

Good Citizen Description

On a cold night in March, a young Japanese-American walks the streets of Portland trying to get arrested. “Run along home, sonny boy,” says a cop on the beat, “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. The year is 1942. The young man is Minoru Yasui, and he’s out to test the constitutionality of a curfew imposed on all people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast. The chain of events that begins this night will reverberate in a national policy that imprisons 70,000 U.S. citizens without due process. The precedent it sets will resonate through eight decades of civil rights legislation and political debate.

Good Citizen dramatizes the true story of Oregon native Minoru Yasui set against a background of political and personal upheaval. The play begins 8 months before Pearl Harbor with a mysterious burglary in Los Angeles. It takes audiences into an FBI interrogation room, a Portland courtroom, a jail cell, and finally to the Supreme Court. As we experience Yasui’s journey, we also share the broader 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 several thousand families – most of them native-born American citizens – lived for months in converted stables. Inevitably, we board a slow train to Minidoka, a tarpaper city of barbed wire and guard towers in a desolate part of Idaho.

Based on contemporary accounts and original documents, *Good Citizen* employs fluid, highly theatrical storytelling that includes direct address by historical figures, dialog scenes, a surreal TV game show. The narrative is connected by found and created poetry, some composed by internees (and attributed to them).

It is a story of perpetrators and victims, of often well-meaning people who have very different opinions on what it means to be a “good citizen.” Its heroes are ordinary and imperfect humans, some of whom stood up against injustice and others who extended a helping hand across a sharp racial divide at a time it was particularly difficult and perhaps dangerous to do so. Though its point of view is evident, it seeks to treat both sides of a complicated issue fairly and truthfully.

The policies and actions that led to internment are regarded by most (but not all) as a racist and unconstitutional overreach committed in the name of national security; a black spot on America’s prosecution of the war on the home front. Yet some of the laws that fed the actions remain on the books, providing cover for vocal critics with a shaky understanding of America’s meaning. *Good Citizen* asks us to question how much we have learned. The ready acceptance by many Americans of crackpot notions on immigration and wall-building proposed by would-be leaders, shows that powerful strains of bigotry, fear, and hatred of “the other” remain.

Earlier drafts of *Good Citizen* had public readings at CoHo Theatre in 2010 and at ART in 2011. Also in 2011 it was featured as a Midnight Projects Workshop at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and was named a finalist for the 2011 Oregon Book Awards. The current version adds new scenes based on input from previous readings. Audiences at those performances have found the play to be powerful, provocative, and timely. They recognize the issues of citizenship and national security that drove these events are not relics of 70 years ago, but attitudes and threats that persist in 2016, on talk radio and the Internet, in military circles and state legislatures, even in presidential campaigns.