

Atomic Lullaby

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 13, 2025)

Linda Parsons is the Poet Laureate of Knoxville, a playwright, the poetry editor for Madville Publishing, and the copy editor for *Chapter 16*, the literary website of Humanities Tennessee. Her plays have been produced by Flying Anvil Theatre, Maryville College, Tennessee Wesleyan University, and Western Carolina University.

There will be a staged reading of her play, *Atomic Lullaby*, on Sunday, November 2, 2025, 2-4 PM, at the Old City Performing Arts Center at 111 State Street, Knoxville, TN. Linda has agreed to explain how this play originated, and help Historically Speaking readers know what to expect at the staged reading.

I can't say how or when I became so driven to capture the story of my stepmother's brother who brought a Japanese wife and daughter home to Knoxville after serving in the U.S. Navy in Tokyo. I entered my stepmother's family when I moved to Knoxville at 11 to live with her and my father. That daughter, my stepcousin, and I grew into teenagerhood together, listening to Beatles 45s and watching The Monkees, slumbering very little at our slumber parties.

I didn't interact much with her mother, Helen/Haruko, but I was curious about her and her life both in a Southern city and her former life in Japan. Over the years, I learned about the Manhattan Project and developed a great interest in the world wars. I wondered if Helen knew her proximity to the enormous war machine that was Oak Ridge, the "Secret City" created to build the atomic bombs that struck her country. I later learned she lived close enough to Hiroshima to see the mushroom cloud.

I began writing plays in the early 1980s, interspersed with poetry and now essays and short prose. I've had seven play productions, and I dearly hope a production will grow from the upcoming staged reading of my latest play, *Atomic Lullaby*, which tells both the true and imagined story of my uncle and his family. I've set it in Oak Ridge, for maximum drama, with the mother and aunt of the returning sailor, Wade, being former calutron girls who labored to create "the product," its identity and purpose unknown to them as it was to most working around the clock to end the war.

I began researching in the fall of 2019, before the official start of the COVID-19 pandemic, using books, online articles, and the incredible Ed Wescott photographs, then wrote the first draft in a fever pitch in the new year, just before the world shut down. If that sounds like a long time ago, playwrighting and play development can take years; you must be in it for the long game. You must believe single-mindedly in your story.

Through rewriting and re-visioning, living room and table readings, staged readings, and, if you're very lucky, a full production. The process calls for belief and endurance. And I do believe. I was indeed driven to write *Atomic Lullaby*, I would even say divinely driven, to keep honing it, and my faith in the work and its potential to change minds and hearts has never waned.

In the play, the young Japanese woman, Kiku, tries to adjust to her new home, an orphan from the war's destruction, though she is thwarted at every turn by Wade's mother and aunt. The time is 13 years after the end of the war, August 6, the anniversary of the bomb on Hiroshima. Even after these years, everyone is scarred from their war experience, with Wade's father confined to the VA hospital in Murfreesboro.

Kiku's presence stirs the pot in a big way, and I don't mince words in the play. I remember my step-grandmother saying that she was called "Jap lover" in the grocery store when carrying her small granddaughter. And, sadly, is today's climate of hatred and polarity any different?

I knew the play's action had to rise above merely a family story, albeit highly charged. My cousin is alive and well, but I decided that the young couple's child would be only a surreal presence, miscarried before her parents married. This unborn girl, named Linda, is a narrator, a master of ceremonies, both a part of

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and apart from the action. She represents the casualties of war—while symbolizing hope, peace, and reconciliation. I didn't want to delve too deeply into the science of atomic weaponry, but I wanted to do it justice.

So, Linda is also the voice of history and the tremendous war effort. The tragic face of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The immense loss that has the power to join these sworn enemies into a family. I see the play as a vessel for both grief and healing, with Linda as the undaunted spirit overseeing both, perhaps even the conscience of human actions that kill so easily and completely.

As secrets are unearthed in the play, the connections deepen between the women when they come to understand that loss is universal, especially the loss of parents and children. It's such connections that have the power to move us and change long-held beliefs. This is the power of live theatre: to entertain, yes, but also to transform. The play is both timeless and timely as we all confront our fear and sometimes disdain of "the other," as we determine how best to live our lives together in peace.

I tried mightily to balance both sides—but as I wrote and discovered more and more about the health effects of the bombs, I felt obligated to show some of those effects in the play, especially since they had been covered up some years after the war in both the U.S. and Japan. So, in many ways, the play is a cautionary tale in our time of increased political violence, a plea and a prayer that we never repeat that means of unspeakable destruction.

The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance (OREPA) is sponsoring the staged reading, as we observe the 80th anniversary of the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. After the reading, a panel of experts will discuss the mythology surrounding the use of atomic weapons in light of current research. The panel will also address the long-term humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons development, use, misuse, and proliferation based on the tenets of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Given OREPA's 30+ years of nuclear weapons abolition advocacy, *Atomic Lullaby* is a vital opportunity to explore different facets of its work. I'm very grateful for OREPA's sponsorship and support.

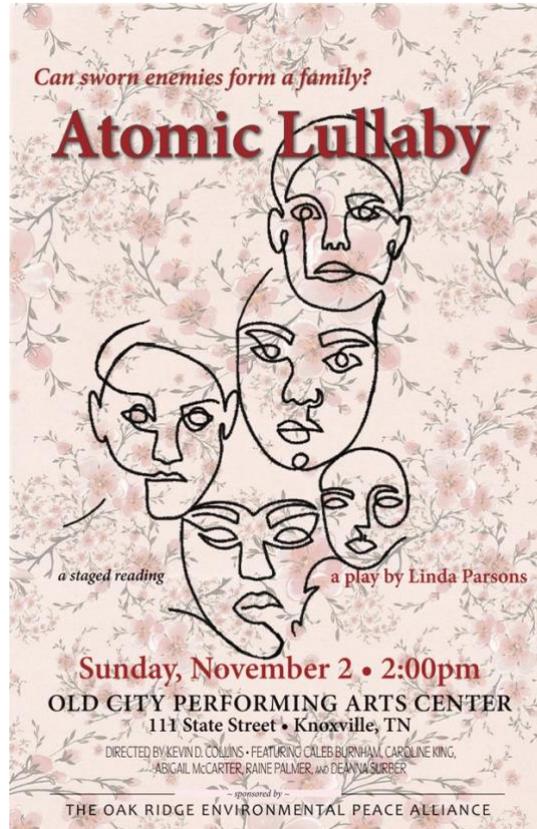
The play will receive a staged reading on November 2, the second giant step toward a full production. It was first read as part of Clarence Brown Theatre's Marian Brown's Circle series in 2023, where the audience was completely engaged and interested in the characters and their struggles and stories. They were interested in the deeply human part of history—and clamored for a production.

I hope one day their (and my) wish comes true. Please join me at the staged reading, where Kiku asks, "Where are we traveling, if not toward a sliver of peace, the ground warmed by battles and bombs and births and weeping!" And where she reminds us that, even though the wars will never end, we can still be "the smallest light that opens our hearts like a flower."

Thank you, Linda for giving readers this insight into the play, *Atomic Lullaby*. There is a free staged reading of *Atomic Lullaby*, a play by Linda Parsons, November 2, 2-4 pm., Old City Performing Arts Center, 111 State St, Knoxville. Kevin Collins directs a great cast: Caroline King, Deanna Surber, Raine Palmer, Abigail McCarter, and Caleb Burnham.

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“Can sworn enemies form a family?” Poster for staged reading of *Atomic Lullaby*



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