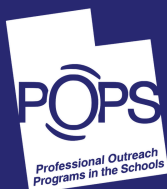




A WEEK WITH A PLAY



A PLAN-B | UTAHPRESENTS CO-PRODUCTION
as part of the Stage Door Series at Kingsbury Hall



Study Guide

Written by Sarah Meservy

Reviewed by Aliyah Bacca

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Aaron Asano Swenson is a *yonsei* (fourth-generation) Japanese American artist, performer, and graphic designer based in Salt Lake City. With a background in costume design, Aaron has worked in film, television, and theatre. He has collaborated with Plan-B for more than 20 years, including illustrating the book *Obāchan Told Me Gaman: A Child's View of Topaz* which Plan-B published and gave to every elementary school in Utah in 2023. KILO-WAT marks his debut as a playwright.



As you read Aaron's thoughts on the next three pages about his experience writing KILO-WAT, jot down the answers to these questions:

- **How did Aaron approach writing the play?**
- **What helped him relate to Wat Misaka?**

DID YOU KNOW

People with Japanese ancestry (or *nikkei*) have a vocabulary to describe their generational distance from Japan. Someone who was born in Japan but emigrated to another country is *issei* (first generation). Their children (born outside of Japan) are *nisei* (second generation—though some *nisei* refer to themselves as “first generation”), their grandchildren are *sansei* (third generation), and their great-grandchildren are *yonsei* (fourth generation).

Unless your heritage is 100% Native American, you are likely descended from immigrants or an immigrant yourself. How many generations ago did your family or ancestors immigrate to the United States?



CONNECTING TO WAT

BY AARON ASANO SWENSON

Note: this article is excerpted from a longer post on our blog.



I'm not a sports fan in general, which means I'm definitely not a University of Utah basketball fan. So when Jerry [Rapier, Plan-B's Artistic Director] approached me about writing a play based on the life of Wat Misaka, my first question was "who?" Once Jerry laid out the basic facts for me, I was sold on the story. How could I not be? By the age of 25, Wat Misaka had led the University of Utah men's basketball team to two national championships before being drafted by the New York Knickerbockers, making him the first Asian American—in fact, the first person of color—in the NBA. Even though the Knicks let him go after only three months, he was offered a position on the Harlem Globetrotters, which he turned down so he could finish his engineering degree. And all of this happened between 1943 and 1947, when anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States was at an all-time high.

STOP AND THINK



- How are legend and myth different?
- What makes a sports hero a legend?

I tried a few different approaches in a few different ways. The dividing line between myth and legend is vanishingly small for sports heroes in the U.S., so I thought about the story as if it were a traditional Japanese folktale. I tried writing it as a live recording of a sports podcast. I'm a fiend for trivia, so I

played with the idea of framing it all as a pub quiz-style game. I even tried a few passes as a first-person monologue. None of these approaches felt like the right fit. I liked little bits of each, but not enough of one.

You've probably heard that lightning takes the path of least resistance. And that's not exactly wrong, but it's not exactly right, either. It might be more accurate to call it "the path of best connection." When a cloud has enough charge for lightning to form, it sends out tendrils which basically test different routes until one connects with the earth. When it does, a massive stream of opposite charge races back up along that connection to the cloud where it started, in a burst of light. This power surge is what we think of as lightning. Not the process—the

build-up, the exploring, the moment of connection. Just the part we see: this colossal, incandescent bridge between heaven and earth that moves so quickly our eyes can't tell what just happened.

My maternal grandparents, Hideyuki “Harry” Arita and Gail Kimiko Minamoto, were both born in the United States to immigrant parents. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the U.S. Army to remove Japanese Americans from “military areas,” which included the entire west coast. This forced relocation applied to both “issei”—“first-generation” immigrants born in Japan—and their American-born, “second-generation” children, or “nisei.” Harry and Gail met briefly before their imprisonment, and they continued their courtship through letters.

My grandfather was released early from the Minidoka incarceration camp to a job in Northern Utah, and my grandmother joined him a few months later. They were married in Brigham City in 1946 and lived there briefly before locating to California. None of the letters survived. We have no records of how they spent that time, or where. But Wat Misaka spent Christmas of 1946 with his family in Ogden, and the U's victory at the NIT championship happened in March of 1947. Even if my grandparents never met Wat Misaka in person, they must have known who he was. Unfortunately, I'll never know for sure.

My mother heard very little from her parents about their experiences during and immediately after the war. There are things we'll never know, and that's OK. In a lot of cases, it's a blessing. The more you know, the more you carry. This is the cost of memories, of legacy. Parts of the story might change or soften with time, but I can't begrudge anybody for wanting to set something down after carrying it

STOP AND THINK



- How might knowing something feel like a weight to carry?

for decades, or finding a gentler way to carry it so the weight doesn't injure or kill them.

