

David Ishii: Bookseller of Asian America

Judith van Praag

On December 31, 2005, visitors were ushered into the space at 212 First Avenue, in Pioneer Square, which for 32 years had housed David Ishii's well-known bookstore. Except for a few framed photographs on the red brick walls, some shelves, and boxes filled with odds & ends, the answering machine on the floor, the space was cleared. Cleared but far from empty.

The vacant store was filled with folks who wanted to bid the bookseller goodbye. David Ishii had gone out for lunch and was expected to return through the front door. In order to surprise him, people moved away from the entrance, up the stairs to the mezzanine, or into the grand hall of the old Pioneer Square mall.

Among the latter was Walter Carr, the founder of Elliot Bay Books, who opened his business only a few months after Ishii started his. Carr reminisced how the first week his store was open, a woman entered, to disappear into the biography section and return with a 12 inch pile of costly books. Leaving her name, she said she would go out for lunch and return to pick them up later. Carr rushed out to ask Ishii if he knew the lady, and whether she was for real. Ishii had said she was one of the richest people in town, and happened to like books. Carr could be sure, she would return and buy that pile. That's how their collegial relationship started.

Gathering from anecdotes, Ishii has often surprised his patrons with unexpected actions.

"One time a Canadian lady spent the night in the store after David, not knowing she was still on the mezzanine, locked up," said Alan Lau (poet/ writer and arts editor of the International Examiner).

On the last day of his reign in Pioneer Square, Ishii approached his "empty" store from the grand hall, rather than the street. He stood still for a moment, surprised by the crowd, perhaps wondering whether he could still turn around, unseen. But a murmur, "He's here", made everyone turn his way, and he gracefully said, "Thank you all for coming."

Shawn Wong (author/ editor and professor of English at U.W.) acted as Master of Ceremony, introducing the first speaker, antiquarian bookseller and neighbor Michael Lieberman, who read out loud King County Executive Ron Sims' proclamation that December 31st 2005 had been declared David Ishii Day.

Many speakers followed, among whom Don Glover, "who now has all the books".

Fellow Mariners lovers remembered how the bookseller sometimes had bunches of free tickets to give away.

Alan Lau made messages from folks who couldn't attend sound like poems, some actually were. And while all this was going on, the answering machine recorded the voice of a woman who wanted a certain book.

Not only did David Ishii sell books, he appeared in at least one. That is, in "Gunga Din Highway", author Frank Chin based a fictional character, Milton Shiro, on the man whose bookstore for 32 years was a meeting place for readers, artists, authors, activists, baseball- and fishing fans.

On Sunday January 29 at 3 p.m. you'll have a chance to see David Ishii, as he appears on the big screen in Doug Ing's "David Ishii Bookseller", and in Curtis Choy's, "What's wrong with Frank Chin?" These two films will be presented back to back during the Northwest Asian American Film Festival.

Doug Ing's 3 minutes and 26 seconds 2002 documentary "David Ishii Bookseller", with David Ishii and Frank Chin, was produced by "New Voices", a master documentary series, in connection with 911 Media Arts Center and KCTS 9 PBS Seattle. Shot on miniDV, the "short short" has been presented at various film festivals as a 35 mm print.

Curtis Choy's 2005, 97 minutes, video, color & B/W documentary "What's wrong with Frank Chin?" features Frank Chin (activist, author, as well as founder of San Francisco's Asian-American Theatre Workshop) with Pacific Northwest locals Frank Abe, Janis Chan, Jeffery Chan, King-Kok Cheung, Lawson Inada, David Ishii, Elaine Kim, Alan Lau, Mako, Spencer Nakasako, Ishmael Reed, George Takei, Shawn Wong and Jessica Yu. Producer/ director/ editor/ writer Curtis Choy wore possibly every other hat as well, during the making of this documentary. With good result, the film was rewarded with the "NAATA SF International Asian American Film Festival's Best Documentary Feature Award".

Speakers at Ishii's surprise goodbye party expressed their hope that the retired bookseller would discover new pursuits in his future free time. Going to movies during the day may be one.

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