



"The Ministers of Japan" in Robert Allan Ackerman's new play, *Blood*

## A Tainted Tale

New political thriller *Blood*, inspired by true events, delves into the conspiracy to cover up Japan's sale of HIV-tainted blood **By Patrick Rosenquist**

**W**hile still an obscure event to most Americans, Japan was rocked by an HIV scandal in the early 1980s. By the time the immunodeficiency virus was identified, most blood banks in the States began heat-treating their supply, destroying the virus and containing the spread of the disease. Japan was approached by Baxter Travenol Laboratories with an offer to provide similar services, but turned down the company to prevent a monopoly on transfusions that would crowd out home-grown competition.

That misjudgment had serious consequences: nearly 2,000 Japanese citizens acquired HIV from untreated blood, spurring an epidemic in the country. In 1989, those who had received HIV-infected blood—mostly hemophiliacs—sued the Department of Health. It was the first time a Japanese national had sued his government. The ensuing legal battle, and consequences from the oversight, are still being felt today. TV and film director **Robert Allan Ackerman** has parlayed the extraordinary story into a new play, presented by The Garage Company, called *Blood*.

"There are so many lies being told," says Ackerman, who has lived in Japan for nearly two decades. "I thought it would be interesting as a play." The Emmy and Golden Globe-nominated director, best known for his movie *The Ramen Girl* and TV's *The Life of Judy Garland*, was initially warned about developing the project.

When he talked to Japanese friends about the project, they were worried.

"I was told by my friends to let the project go; I would be attacked by right-wing Japanese politicians. It would be especially tricky because I was an outsider. I shelved the project and moved on," says Ackerman.

Still, *Blood* moved to the front of his mind with two recent events in Japanese culture. First, reception of *The Cove*—about fishers killing dolphins and the government's blasé reaction—piqued his interest in the government's secrecy. Second, the questions surrounding Fukushima—the nuclear power plant rocked by a powerful tsunami—have remained unanswered, even as citizens return to the site of the compromised plant, and agriculture derived from the area is sold in stores. "I wanted to ask, what else has the government covered up?" he says.

The world premiere of *Blood* is presented by The Garage Company, an East Asian theater repertoire developed in Los Angeles. While it began as a workshop—aided by Ackerman—it has become a full-fledged theater company, and *Blood* will be its first event. "It was started by **Sohee Park**, an actor I used in *The Ramen Girl* and some plays," says Ackerman, "and it was developed because there were a lot of

actors from Japan arriving in America, and they realized they weren't in demand." The Garage Company—developed in an actual garage—has become a beacon for Asian and Asian-American actors, allowing them to develop and hone skills in an industry they find either disinterested or hostile.

"With the Oscars, we see a lot of people talking about diversity, and you'll hear from industry guys that there just aren't talented actors," says Ackerman, referring to performers of color. "Meanwhile,

you have a group of great actors in L.A. putting on a play because they're determined and talented."

*Blood*, premiering March 5, is one of Ackerman's largest projects. "I never realized how involved and complex the play was," he says. "It has 60 scenes and musical numbers." He's still happy to have the play put on, years after he was told it could be a liability. "When I first discussed the idea, years ago, I was told I could be in actual danger if I went through with it," he says. While he's forgone a credit as a playwright—it's officially penned by an anonymous individual—it's less out of fear than humility. "I always think of myself as a director first," says Ackerman. "I don't think of myself as a writer. I never saw this being so big. It's great." ■



### Blood

A world premiere political thriller (with music) about the Japanese tainted blood scandal

Premieres  
March 5 at  
The Complex  
[plays411.com/blood](http://plays411.com/blood)