The success of the University of Utah men's basketball team was never just about strategy—it was about

conditioning and teamwork. It was about trusting the work, and it was about trusting your teammates. We all live on to one extent or another through the recollections of others after we die. But it's equally important to remember that

the same people carry us with them while we are still alive. It is so easy for us to lose ourselves in this world and its stories. When we forget who we are, they can remind us.

To tell this story, I had to tell my own—how I found my connection with Wat Misaka, and how he reconnected me with my own family. I can't interview Wat Misaka as he

passed away in 2019. I can't ask my grandparents to fill in any blanks. But there are still a few people I can talk to about them who remember them. They can add color and detail to the versions of my grandparents that still live in my head and heart. That's the miracle of community and communal storytelling. Even if I'll never speak to them again in this life, I can still get to know them a little better because of the connections that still exist between us. There is still time for lightning to strike—to connect us across time and space, to illuminate our surroundings and the path ahead, if only for a short while.

STOP AND THINK

- What do you think this means?
- How do the people in your life help you remember who you are?



PREPARING TO SEE THE PLAY

Read [the script](#) and come prepared with questions to ask playwright Aaron Asano Swenson and actor Bryan Kido.

To learn more about the creative team, take a look at [the digital playbill](#).

WAT MISAKA: FRONTIERING RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE NBA



Watch [this 10-minute documentary](#) about Wat Misaka created by Utah high school student Kimari Perng for National History Day 2023.

KAMISHIBAI

Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson plays with a style of Japanese storytelling called *kamishibai* (paper theatre). The kamishibai storyteller uses picture cards displayed in a type of frame called a *butai*. As they tell the story, they remove each card to reveal the next picture.



Kamishibai arose in the 1920s during a time of economic depression. Street performers would often attach their butai to a bike and travel around performing several times a day to whatever audience they could drum up. Performers would ring a bell or clap together wooden blocks called hyōshigi to announce the beginning of a story. They performed for free and made money by selling candy. A typical performance would include three stories: something simple and funny for the youngest children, a romantic drama, and finally an exciting adventure tale. Often these stories were single episodes in a larger story so that listeners would be excitedly awaiting the kamishibai's return the following day for the next installment in the series.

As the kamishibai tradition grew and spread in Japan, Christian missionaries, Buddhist priests, teachers, and government officials began to use it to share their own messages.



LEARN MORE

- Read more about the [history of kamishibai](#).
- Watch a kamishibai performance of the popular Japanese folk tale [Mototaro](#).
- Watch a [30-minute documentary](#) about modern-day street kamishibai performers in Tokyo.

JAPANESE AMERICAN EXPERIENCES DURING WORLD WAR II

Jigsaw Activity

Divide your class into groups, with each group taking one of the topics listed below. As you use the links to learn about your assigned topic, make a list of the essential points in the chart on the next page. Then re-organize into new groups containing at least one person from each topic group. Take turns sharing what you learned about your assigned topic. Fill in the rest of the chart with information from your classmates.

Pearl Harbor

- [What Pearl Harbor meant for Japanese Americans](#)

Executive Order 9066

- [Japanese American Citizens League: Historical Overview](#)
- [Looking Like the Enemy](#)

Living Conditions in Japanese American Concentration Camps

- [Ugly History: Japanese American Incarceration Camps](#)
- [WWII Incarceration](#)
- [Topaz Camp](#)

The Draft

- [First Peacetime Draft Enacted Just Before World War II](#)
- [Japanese American Military Service and Protest During WWII](#)

Hiroshima

- [The Overlooked American Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#)

TOPIC	ESSENTIAL POINTS
Pearl Harbor	
Executive Order 9066	
Living Conditions in Japanese American Concentration Camps	
The Draft	
Hiroshima	

WAT MISAKA AND BASKETBALL

KILO-WAT explores the life and legacy of Wataru "Kilo-Wat" Misaka. He was born in Ogden, Utah in 1923. His parents were Japanese immigrants.



