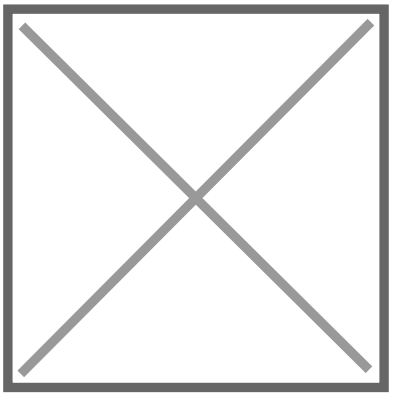


The World Premiere of KILO-WAT by Aaron Asano Swenson: Basketball, War, and the Power of Storytelling

Description

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SALT LAKE CITYâ??**Plan-B Theatre** Companyâ??s *KILO-WAT*, written by playwright **Aaron Asano Swenson,** is more than a biographical drama-it is an interrogation of memory, history, and the complexities of legacy. Presented in collaboration with **UtahPresents** as part of the **Stage Door Series** , the production explores the life of Wataru â??Watâ?• Misaka, a second-generation Japanese American born in Ogden, Utah, who became the first person of color to play professional basketball for what would become the NBA. Through a fusion of traditional Japanese storytelling techniques and modern media, *KILO-WAT* challenges audiences to consider what it means to â??make history within history.â?•

Swensonâ??s script weaves together past and present, blending personal narrative with larger cultural and political events. The play follows the fictional character Kenji â??Kenâ?• Kushida, a Japanese American podcaster, as he attempts to reconstruct Misakaâ??s story, confronting the gaps and distortions in historical memory. This layered structure not only underscores the fragility of recorded history but also invites audiences to question how narratives are shaped, who controls them, and what is left unsaid.

> Title graphic for KILO-WAT, written in English and Japanese on a distressed black and white backgr
> Design by Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson

An Archival Act: Swensonâ??s Personal Connection to *KILO-WAT*

KILO-WAT is not just a historical narrativeâ??it is deeply personal for Swenson. As a Japanese American playwright, Swenson is not merely recounting history; he is engaging in an act of archival storytelling, reclaiming a narrative that is as much about his own family as it is about Misaka.

Ken, the podcaster searching for fragments of the past, is Swensonâ??s stand-in. His obsession with getting the story â??right,â?• his frustration with the gaps in historical records, and his realization that memory is shaped by those who tell itâ??all mirror Swensonâ??s own journey in writing this play. This is what makes *KILO-WAT* so compelling: it is not simply a recounting of Misakaâ??s life, but an

exploration of how personal and collective histories intersect.

Swensonâ??s commitment to telling the entirety of the story reminded me of **Gail Y. Okawa**â??s *Remembering Our Grandfathersâ?? Exile: US Imprisonment of Hawaiâ??iâ??s Japanese in World War II*. Like Okawa, Swenson engages in a process of recovery, illuminating the overlooked and often deliberately obscured experiences of Japanese Americans during and after World War II. The act of remembering becomes an act of resistance, ensuring that these histories are neither sanitized nor forgotten.

By positioning Ken as the narrative frame, Swenson underscores how historical storytelling is often an act of reconstruction.

> â??To tell this story, I had to tell my own â?? how I found my connection with Wat Misaka, and how he reconnected me with my own family.â?•
> *~Aaron Asano Swenson, Quoted in Salt Lake Magazine~*

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Design by Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson

A Masterful Blend of Form and Function

Under the direction of **Jerry Rapier**, *KILO-WAT* balances multimedia storytelling with theatrical tradition. One of the most striking elements is the incorporation of **Kamishibai**â??Japanese paper theatre techniqueâ??where images are revealed and replaced in a wooden frame (**Butai**), mirroring the way Ken sifts through archival materials and personal reflections. This technique, combined with projections and live sound design, gives the play a dynamic rhythm to show that guides the audience along Kenâ??s journey as he discovers Misakaâ??s story as a person of color living in Utah, traveling to Madison Square Garden, and later to post-war Japan.

With a minimalist yet evocative scenic design by **Janice Chan** and immersive lighting by **David McKain**, *KILO-WAT* ensures that the focus remains on storytelling. The sound design by **Cheryl Ann Cluff** is minimal yet effective when it needed to be, seamlessly integrating podcast sound effects, music of the era, traditional Japanese percussion, and of course thunder, to create a layered soundscape.

Bryan Kido delivers a compelling performance as Ken in this one-person play, capturing the characterâ??s obsessive drive to uncover the truth while also grappling with his own place in the story. His interactions with the **Butai** and podcast recordings highlight the tension between historical fact and personal experience, making the audience complicit in the act of remembering.

> Aaron Asano Swenson, in glasses and a dark jacket, gestures while holding a small box in Plan-B T
> **Bryan Kido** as Ken, Photo Credit: Sharah Meservy

As both playwright and projections designer, Swenson seamlessly integrates visual storytelling into *KILO-WAT*, creating a fluid interplay between past and present. The projections serve as more than just backgroundâ??they act as an evolving archive, shifting between documentary footage, stylized historical imagery, and Kenâ??s digital research. The transitions are deliberate and deeply affective, underscoring the tension between memory and erasure.

The most powerful moments come when history begins to overtake the present. Newsreel clips and basketball highlights are gradually layered with static, war propaganda, and Hiroshima survivor testimonies, reflecting Kenâ??s growing awareness of the gaps in recorded history.

