

# Dancing on the Moon: Jill Togawa

By Alexis Arrow

Almost eleven years ago Jill Togawa had reached a turning point. She had been a dancer most of her life, trained in ballet and modern dance, but Western style dance no longer spoke to her soul or person. She felt passionately that dance can encourage social change and overcome differences based on race, gender, occupation and sexual preference.

To explore this possibility, she moved to San Francisco, where she found acceptance in the gay and lesbian community and comfort in the diversity of the city. Though encouraged by the supportive environment, she discovered very few dance organizations that particularly addressed the experiences of women who, like herself, were lesbians and women of color. So she founded Purple Moon Dance Project, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization dedicated to developing a greater appreciation of American cultural diversity, especially for GLBT women of color, through the medium of dance.

In pursuing her dreams, Togawa had to take risks. "Dance, in the past, was not a broad, diverse experience, but if I wanted to dance, then it was a matter of working with others who shared my vision," she says. "There is no road map for this process. I am the kind of person who is always asking: 'Why does it have to be that way? How could it be done better?'"

Togawa, a Hawaiian-born Yonsei, feels fortunate that her mother sent her to an elementary school run by the University of Hawai'i which reflected Honolulu's diversity.

"I have always had an appreciation and awareness for differences. I was encouraged to be independent. These were good values—I was not intimidated by or afraid of life," she says.

This self-confidence served her well when she was in college and having trouble deciding what to do with her life. "I went to hear a yogi speak and the message I heard was, 'Make a choice. It really doesn't matter. You will learn about life if you wish to. You will not miss out.' So I chose dance—and I have certainly not missed out."

Early in her career, she danced and taught in New York with the companies of Martha Graham and Jose Limón. Later, she moved to

Oklahoma with a friend who was a university teacher. "I wanted the exposure to Native American culture and this would probably be the only time I would get to Oklahoma," she recalls. The next step was to enlarge her body of work by studying Japanese, Indonesian and Hawaiian dance. Honolulu remained her retreat, a place to reconnect with her roots and her family.

After moving to San Francisco, she worked with the Asian American Dance Collective, which included many people of color but only one lesbian—Togawa. She worked with gay and lesbian choreographers at the Gay Olympics, but she was one of only two people of color in the group.

"I felt outside the Japanese American community because I am an artist and lesbian," she says. "On the mainland, I felt an outsider because I am from



Hawai'i, and on Hawai'i I felt an outsider because I live on the mainland. I felt outside the lesbian community because I am a woman of color, and outside the dance community because I am both. I wanted all these circumstances to mean something."

Purple Moon's first performance in 1992 was by, about and for women. Togawa intended it to be Purple Moon's only performance, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. Gail de Rita, of *lesbian uprisings!* said: "It's monumentally important to build and devise a world of our own, to express our love for each other without qualification, without embarrassment, without censure. Jill and the troupe did this with courage and commitment."

Togawa always is looking for a broader vision of how to communicate within her community. "Over the years I wanted to express the bond and intimacy between women—women who love women, women giving birth, in friendships, raising children and dealing with death through dance," she says. She has offered health and education programs to lesbians over 50, worked with non-profit groups such as Women and Children's Family Services and API Wellness Through Movement, and presents opportunities for women to tell their stories.

"Our focus in 2003 will be moving back to my heritage, to what we are calling The Floating Lantern Project," she says. "I hope it will be a recurring public event based on the Japanese obon festival. This brings me back to my tradition and more into the Japanese community. Because of the broadness of Purple Moon it might seem like I lack interest in the Japanese community, but that is not so.

"This work emerges from a personal place, expressed in a way that is transforming because of self-knowledge. As I step myself in my tradition it will make room for each person to honor their own tradition, to honor their own lives, to honor women living with cancer and individuals living with HIV. Living with the fact that people are going to die can be depressing but you can grow from the experience. It also speaks to the future and the hope, the potential for people to heal," Togawa declares.

Leaders in the dance and performing arts community recognize Togawa's pioneering work. "I strongly believe that Purple Moon Dance Project is committed to broadening the understanding of issues facing lesbians and women of color," says Wayne Hazzard, director of Cowell Theater. "This is no easy task! Ms. Togawa continues to impress me with her gently persuasive manner, creating work that touches your soul and leaves you wanting more."

Adds Diane E. Takei of Asian American Theater Company: "I have seen her work mature and develop. Jill is more able to call on influences from her Asian-American heritage to express a truly unique perspective." \*

For more information about Purple Moon Dance Project, contact the company at 3543 - 18th St., San Francisco CA 94110, (415) 552-1105.

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Photos of Jill Togawa and Jill Arsk by Theresa Thadani