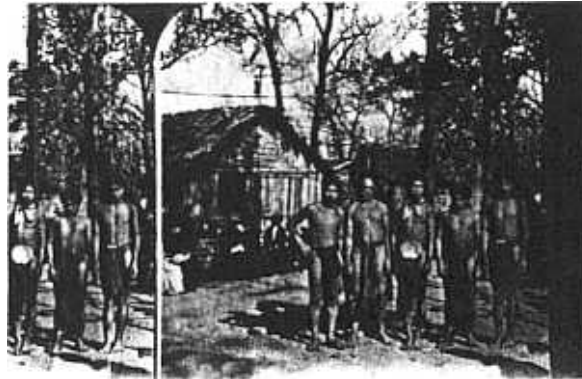
of the more spirited ways to look at how we come to understand this thing called 'reality.'"

These films are the latest in a genre with a long history. As

pointed out by anthropology professor Faye Ginsburg during the festival's symposium "Sometimes You Have to Lie to Tell the Truth," one can trace this genre all the way back to the recreations of Robert Flaherty (who said the symposium's title when asked about the staged scenes in *Nanook of the North*) and Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters*.

Some precedents were resurrected at the Mead festival. There was Jim McBride's 1973 classic *David Holzman's Diary*, a mock verité diary that covers a few days in the life of an earnest young filmmaker whose girlfriend has just left him because of his incessant filming. Unlike documentary parodies, it never gives the audience any clue about its "fakeness." At the time of its release, *David Holzman's Diary* was a response to the pitfalls of cinema verité. "There was this false glee that if you pointed a camera at anything, the truth would come out," says McBride. "I became interested in this myth, because filmmakers seriously alter the realities they are capturing. For me, the film is really an aesthetic version of the Heisenberg Principle."

Also in the line-up was the late Peter Adair's *Some of These Stories*



Marlon Fuentes's fake yet profound narrative, *Bontoc Eulogy*, follows his Filipino grandfather, one of the 1,100 tribal natives displayed as anthropological specimens at the 1904 World's Fair.

Courtesy American Museum of Natural History

Are True (1981). Shot in the talking-heads style used by many oral history documentaries during the seventies and eighties, Adair's film includes long anecdotes from five people about significant moments in their lives. As the title indicates, some of their stories are true; some are not. In the process of viewing, the audience must decide how important veracity is to them; does it change how they feel about the tale or the teller?

As symposium moderator Jay Ruby noted, such films "try to disabuse audiences of the idea that all images are true; they remind us that images are constructed." He stressed that this tradition

is really as old as any prototype of electronic media and that these films play on "the need to believe" that audiences demonstrate in seemingly irrational ways.

In efforts to rewrite history or oppose a history of domination, a few provocative films featured at the festival employed what filmmaker Marlon Fuentes calls a "dichotic" viewing style—employing irony and parody to emphasize the artificial and constructed nature of filmmaking, so the audience's attention shifts back and forth between the narrative and the process of storytelling. The most blatant cases disassociate themselves completely from the concept of an essential truth. Their real interests revolve around issues of construction and purpose, the process of filmmaking, and the mixing of techniques. Specifically, Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy*, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's *Halving the Bones*, and Shashwati Talukdar's *My Life as a Poster* have a parallel interest in addressing the Western gaze. They are successful because the films' structures are premised on the model of personal storytelling and the use of an extreme subjectivity. The personal nature of these films allows the filmmakers to tell the story the way they see it

IN HALVING THE BONES, RUTH OZEKI LOUNSBURY'S STRATEGY IS TO create an illusion that makes the audience complicit in a fantasy about family history and cultural confusion. Lounsbury tells the story of inheriting her Japanese grandmother's bones. As the filmmaker gets ready to deliver the bones to her mother, Lounsbury relates her grandmother's history, told with the help of home movies of the young Japanese bride in Hawaii. But these home movies are all faked. "My cameraman, Jim Healy, pretended to be my grandfather lurking in the palms with a new camera and a brand new wife. And my grandmother in the diaphanous dress is in fact me," the director says. (Healy had shot the Calvin Klein ads of Kate Moss and Christy Turlington in

Seeing Double

BY ERIKA MUHAMMAD

diaphanous underwear, to which this black-and-white footage bears some resemblance.) Lounsbury tweaked the color and popped the soundtrack to make the film appear more “real.” But at the same time, she gave them French titles that subtly reveal their faux texture.

“I took enormous poetic license with the grandfather’s home movies,” she recalls. “At the end of the scene, I use a little rock music, which is really pushing the concept of archival footage. This whole scene of my grandfather’s home movies feels very contemporary, but at the same time you’re buying it as being authentic.” At least, most

people do. “My mom said that my grandmother would never have run around in underwear like that,” she notes with a laugh. But even aside from that, the filmmaker felt she had left enough clues to tip off a knowing audience. Instead, what she discovered is that when you include enough gratuitous detail, people actually start buying your story. “The French titling sequence is what actually convinces a lot of people that the film is real. I didn’t expect that at all.”

