

Social activism Takei's 40-year mission

Mr. Sulu actor celebrates 'Star Trek' anniversary

By Peter Jones
Staff Writer

When George Takei agreed to become the official announcer for Howard Stern's new satellite radio show, he had more on his mind than bodily functions and explicit sex talk.

"Freedom of speech is a core tenet of our democracy," the actor explained. "Howard is someone who challenges the status quo. I think it's important that we have people who speak out candidly — and sometimes bluntly — and sometimes crudely — for a fundamental value of American democracy."

That may be highfalutin justification for dwarf-tossing and "The Lesbian Dating Game," but Takei is serious — as he boldly explores the final frontiers of the First Amendment.

The actor is best known for playing Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek," but he has a long history in social activism. As a gay Japanese-American, he has lived on the frontlines of at least two of the nation's battles involving disenfranchised segments of society.

Even so-called Trekkies have been marginalized as nerds.

Takei will meet many such fans and others when he attends Starfest, April 21-23, at the Marriott Denver Tech Center.

As a child, Takei spent several years in a World War II-era internment camp. Then, after rising out of the slums of Los Angeles, he made his mark on television. His best known work, as the actor is proud to say, covered social issues via science fiction.

In later years, the Democrat ran for city council. He lost, but was appointed to a California transportation board and to President Clinton's U.S.-Japan Commission. More recently, he has become an activist for gay marriage in his home state.

"When people say they're rallying in defense of marriage or protection of marriage, I think about how insecure they

**If You
GO**

George Takei and Denise Crosby of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" are among the science fiction stars scheduled to appear at Starfest, April 21-23, at the Marriott Denver Tech Center at I-25 and Belleview. Tickets are available at King Soopers stores. Call 303-777-6800 or visit www.starland.com for more information.

must be about their marriage," Takei said.

Although the actor insists he has never tried to keep his homosexuality a secret, last year, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill that would have legalized same-sex marriage in California, Takei decided to explicitly "come out," to be a credible spokesman on the issue. He says 95 percent of the e-mail he has received since has been positive and supportive.

"I would characterize the 'Star Trek' audience as libertarian," he said.

Takei is no alien to freedom struggles. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, his family was among 115,000 Japanese-Americans forced into "war relocation camps." The orders from President Franklin Roosevelt were affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"I can't forget that scary day when soldiers with bayonet guns came to our home to order us out," Takei said.

His family was kept in horse stables for three months while their camp was built. They and others were later hauled across the desert by train to a camp in the swamps of southeast Arkansas.

In the meantime, the Takeis lost their home and business. The actor's father was forced to sell the family car for \$5.

Takei and his younger siblings spent formidable years



COURTESY PHOTO

George Takei, best known for playing Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek," is scheduled to appear at Starfest April 21-23, at the Marriott Denver Tech Center at I-25 and Belleview.

interred behind barbed wire and grew accustomed to an orderly life that included lining up three times a day in a noisy mess hall. It was, in many ways, preferable to the post-war years that followed. When Takei was 8 years old, his destitute family returned to California and eked out a life on Los Angeles's skid row.

"For us, that was the most traumatic part," the actor recalled. "We'd never seen people that scary and ugly and smelly falling down and barfing in front of us. My little sister said, 'Mama, let's go back home,' meaning behind the barbed-wire fence."

Takei relived the memories 20 years later when he appeared in a controversial and seldom-seen episode of "The Twilight Zone." He played a Japanese-American gardener who has a surreal confrontation with a bigoted World War II veteran. In the end, it is revealed that the father of Takei's character, named Taro, had been a state-side conspirator in the Pearl Harbor attack.

"My old man was a traitor!" Taro exclaims before his hari-

kari-like suicide.

Largely because no Japanese-Americans were ever accused of signaling enemy planes from Hawaii, the episode was pulled after its first airing and never aired in syndication.

"I think it was too close to the end of the war," Takei surmised.

In 1966, when he landed his fateful role as Sulu, producer Gene Roddenberry was determined that the character be Asian but not specifically Japanese. The "Star Trek" creator wanted each character, except Spock, to represent one part of the future's unified Earth.

"Asian names are all nationally specific," Takei said. "So he was looking at a map of Asia and saw west of the Philippines the Sulu Sea — and he thought, 'Ah, the waters of the sea touch all shores!'"

Takei took a three-year mission of navigating knobs on the Enterprise. Sulu would also beam down to strange new worlds of English-speaking natives, and when the science fiction demanded it, he would flirt with Lt. Uhura and wield a

sword, shirtless, in the hallways.

Takei is quick to mention that "Star Trek" commented on contemporary issues, but from the relative safety and distance of a space-travel context. In one episode, Frank Gorshin played an interplanetary figure whose face was half-white and half-black. Other entries saw "space hippies," war, quasi-environmentalism, a neo-Nazi planet and network TV's first interracial kiss.

"Television is a very conservative medium dependent on advertising revenue," Takei pointed out. "But Gene felt it could do so much more than brainless entertainment pap. So science fiction became a

metaphor for addressing political, social and cultural issues."

"Star Trek" came in for a temporary landing in 1969, but was soon relaunched, thus keeping Takei busy for 40 years with a '70s cartoon version, six theatrical films and literally thousands of appearances at "Star Trek" conventions from Japan to Latin America.

"Gene Roddenberry created the series," the actor said, "but the long-lasting and international popularity of 'Star Trek' and the conventions were created by the fans."

Although the subculture birthed "Star Trek" porn and a juror arriving to court in her Trek uniform, it has also been part of a profoundly moving experience for Takei. An interracial couple told him the show gave them confidence. Women said they dared seek technical careers because of the series. James "Scotty" Doohan once talked a distraught fan out of her plans to commit suicide.

"When Gene came on stage at his last convention, he was in a wheelchair," Takei remembered of the late producer. "The applause, the ovation, the love was unending."

Takei also mourns the passing of Doohan, who died last year after making several final convention appearances, even though he had become sickly and suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

During Takei's interview with Colorado Community Newspapers, a heavy rainstorm hit Los Angeles, causing the telephone to disconnect.

"This is the high technology of the early 21st century," the actor later said — with a hint of bittersweet humor in his baritone voice. "We need Scotty more than ever."