The Great Leap
by Lauren Yee
Directed by Lisa Peterson

The Geary Theater
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# Table of Contents

1  A.C.T.’s Production of *The Great Leap*

3  Game On  
   An Interview with Playwright Lauren Yee and Her Father Larry Yee  
   *By Joy Meads*

8  Great Leaps Forward through Time  
   A Brief Historical Background to *The Great Leap*  
   *By Ariana Johnson*

17  Chasing Bravery  
   An Interview with Director Lisa Peterson  
   *By Elspeth Sweatman*

23  The Edge of Your Seat  
   The Links between Sports and Theater  
   *By Simon Hodgson*

28  Images in Air  
   A Conversation with Projection Designer Hana S. Kim  
   *By Annie Sears*

34  A *Great Leap* Synopsis

39  A *Great Leap* Glossary

48  Questions to Consider/For Further Information
A.C.T.’s Production of The Great Leap

The Great Leap was commissioned by Denver Center for the Performing Arts and received readings and workshops at Minneapolis’s Playwright’s Center (2016), New York’s Ma-Yi Theater Company (2016), San Francisco’s A.C.T. (2017), and San Diego’s Old Globe (2018). It premiered at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts in 2018. Since then, there have been productions at Seattle Repertory Theatre, Atlantic Theater Company, and the Guthrie Theater, and there will be upcoming productions at InterAct Theatre and Arts Club Theatre Company.

Creative Team
Scenic Designer.......................................................... Robert Brill
Costume Designer..................................................... Meg Neville
Lighting Designer........................................................ Yi Zhao
Sound Designer............................................................ Jake Rodriguez
Projection Designer.................................................... Hana S. Kim
Movement Coach.................................................. Danyon Davis
Dramaturg................................................................. Joy Meads
Casting Director....................................................... Janet Foster, CSA
Vocal Support........................................................ Christine Adaire
Stage Manager .......................................................... Leslie M. Radin
Assistant Stage Manager ........................................ Chris Waters
Associate Artistic Director ......................................... Andy Donald
General Manager ...................................................... Louisa Balch
Director of Production ............................................. Martin Barron

Characters and Cast
Saul........................................................................... Arye Gross
Manford ....................................................................... Tim Liu
Connie........................................................................ Ruibo Qian
Wen Chang.................................................................. BD Wong
Understudy.................................................................... Steven Ho

*Information correct at time of publication.

OPPOSITE A basketball on a court in a gym. Photo by franchise opportunities. Courtesy Flickr.
In the 2018–19 theater season, playwright Lauren Yee’s work has been produced 14 times, from New York’s Atlantic Theater Company to Minneapolis’s Guthrie Theater to Ashland’s Oregon Shakespeare Festival. But for Yee, this is nothing extraordinary. Since she burst onto the scene in 2008 with *Ching Chong Chinaman*, Yee’s plays have consistently been produced from coast to coast, winning awards as they go. Her debut play won the Paula Vogel Award for Playwriting and the Ford Foundation Emerging Writers of Color Fellowship. *King of the Yees* (2016) was an Edward M. Kennedy Prize finalist. And her latest, *Cambodian Rock Band* (2018), received the Horton Foote Prize.

With *The Great Leap*—a Susan Smith Blackburn Prize finalist—Yee calls upon her memories growing up in San Francisco. In her author’s note in the script, Yee writes, “Growing up, my father played basketball. Every day, all night, on the asphalt courts and rec centre floors of San Francisco Chinatown. It was the only thing he was good at. He was never good enough that he was going to play for the NBA or even at the college level, but for a 6’1” Chinatown kid from the projects, he was good. Really good. I know this because even today, people still stop me on the street and try to explain what a legend he was. They tell me his nickname (Spider), his position (center), and his signature move (the reverse jump shot).” We spoke with Lauren and her father, Larry, to learn more about the real-life stories that inspired *The Great Leap*.

Did you always know that your dad was a basketball player?

Lauren: It was something that I knew growing up. Basketball was something that my dad did till I was nine or ten, when he tore his Achilles tendon. That was the end of his basketball days. Growing up in San Francisco, where my dad was born and raised, we’d run into fellow basketball players who knew my dad. So it was just part of the family culture and mythology.

And people would describe to you how he played.

Lauren: Yeah. I always got the sense he was pretty good. After we would run into someone who played with my dad and they would walk away, my dad would give me an
assessment of how they were as a player, whether they were fast or kind of a dirty player. That player research and these associations are things you're never able to shake. It's been really nice being able to research and talk to some of my father's former teammates and rivals and just hear these stories. There's this whole culture of basketball in Chinatown.

Larry, when did you first start playing basketball?

Larry: When I was probably about seven or eight years old, I started playing at a playground in Chinatown. Then I played pick-up basketball at the local rec center, which is now called Betty Ong Rec Center. They put on a Chinese New Year basketball tournament. Well, I won a few tournaments and was MVP one year, so I was recruited to play in Taiwan in 1977. We had a coach from UCSF. It was a college-level environment. They were a professional team in Taiwan, we were a pick-up team. But we had a good time.

