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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Greg Watanabe — actor extraordinaire!

I've had the honor of working with Greg Watanabe for the last month during the production of *Caught*, an innovative play by Christopher Chen with an art installation by a mysterious artist. We are in the middle of our performance run at Artists Repertory Theatre. Greg has been incredible to work with and learn from while dusting off my acting skills in this production about the meaning of truth in art and journalism as well as the nature of cultural appropriation.

Watanabe is a veteran actor who made his Broadway debut in *Allegiance* with George Takei and recently performed *Hold These Truths*, a solo play by Jeanne Sakata about Gordon Hirabayashi. Earlier this year he starred in Portland Playhouse's production of *The Language Archive* by Julia Cho. Greg has worked at major theatres around the country, so I was curious to find out more about his acting career.

I was surprised to learn Greg was majoring in English literature at the University of California, Berkeley when he took an introductory acting class. He said he "immediately changed" his major to dramatic arts and never looked back. His older sister is a rock musician, so his parents were supportive of his career choice.

"I grew up in a really white suburb of Orange County, California," Watanabe said, "so working on Asian-American plays, working with API theaters and artists, interacting with community members, has been my education. And I continue to travel on that learning curve."

Watanabe said he didn't have a lot of training when he started acting. He relied on his instincts and emotions, as well as the textual analysis he learned in his literature studies. He credits the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco with giving him the support he needed to grow into the actor he is today, one who could master the challenge of performing solo in *Hold These Truths* for an hour and 40 minutes. He found that experience "pretty scary, and ultimately, incredibly rewarding."

During *Hold These Truths*, he also explored his own identity and those on his father's side of the family, who were "incarcerated in the Heart Mountain concentration camp." He was also able to

focus on the life of Gordon Hirabayashi, a civil-liberties hero.

As a lifelong George Takei fan, I was fortunate enough to work with him briefly when he hosted the *Crossing East* series more than a decade ago. But I wanted to find out what it was like for Greg to work with George in a play on Broadway. He said it was an amazing experience.



Greg Watanabe is starring in *Caught*, an innovative play by Christopher Chen currently featured at Artists Repertory Theatre. (Photo/Russell J. Young)

"George is a great guy. He and Brad [his husband] are just lovely, positive, giving people," Greg said. "And what you see is what you get with George. He is just as jovial, considerate, and unequivocal as he appears in public. And to work on a Broadway show about the incarceration experience with him and all the other amazing folks who worked on that show ... it was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life."

Watanabe is reprising his role in the musical play *Allegiance* with Takei at East West Players in Los Angeles from February 21 to April 1, 2018. He'll play Mike Masaoka again, which is the only character in the play based on and named after a real historical figure. He's looking forward to sharing the story of the Japanese-American internment with folks on the west coast who weren't able to make it to New York. He also says he's "eager to have more conversations with folks about their own experiences" and hopes his extended family has a chance to see it so he can hear more family stories.

With so many roles in his acting credits, I asked Greg for his bucket list of the roles he'd still like to play. He said he'd "love to do *Vietgone* before I age out of it!" *Vietgone*, a play by Qui Nguyen about the Vietnam War from the Vietnamese perspective, drew packed houses at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival last year. He also mentioned he has never been involved in Phillip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die!* or Rick Shiomi's *Yellow Fever*, and would love a chance to work on those plays.

I also asked Greg about his thoughts on the current state of representation of Asian-American actors. In most ways, he said, it's better than it's ever been.

"On stage, on television, and to a lesser extent in movies," Greg said, "there are more Asian Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, and South-Asian Americans playing a wider variety of characters

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