Lounsbury also fakes various voiceovers, such as the Japanese-accented narrator who introduces the “Ruth” character. (Though a personal documentary, Lounsbury thinks of herself as a character in the film, and distinguishes between her screen presence and herself.) A quarter of the way into the film, Lounsbury confesses to her audience that much of the material is made up: the home movies, the accented voice-over (it’s Lounsbury), even her grandmother’s diary. She is no longer a reliable narrator. It’s a daring confession, for she risks alienating her audience. The director is quick to say that she is not out to manipulate spectators. “It’s an inclusive, not an exclusive act,” she explains. “You have to constantly treat the audience as your best friend. You are going to play a trick on them because you love them so much.”

More important, she wants them to take part in her fantasy about her grandmother. A native of Connecticut, Lounsbury admits she grew up exoticizing her Japanese relatives. “So in the first twenty minutes, I create a world of my subjective fantasy, but in a way the audience has to experience and believe it with me. They’re complicit in a cultural confusion.

“My mother is Japanese and my father is an anthropologist, so the issue of recollection is built into my genetic code. I think I practice ethnography on myself, so the voyeurism is actually internalized.”

— Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury



When telling the story of inheriting her Japanese grandmother’s bones in *Halving the Bones*, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury makes the audience complicit in her cultural confusion.

Courtesy filmmaker

“Here in North America, most of us come from other places,” she comments. “This was not something unique in my case; this was something I felt an audience could understand. I’m half. My mother is Japanese and my father is an anthropologist, so the issue of recollection is built into my genetic code. I’m used to examining myself. In fact, I think I practice ethnography on myself, so the voyeurism is actually internalized. What I tried to do is use the metaphor of half, of fractured history, to talk about what I think

is at the core of fake documentary, which is the use of various types of consciousness splitting and fracturing to create a larger type of truth.”

The shifting subjectivities of *Halving the Bones* are also reflected in the various narrators. There’s the Japanese voiceover, then Lounsbury takes over and starts talking about her grandmother. Then her mother comes in and talks about Lounsbury and the grandmother. It’s the first time in the film someone speaks directly to the camera in sync sound. “Mom saves the day,” Lounsbury says. “This is where the ‘real’ documentary starts.” But it’s no more valid than the recreated parts. “There are lots of points of view shifting throughout the film. I’m probably in violation of every cinematic rule in the book, but what I’m doing is insisting on the fundamental subjectivity of the world I’m trying to create.”

A “FAKE” NARRATIVE ABOUT THE FILMMAKER’S ATTEMPT to learn about the history of his Filipino grandfather, Marlon Fuentes’s *Bontoc Eulogy* offers a postmodern critique of colonialism. *Bontoc Eulogy* (which is included in the upcoming ITVS series *American Independents*, on air this month and next) unfolds through the perspective of two characters: the narrator, a Filipino immigrant, and his grandfather, Markod, an Igorot warrior on display at the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904. The film traces the grandfather’s tribal days in the Philippines; how he and his peers were convinced to come to America and rebuild their village as a way of educating others about their lives; and the rude awakening in St. Louis, where they’re virtually held captive with 1,100 tribal natives displayed as anthropological specimens at the World’s Fair.

Using all his resources as a researcher to track down traces of this past, the filmmaker comes up with a variety of archival stills and movie

FILMMAKER™

WINTER 1996

Five years after her Japanese grandmother Matsuye's death, Ruth Ozaki Lounsbury still has three of her bones — ceremonially handpicked with chopsticks from her cremated remains — in a closet in her New York apartment.

Ruth's "tough and pragmatic" mother, Masaka, who had not made the trip to Japan for the funeral because "it was bad timing," had never inquired about the bones in the years that followed and this troubles Ruth, who suspects that she too might have some skeletons in her closet. "Now Ruth has decided," intones an omniscient Japanese voice, "Something must be done about the bones."

This confrontation, which forms the core of Ruth Lounsbury's feature-length documentary *Having the Bones*, is tinged with mystery: Ruth, after all, will never understand her Japanese-born mother — now a Connecticut housewife with a Ph.D. from Yale whose desire to live "only in the present" may belie a guarded

family history — nor can she ever fully recover the past — only piece it together from the fragments of letters and photos that remain. As Masaka cautions Ruth, "I don't think we can talk with accuracy about memory. I think, without realizing it, you want to color it."

Ruth obviously realizes this; *Having the Bones* questions documentary conventions even as it deploys them, and Lounsbury dramatizes historical events and invents archival material as it suits her needs.

Nevertheless, the bonds with her mother, whose cultural displacement she realizes, mirrors if not amplifies her own. (Ruth's Japanese relatives, we informed, can't even pronounce her name.)

Having the Bones resonates with a desire to bridge personal and cultural histories in order to come to terms with the present. The film, however, gives short shrift to the men in Lounsbury's family, suggesting that she may yet have another bone to pick. ▼

—Stephen Gallagher





Tiananmen epic: "The Gate of Heavenly Peace"

Asian film in transition

Expanded bill, eclectic topics at S.F. festival mirror tremendous changes in dynamic region

By Barry Walters
EXAMINER STAFF CRITIC

THIS YEAR'S San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival is the largest, most ambitious and perhaps most varied array of films in the festival's 14-year history. More than 110 films and videos from 16 countries will be presented Thursday through March 14 by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association at the AMC Kabuki 8 Theatres in The City and at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley.