It sounds like you guys were the underdogs.

Larry: We never looked at ourselves as underdogs. [Laughs] We figured we were pretty good. We went three for three; we beat their top team. But we weren't used to that kind of weather. It was 80 percent humidity and 80 degree heat.

What else do you remember from that trip?

Larry: When you play other teams, they call it a friendship game. But once the ball is in play, there is no friendship. They're out there to beat you as much as you're out there to beat them. Their style of play in Taiwan, it wasn't like the Western style, which is to run and attack. The Taiwanese style was to display their shooting ability. They were not as tall as the Chinese team—we played them in 1981, a couple years after Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon had opened up the doors politically between America and China [in the 1970s, America's President Nixon and Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping held a series of visits to bring the two countries closer together].

How much pressure did you feel to represent the United States?

Larry: We tried to be as cordial as possible. We weren't swearing at them, they weren't swearing at us. But when the ball is up in the air, game on. One time, one of our guys went right by this heavyset Chinese guy and made the shot and everybody in the stands said, "Wow!" But the next time he did that, he ended up on the floor.

The Chinese team was bigger and taller?

Larry: Substantially. Beijing's big guy was 7'4". They pick the best of the best. We lost to them by 20 or 30 points. In Beijing, we went into Tiananmen Square. It's huge. Four
football fields. There were people who wanted to converse with us because they wanted to practice their English. We went to this famous Peking duck restaurant with the Chinese team. And we’re eating the starter and thinking, “Wow, they’re so considerate. They let us eat first, and they hardly ate anything.” All of a sudden, out come two Peking ducks. And we start laughing, because their chopsticks are flying around and soon both of the Peking ducks are finished. These guys knew what was coming, and they let us fill up. [Laughs]

Lauren, you must have grown up hearing these stories.

Lauren: Those overseas trips that he took for basketball were a part of the family lore I never really investigated. It was only when I was thinking about what I wanted to write for Denver Center for the Performing Arts that I really dug into these stories. What was that experience like? What year was that? And there were all these wonderful nuances, such as he went to Tiananmen Square or he was late and missed the bus. But I kind of stumbled on them by myself in my writing. And in going back around to talk to my dad, I’ve discovered that I wrote some of these things in without even knowing it was in his story.
There’s a photo that you use on the cover of the script of your dad blocking a shot. Why did that image speak to you?

Lauren: I think it’s a Chinatown rec center, probably in the Chinese New Year classic. What’s kind of wonderful is that, even if you don’t understand the context, it almost looks as if he’s flying; he’s completely airborne. It captures not only a time and place but also this incredible moment where everyone’s eyes are on him. He’s up in the air and he’s completely confident about what he’s about to do. I thought it belonged on the cover of the play.

When you decided that you wanted to write a play about basketball, did you know right away how you were going to dramatize the sport?

Lauren: I didn’t, because in spite of my father being very athletic and being high school MVP for multiple sports, all three of his kids never took after him athletically. Basketball in particular is a sport that I never really appreciated until I started writing this play. I didn’t understand the game. I didn’t understand the strategy. I didn’t understand what made it so attractive to everyone but me. It’s one of those sports that just has been exploding in popularity over the last 50 years and then even over the last 10 years.

So there was a lot of catching up I had to do in order to write this play because, in addition to it being a play about basketball, it is a play where basketball is reflected in the storytelling, the vocabulary, the staging, and the visuals. Even though you know you’re not seeing a traditional basketball game being played onstage, there is the same excitement and tempo and rhythm that you get when you’re watching a game.

How did you build that into the play?

Lauren: The characters are engaging in these athletic, playful, back-and-forth conversations. The structure of the acts and how quickly characters get into scenes and say what they want—that feels to me very much like changes of possession in basketball. A lot of the scenes feel that they happen in transition as one team gets the ball and they’re trying to hurtle down the court to score.

We think of basketball as an American sport, but it’s just as popular in China. Why do you think that is?

Lauren: China has had basketball almost as long as America has. It was brought to China in the late 1890s. It’s a sport that in [Chinese Communist Party leader] Mao Zedong’s eyes really reflected communism. Everyone plays the same position, on the same team, with the same goal. And basketball is a great equalizer—you don’t need a lot of money to play basketball. All you need is a ball and a hoop. You don’t even need an asphalt court; you can play on a dirt floor or on a road. That’s something that made it very popular with the poor in China. It’s about this collective of people working together—there’s nothing more Chinese than basketball.
A.C.T. did a workshop of this play in our New Strands Festival in 2017. How did that inform your process?

Lauren: It was great to begin working with Lisa Peterson, who is directing the production at The Geary, and start to think about the vocabulary for this play. What’s exciting about *The Great Leap* is that there are four people onstage, but other than that it’s pretty open about how the set looks. It’s been performed in open space; you can have basketballs onstage but you don’t have to. You might have movement, you might not. So it was a really great chance to start building that relationship and that perspective of what this world should look like.

