

# ‘Hold These Truths’ Reading Honors Gordon K. Hirabayashi

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“He shocked us. He shocked us all.”

So said the late Tama Tokuda, remembering when then-24-year-old Gordon K. Hirabayashi challenged the U.S. government regarding its World War II era internment of Japanese Americans.

This brave stance is the reason that Hirabayashi will soon be front and center here in Seattle. Several institutions and individuals will be collaborating to celebrate the history of Hirabayashi’s protests against the U.S. policy of internment.

During the weekend of February 22 to 23, the [Interim Community Development Agency](#) and the Gordon Hirabayashi Legacy of Justice Committee will present a [staged reading of Jeanne Sakata’s one-man play](#) entitled *Hold These Truths*, featuring actor Greg Watanabe, at the Theatre Off Jackson. This presentation coincides with the University of Washington event on February 22, entitled

## “Courage in Action: A Symposium on the Life and Legacy of Gordon K. Hirabayashi.”

Many local scholars and artists have found inspiration in Hirabayashi’s story, and playwright Sakata is no exception.

“When I discovered it through a documentary film in the late 1990s, I was excited and enthralled,” Sakata said. “I knew immediately that this was a vitally important but little known American story that I wanted to try to bring to the stage.”

Sakata found many small details about Hirabayashi’s background compelling. “The fact that he was a Nisei Quaker intrigued me,” she said, “and I was drawn to his zest for life and wry sense of humor.”

Many in the community, including Hirabayashi himself, contributed to Sakata’s new project.

“The play was inspired by interviews I did in the late 1990’s with Gordon, who was a delightful interview subject, giving generously of his time,” Sakata said. “I was also greatly helped by Gordon’s wife Susan Carnahan and his younger brother, the late James Hirabayashi, as well as several of Gordon’s college friends: the late Art Barnett, legal advisor to Gordon during World War II, and Eleanor Ring Davis, who donated to the University of Washington many of Gordon’s wartime letters.”

Sakata’s next task was to shape all of these resources into a coherent script with clear dramatic structure.

“It was a huge challenge to distill all the information I gathered from research and interviews down to 90 minutes,” she said. “I had wonderful mentors and advisors who helped me bring the script across the finish line.”

Sakata explored several different structural models for this play, before deciding to create a one-man show that focused strictly on Hirabayashi’s experience.

“I felt that Gordon’s stand, being such a solitary one, could be wonderfully emphasized through a solo show,” she said. “And I loved the idea of the older Gordon looking back on his youth and physically embodying all the people who were part of those years.”

She also wanted to highlight the Asian American actors who could embody this role.

“Historically, Asian American roles in the American theater have been limited in scope, and *Hold These Truths* as a solo show has been an exciting way to showcase the range and versatility of all the actors who have done our productions so far,” Sakata said.

These actors have included Ryun Yu at East West Players in Los Angeles, Joel de la Fuente at the Epic Theatre Ensemble in New York, Blake Kushi and Marty Yu in the EWP Theatre For Youth tour, and now Greg Watanabe, who will present the upcoming staged reading at Theatre Off Jackson.

Over time, Sakata has revised and developed the original script and its title.

“The play initially focused almost exclusively on Gordon’s personal experiences, and as it evolved I added more scenes that showed his experiences in the larger context of the government forces and public hysteria and racism that resulted in Executive Order 9066,” she said. “The title change happened as a result, to convey what Gordon actually did in response to those forces.”

This presentation of *Hold These Truths* is akin to a homecoming for Hirabayashi.

“I did a huge amount of research for the play at the University of Washington, where Gordon’s wartime letters are housed,” Sakata said. But more importantly, she said, “since Gordon was born near and grew up around Seattle, and since he was a University of Washington student when World War II broke out, I always had a great desire to bring the play here.”

*“Hold These Truths” will have a staged reading on February 22 at 7:30 p.m. and February 23 at 2:00 p.m. at the Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Avenue South, Seattle.*