1932 photo of 25th Street in Ogden

The railroad brought immigrant workers to Utah towards the end of the 19th century. The 1920 census shows 2,936 Japanese people living in Utah. Both Ogden and Salt Lake City had areas known as “Japantown.” While Salt Lake’s Japantown encompassed several city blocks, Ogden’s Japanese-owned businesses were

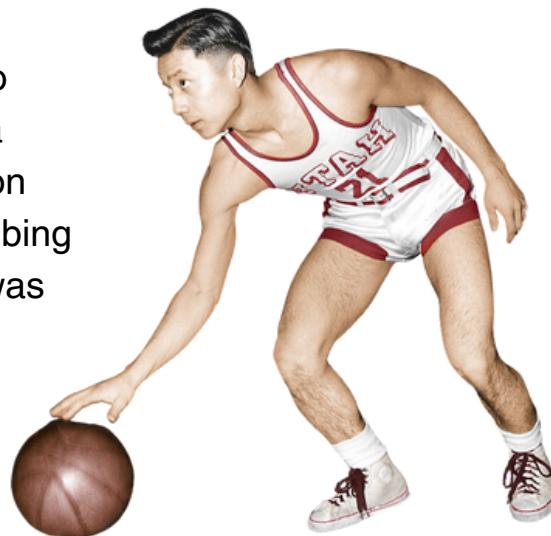
clustered along a two-block stretch of 25th Street close to the railroad tracks. Wat’s father owned a barbershop and the family lived in the basement beneath it.

Wat loved basketball and played on teams in high school and at Weber College. In 1943 he enrolled at the University of Utah to study engineering. As the shortest player on the U’s basketball team, he played the position of point guard. A point guard’s job is to facilitate scoring by getting the ball to the right person at the right time.

There were two big college basketball tournaments and the team was invited to both: the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) and the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Championship. While both tournaments are much bigger today, at the time, only eight teams played in each and the NIT was seen as more prestigious.

Wat’s team chose to play in the NIT. Unfortunately they lost their first game, knocking them out of the tournament. However, one of the teams slated to compete in the NCAA Championship was in a car accident and the Utah team was offered their slot. They cut their NYC trip short and hopped on the train to Kansas City where they won every game and the NCAA championship.

Wat was then drafted in to the Army and had to take two years off from college and basketball to work in military intelligence. He was trained as a Japanese translator and sent to Japan to work on a project called the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. World War II had just ended, and Wat was assigned to interview survivors of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima.



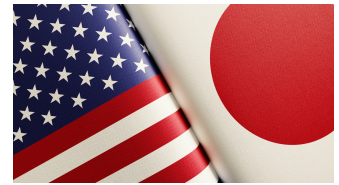
When he returned home, he led the University of Utah basketball team to victory in the 1947 NIT Championship. Wat was very popular with New York basketball fans during his 1944 and 1947 trips there. He felt less discrimination than he was used to in Utah. It seemed to him that they loved cheering for an underdog, so being from Utah and only 5 foot 7 inches tall worked in his favor. (The average height of professional basketball players was 6 foot 2 inches.) His popularity with the New York crowds earned him a contract with the New York Knickerbockers. He left university in the fall of 1947 and played three games with his new team, though he spent most of each game sitting on the bench. It did not occur to him that he was breaking the color barrier as the first person of color in the league. He was cut from the team after only three games.

The Harlem Globetrotters, which had only Black players at the time, tried to recruit him. The Globetrotters were one of the best basketball teams in the world and they traveled the world playing around 250 games a year. Wat chose instead to return to Utah and finish his engineering degree. He married and had children, and enjoyed a successful career as an engineer.

In 1999 Wat was inducted into the Utah Sports Foundation Hall of Fame. In 2009 a documentary about his life called *Transcending* came out and shortly after the New York Knicks honored him with a plaque at Madison Square Garden. The University of Utah retired Wat Misaka's jersey number (20) in 2022.

JAPANESE AMERICANS TODAY

Today more than 1.2 million Japanese Americans live in the U.S. and roughly [18,300 live in Utah](#).



During the post-war era, many Japanese Americans felt pressure to distance themselves from their heritage. They gave their children American names and raised them speaking only English at home hoping to protect them from discrimination. Director Jerry Rapier writes,

“My mother was from Nagasaki. After she immigrated to the U.S., she realized she couldn’t change how she looked. And she couldn’t change how her children looked to better assimilate into life in the United States. Although she had a heavy accent until the day she died, she realized she could change how we sounded. So she did. She intentionally didn’t teach us any Japanese. I didn’t really realize how common this practice was in the decades following World War II until I was an adult and mourned the loss of that part of my identity.”

STOP AND THINK ?

Take a moment to think about your own heritage.

- In what ways do you feel connected to or disconnected from your roots?

Only a small piece of the historic Japantown still remains in Salt Lake City along 100 South between 200 and 300 West: the Japanese Church of Christ, the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple, and a World War II memorial garden. Most of the neighborhood was destroyed to build the Salt Palace convention center in 1967. The Japanese American community has come together to work on revitalizing Japantown and to protect this important gathering place and piece of history.



2024 Obon Festival

Nihon Matsuri (“Japan Festival”) takes place here every April sharing Japanese and Japanese American Culture with the community. In July, the [Obon festival](#) commemorates and remembers deceased ancestors with traditional Japanese dances and drum performances.