

Synopsis: *Good Citizen*

A play by George Taylor

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POET: *And can you feel, my friends, the coming storm? / Storm upon storm,
families lightning split / Father, mother, sister, brother / Split each from each,
Topaz to Manzanar / to a rail siding called Minidoka. / See in time a tar-paper
city / of rusted wire and rattlesnakes / A false home of barren walls /
naked bulbs hanging / six-hole indignity.*

On a cold Friday night in March, a young Japanese-American attorney walks the streets of Portland trying to get arrested. He gives his name to a cop. “Run along home, sonny boy,” the cop says, “before you get into trouble.” This is exactly what the young man wants. He goes to the police station, flashes some papers, and is thrown into the drunk tank for the weekend.

The year is 1942. The young man is Minoru Yasui, and he’s out to test the constitutionality of a curfew that has just been imposed on all people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast.

Good Citizen follows Yasui’s story, placing it in context with the political and personal upheaval that marked America’s treatment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II. The chain of events that begins this night will reach the Supreme Court and affect four decades of civil rights debate and legislation. More immediately, it will reverberate in a national policy that imprisons 70,000 U.S. citizens – men, women, and children – without due process.

Good Citizen takes audiences into an FBI interrogation room where Yasui is questioned about his patriotism, into a Portland courtroom for his trial, into the Portland jail cell where he cools his heels for 9 months awaiting disposition of his case, and finally to the Supreme Court itself. As we experience Yasui’s story, we also share the greater story of what was called “exclusion.” We learn how families had four days to settle their lives and pack only the belongings they could carry; we travel to the Portland livestock center, where temporary living quarters were built in converted stables and where several thousand families were confined for months of waiting. Finally, we board a slow train to Minidoka, a tarpaper city of barbed wire and guard towers in a desolate part of Idaho, where most internees would stay until the last months of the war.

Good Citizen is based on contemporary accounts and original documents, and is in part courtroom drama, using the transcript of Yasui’s Portland trial. The play employs a variety of approaches, including direct address by historical figures (FDR, Supreme Court justices), invented dialog based on actual accounts, scenes imagining meetings that didn’t take place, even a surreal TV game show, “Who’s Sorry Now?” The narrative is connected by found and created poetry, some composed by internees (and attributed to them), some by the playwright. One short scene, in which internees get their first view of their camp, is composed completely in haiku, reflecting the poignancy, dignity, and humor that reside in both the people and the haiku form.

Today the policies and actions that led to internment are regarded as racist and unconstitutional, a black spot on America’s prosecution of the war on the home front. They have even been linked to a subversion of the justice system. Yet some of the laws that fed the actions remain on the books, continuing to provide cover for violations of the rights of U.S. citizens that occur today.

INTERNEE: *Outside that barbed wire / Will their lives be perfect now? / Since we don’t exist?*