As Festival Co-directors Corey Tong and Paul Yi point out in their program notes, this year's selection of films reflects Asia's current state of tremendous economic and cultural change. Films will be shown that couldn't have been made years ago, stories will be heard that would have gone untold until now. Like Asia itself, this year's festival combines both tradition and transition, despair and hope, as well as the inevitable growing pains.

These themes are borne out by "Cyclo," the prize-winning Vietnamese film that kicks off Thursday's opening night gala. Directed by Tran Anh Hung ("The Scent of Green Papaya"), this naturalistic but highly po-

◆ ASIAN from C-1

Asian film in transition

etic drama tells the story of contemporary Ho Chi Minh City as it focuses on the hardships of a bicycle rickshaw driver and his family. Through an unfortunate chain of events, the hard-working young driver and his striking sister are drawn into a downward spiral of lawlessness and desperation. Capturing the beauty and squalor of a city caught between the battle of old and new, Tran examines Vietnam in a manner far divorced from the mythology of Hollywood.

The closing night film looks at another chain of events in a different quintessential Asian city — Beijing. "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" is an epic documentary centered on the 1989 demonstrations of Tiananmen Square that manages to clearly and precisely encompass the history of Chinese student protest. Filmmakers Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon offer a staggering array of archival footage, newscasts, testimonials and political analysis from countless perspectives. The film is more than three hours long, but the event demands this degree of depth.

Between these two films are a week's worth of stories and images. "Having the Bones" is a documentary on a much smaller and far more personal scale. American filmmaker Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury weaves an intricate family history around the bones of her grandmother kept in a tea tin. Combining imagined home movies, true stories, tall tales and her own playful nature, Lounsbury breaks the rules of documentary filmmaking and is all the better for it.

Far more ambitious is a trilogy of films reflecting Taiwan's mod-

ern history. Master director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's work is celebrated in "A City of Sadness," "The Puppetmaster" and "Good Men, Good Women." These austere attractive films convey the cultural diversity of a land that has endured centuries of colonization. Relying on long shots that often last for several minutes, Hou maintains a contemplative mood that beckons the viewer to think as well as feel.

This year also offers a wealth of films that examine Asian gay life. "Like Grains of Sand" is Japanese director Ryosuke Hashiguchi's understated feature about a high-school senior's crush on his best friend and consequential coming out. Jo-Fei Chen creates the American drama "Where Is My Love?" which examines a young writer's dilemma about disclosing his gayness in his work. "Broken Branches" chronicles three generations of post-war Korea. "Beautiful Mystery" is the rarely seen 1993 Japanese feature based on the notorious suicide of author Mishima Yukio.

The experimental side of gay Asian filmmaking is also on display. "Heaven-6-Box" is an impressionistic documentary of Kochi, a town in Shikoku where avant-garde director Hiroyuki Oki lives. American filmmaker Quentin Lee's "Flow" binds together five short films to create a stylistically diverse mockumentary. Three programs of video shorts, "Queer Boys Forever," "Coming Out, Coming Home" and the lesbian collection (including some film) "It Ain't Easy Being Pretty" gather together youthful perspectives.

With plenty more documentaries, features, children's films, personal appearances and parties, the 14th San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival promises something for everyone.

For ticket information, call (415) 252-4800.

SAN FRANCISCO
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Halving the Bones

Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury

Women Make Movies

70 minutes

Color/BW

The press release on **Halving the Bones** describes the film as a "spirited exploration of the meaning of family, history and memory, cultural identity..." Yeah, right. Personally, the description in no way even begins to scratch the surface of this deeply moving and somewhat disturbing film about family, and the effects of being "different."

The primary character and filmmaker, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, explores her existence while contemplating the fate of a tea can full of her grandmother's bones. The film might for some viewers simply present a woman who is confused about her cultural identity due to being the product of a mother of Japanese ancestry and a father who is "all-American."

Watching the film, I was profoundly affected by the similarities -- being half-Japanese, half-Caucasian, raised by a mother whose means of communicating were identical to those of Lounsbury's mother. Listening to the dialogue of being "different" and coming to terms with a culture that I, too, had chosen to alienate until late in my teens had a disturbing effect.

During the film, the viewer explores the past, present and future of a a life full of cultural clashes, inherent dichotomies and beautifully shot, if not sometimes surreal, images of the filmmaker's ideological past of her ancestors. It also explores being the "half" daughter of a cancer (no, not the astrological sign) and coming to terms with one's mother and her culture -- a mother who may or may not even want to be understood.

This film also explores some of the reasons for this alienation and the strong desire to seek assimilation -- World War II, concentration camps, carrying the awful label of "Made In Japan."

Halving the Bones is a movie for anyone of any culture and any background that has any sort of personal documentary within themselves.

Submitted to the VFF/i_LINE '96 Sundance Indie Report via e-mail by Kathy Eckel, Park City Record Guest Writer. Reprinted by permission from the Park Record.
