

BEHIND THE SCENES

# Living History

## SANTA BARBARA TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION CELEBRATES ASIAN-AMERICAN CINEMA

By Brett Leigh Dicks, News-Press Correspondent



Above and below, "Somewhere Between" is screened at the Alhecama Theatre.



Asian-American History Committee board member, Paul Mori, visits with members of the audience, as they enter the screening.



Asian-American History Committee board members, Karen Schultz Anderson and Juliet Velarde Betita, greet members of the audience at the Alhecama Theatre.

Successions of cultures have called Santa Barbara home, a condition about which the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation is well aware.

From the Native American community, who have long called the region home, to Spanish, Mexican, Euro-American, Chinese and Japanese immigrants, Santa Barbara incorporates a rich cultural tapestry. And El Presidio de Santa Barbara State Historic Park has been at the heart of it.

Along with the role the Presidio played in the occupation of New Spain, the neighborhood also boasts a considerable legacy in terms of Asian-American settlement. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the area in and around the Santa Barbara Presidio included communities of Chinese and Japanese residing in what was a unique and culturally rich part of Santa Barbara.

While all that might physically remain of this legacy is the ornate Jimmy's Oriental Gardens property, which the SBTHP purchased in March of 2007, it is a heritage the organization is intent on keeping at the fore.

"In the area that the Trust interprets, which we call the Presidio neighborhood, there were Chinese and Japanese who occupied the area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," explained Anne Petersen, associate director of historical resources for the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation. "Our interpretative mission is to share all the layers of history within the neighborhood with the public, and we're inherently interested in those ethnic groups and their occupation of this site."

The Asian history of the Presidio neighborhood dates back to the arrival of the first Chinese in the 1860s and their settlement in downtown Santa Barbara.

The community quickly transformed the block of Canon Perdido between State and Anacapa streets into what is now referred to as 'old Chinatown.' The neighborhood featured an array of Chinese-operated businesses and boarding houses on both sides of the street, centered around a community joss house.

"It was a very active population," Ms. Petersen said. "There were a lot of fishing-related businesses, as the Chinese community was heavily involved in abalone fishing out on the islands. There were warehouses and a school. They did gardening and sold their produce and had laundries that serviced the whole community. There were also a lot of Chinese who lived on local ranches doing agricultural work."

After the 1925 earthquake, the block was redeveloped, and by 1928, old Chinatown had all but disappeared. Elmer Whitaker had purchased a portion of the old Presidio and set about re-establishing Chinatown in the block on Canon Perdido between Anacapa and Santa Barbara streets. After convincing Jimmy Chong to relocate his restaurant, Jimmy's Oriental Gardens, that endeavor resulted in the Whitaker building.

The Japanese came to Santa Barbara in the early twentieth century and settled on the north side of 'new Chinatown.' Their community consisted of markets, barbershops, boarding houses, billiard halls and churches. The neighborhood, which also branched halfway along both the 900 and 800 blocks of Anacapa Street, was home to several hundred residents of Japanese descent.

The significant Asian-cultural heritage of Santa Barbara led to the SBTHP forming their Asian-American History Committee, a sub-committee of the organization's board, which comprises members of Chinese, Japanese and Philippine descent. The committee is charged with honoring Santa Barbara's Asian history through a range of programs.

"Acquiring Jimmy's was really a flashpoint for giving us a physical place relating to Santa Barbara's Asian-American his-



Nik Blaskovich/News-Press photos

Deborah Cristobal, of the Asian-American History Committee Board, introduces the screening of "Somewhere Between" at the Alhecama Theatre.

tory," Ms. Petersen said. "It's fed a lot of new programming. And trying to do more surrounding those communities and the Asian-American History Committee is one of the Trust's most active committees."

An event that the SBTHP's Asian-American History Committee is in the midst of presenting is "Sharing Our Common Ground," the fourth annual Asian-American Film Series. The series got underway last Friday night with a screening of Linda Goldstein Knowlton's 2011 documentary, "Somewhere Between," at the Alhecama Theatre. The series continues tonight with "I am Bruce Lee," before concluding next Friday with "The Cats of Mirikitani."

The series was introduced in 2010 as a means of portraying an authentic Asian-American point of view through cinema using Asian-American characters and communities.

"We started off with films from just the West Coast and now that we're on our fourth, we thought that was kind of limiting," explained Karen Anderson, director of education for the SBTHP. "So while we still look for films set here on the West Coast, we have enlarged the focus of the series and expanded across the United States."

Through the use of film, the SBTHP is seeking to not only bring to the fore the Asian-American history of Santa Barbara, but also highlight issues that the community has and continues to face.

"We want to tie in this chapter of the Presidio neighborhood's history with larger, cultural issues," Ms. Anderson said. "And those issues are not just Chinese-American or Japanese-American issues, they're really immigrant issues. So we try to select films that make people think."

"For example, we have one film that talks about Chinese-American adoption. There is another film that talks about the iconic Bruce Lee, and that film talks about Bruce Lee as a Chinese-American actor and what he faced and had to overcome. The third film is about an artist who tells his story through his artwork and what it was like to be a Japanese-American during World War II."

The series takes place at the Alhecama Theatre, another building under the control of the SBTHP that also has been the recent home of the Ensemble Theatre. The Asian-American History Committee, who selected and is presenting the films, comprises a ten-member panel that also organizes the annual Presidio Pastimes each October.

"We don't see history as something old and dusty that you have to march fourth-grade students through as a rite of passage," Ms. Petersen said. "It is something that is connected to everybody's daily lives, and it's a way to understand your place in your community, and to connect with others to understand the backgrounds and lifestyles of friends and neighbors."

"So the Trust does a lot of cultural programs that have a historical component, but we bring these cultures to life. We want to perpetuate them and give them a space to thrive."