Swensonâ??s ability to merge traditional Japanese aesthetics with modern digital storytelling is a triumph. The Kamishibai sequences, where printed illustrations seamlessly interact with projected images, reinforce the playâ??s central themes of storytelling as both a personal and communal act. The effect is immersive and deeply moving, transforming the stage into a living, breathing memoryscape.

Lightning as Legacy: The Motif of Connection

One of the most powerful motifs in *KILO-WAT* is lightning. The play repeatedly draws connections between lightning, luck, and lineageâ??suggesting that history, like a lightning bolt, is unpredictable yet leaves a visible path in its wake. Misakaâ??s nickname, â??Kilo-Wat,â?• evokes both his electrifying presence on the court and the unseen forces that shaped his life.

The theme is introduced early in the play through a stylized retelling of Misakaâ??s birth: during a storm, his mother, Tatsuyo, ties a silk thread around his umbilical cord just as lightning strikes, symbolically containing its power within him. This story is echoed in the way the play conceptualizes legacyâ??not as a straightforward progression, but as something fractured, charged, and constantly rediscovered.

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Black-and-white artwork of several pairs of hands reaching toward one another, a projection from KI
Design by Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson

The Importance of Names: Wataru vs. Wat

Names carry weight in *KILO-WAT*, shaping identity and perception. The play makes a distinction between â??Watâ?•â??the name he was known by in American sports cultureâ??and â??Wataru,â?• the name given to him by his family. In the final scene, Ken reflects on the kanji of Misakaâ??s name, which can mean â??bridgeâ?• or â??connectionâ?•â??a fitting tribute to a man who navigated multiple worlds: Japanese and American, war and peace, sports and survival.

By restoring his full name, the play symbolically returns Misaka to himself, honoring not just his public achievements but the personal struggles and cultural history that defined his journey. Itâ??s a small but profound act of reclamationâ??one that resonates beyond Misakaâ??s story and into broader questions about whose names are remembered, whose are erased, and how history can be rewritten.

Projection from KILO-WAT showing the name Misaka Wataru in Japanese characters with romanize
Design by Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson

Beyond the Court: A Story of War and Silence

KILO-WAT foregrounds Misakaâ??s athletic achievementsâ??his role in Utahâ??s 1944 NCAA Championship win, his historic signing with the **New York Knicks**â?? yet it does not shy away from the darker realities of the era. The play explores the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans, the racism Misaka and his family faced even in moments of triumph, and his military service in post-atomic

Hiroshima. In one of the most haunting sequences, Ken uncovers transcripts of Misakaâ??s interviews with Hiroshima survivors, forcing him (and the audience) to confront the cost of war.

> Black-and-white projected illustration of a couple embracing in front of mountains, from KILO-WAT. Design by Playwright Aaron Asano Swenson

Swensonâ??s script resists mythologizing its subject. Instead, it acknowledges the limitations of historical recovery. Misaka himself downplayed his significance, often describing his success as mere luck. But as *KILO-WAT* suggests, this humility is as much a product of internalized survival strategies as it is a reflection of historical erasure.

Ultimately, *KILO-WAT* is not just a biography; it is an act of reclamation and resistance. It acknowledges Misakaâ??s achievements while also critiquing the ways in which history is recorded, remembered, and retold. In doing so, it invites audiences to reflect on the stories that have been lost and those that still need to be told. Swensonâ??s *KILO-WAT* reminded me of the sacrifices made when the horrors of war are glossed overâ??how citizens of a democracy in their silence become complicit in the harm inflicted by their nationâ??s leaders. Itâ??s a powerful reminder of how far removed we can become from the realities of history when uncomfortable truths are omitted or softened for the sake of national pride.

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> *~Rhetorical Review~*

KILO-WAT does not allow for such distance. Instead, it demands that we reckon with the weight of memory, the cost of erasure, and the responsibility of storytelling. By illuminating Misakaâ??s journeyâ??one shaped by resilience, loss, and perseveranceâ??Swenson compels us to consider our own roles in preserving and confronting history.

Plan-B Theatre Companyâ??s *KILO-WAT* runs February 14â??16, 2025, at Kingsbury Hall.

Feb. 14 performance includes ASL interpretation.
Feb. 16 performance is sensory-friendly.

50 minutes, no intermission, No Late seating.

Dates: February 14-November 10 2025

Tickets: General Admission: $30, Youth: $10, ARTSPASS: $5 https://artstickets.utah.edu/events/kilo-wat/

Venue: UtahPresents Kingsbury Hall, 1395 Presidentsâ?? Cir, Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Contact: Please call 801-581-7100 to be placed on a wait list.

Venue: UtahPresents at Kingsbury Hall, 1395 Presidentsâ?? Cir, Salt Lake City, UT 84112

- **â??A WEEK WITH A PLAYâ?? FREE STUDENT MATINEES**
- Limited seating is still available for free student matinees February 11-14. Please **email Melissa Salguero, Community Engagement Manager, UtahPresents** for more information.
- KILO-WAT will also tour to three high schools February 18-21: Davinci Academy in Ogden, City Academy in Salt Lake City, and Utah Arts Academy in St. George.

CAST & CREATIVE

Playwright: Aaron Asano Swenson
Cast: Bryan Kido

Director: Jerry Rapier
Lighting Designer: David McKain
Projections Designer: Aaron Asano Swenson
Scenic Designer: Janice Chan
Sound Designer: Cheryl Ann Cluff
Stage Manager: Maisie Bunker Nelson
Scenic Builder: David Knoell

Photography: Sharah Meservy

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