How has being from San Francisco shaped your worldview and your choice of subject?

Lauren: When I write about what it means to be Asian American today, I’m always looking for interesting things that reflect something closer to my experience growing up. I grew up in the majority—I went to school where most of the students looked like me and I lived in communities where most of the people looked like me and ate the same food. It wasn’t about being the only Asian kid growing up in Oklahoma. My experience is a little bit different; I feel distant from someone who is born in Beijing and comes to San Francisco. That’s interesting for someone who writes a lot about Asian American identity.

Larry, how does it feel to have Lauren’s play in your hometown?

Larry: It’s great. Every week I have dinner with some of the guys I used to play ball with. And recently, this lady from Philadelphia came over to our table and asked if it was my daughter who wrote the basketball play. Lots of people in San Francisco have been asking me about it.

When did you know that your daughter was a writer?

Larry: In the third grade. Every student is writing a story, and at the end of the first week, everyone finishes up. But Lauren’s still writing. She’s up to 23 pages. And when the teacher asks, “Lauren, why aren’t you finished?” she says, “I can’t stop.”
Great Leaps Forward through Time
A Brief Historical Background to The Great Leap

By Ariana Johnson

“A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay . . . it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle . . . A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence.”
—Mao Zedong

In 1949, China emerged from a lengthy period of war. Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, established the People’s Republic of China and placed Party members and military leaders in positions of power within the new government. Mao and the Party began a program of national economic and societal restructuring. Their aim was to create a more just state by replacing the strongly hierarchical system China had experienced for centuries. The first step was to complete the land reform promised during the civil war, deposing landowners and redistributing their land to the peasants. In that way, Mao intended to establish a new system of family-owned farms to support the largely agricultural economy. At the same time, he began a campaign to suppress counterrevolution, targeting Nationalist Party members, criminals, religious leaders, and anyone who was a political or social threat to the Party. Mao spent several years securing the new government in China before embarking on his first massively ambitious plan to steer the country farther away from its class-riven past and toward a revolutionary future.

The Great Leap Forward: 1958–62

Mao advocated for the faster socialization of economic structures, despite both the misgivings of Party members and the warnings of Soviet communist leader Joseph Stalin to follow a conservative timeline because of China’s lack of industrial infrastructure. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Mao accelerated his timeline—insisting that planning, caution, and balance were capitalist superstition—and pushed the government into an authoritarian regime that did not tolerate any opposition, even from its own Party members. China’s economy experienced huge growth with the First Five-Year Plan from 1953–57, but the development was imbalanced. By 1958, the socialization
of agriculture had reached a stage featuring massive village-wide collective farms, rather than individual family farms. All land and resources were now under government control and collective ownership, with peasants living in military-style accommodation to increase productivity and working in jobs assigned according to the needs of the state.

In May 1958, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward, an aggressive plan for increasing industrial and agricultural production. The goal was to catch up to Britain in seven years and the US in 15 years. In 1957, China had produced five million tons of steel, while Britain and the US had produced 22 and 100 tons, respectively. The original plan for 1958 was to produce 5.8 million tons, but now, with the Great Leap Forward, provincial Party secretaries pledged to make 11 million tons, and set 1959’s goal at a wildly unrealistic 39 million.

This type of exaggeration was not isolated to the steel industry. Party officials across multiple levels and industries falsely reported success at meeting their impossible production goals, placing more pressure on other Party officials higher up the chain of command to inflate their own numbers. Due to a combination of Party-prescribed farming techniques that had negative effects on crop yield, a lack of labor due to the mass of people assigned to work in newly created industrial factories, and the destruction of useful crops in order to increase grain output which could be traded to the Soviets for industrial equipment, there was widespread famine by 1959.
In addition to dealing with food shortages and famine, Chinese citizens also experienced economic depression during the Great Leap Forward. Overly ambitious production goals led to industrial accidents, shoddy manufacturing, and breakdowns in equipment. Party leaders viewed steel productivity as the global standard of progress and encouraged people to throw pots, pipes, and tools into backyard furnaces. Much of the metal they produced was not only useless but also cost them useful utensils. In her memoir, *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China during the Cultural Revolution*, writer Moying Li remembers adding the family’s meat cleaver to the furnace. When her grandmother tried to find the blade, Li explained, “I helped our country with it.”

Although there was widespread popular support for the ideals behind the Great Leap Forward, Mao was watchful for critics within the Chinese Communist Party. At the Lushan Plenum in 1959, a meeting of Party leaders to adjust policies that were causing famine, Mao interpreted the meeting as evidence of a rising anti-Party clique. He instituted a campaign that punished more than 10 million people for not publicly supporting the Great Leap Forward. But the famine and economic depression were too great to ignore, and the policies of the Great Leap Forward were reversed. China
re-established family farms in November 1960, and following an industrial collapse in 1961, reassigned workers to agriculture. Although the nation's food production was eventually restored, there was a terrible human cost. While exact numbers are difficult to verify, there were between 30 and 45 million “premature deaths” from a population of 600 million in 1958–61.

The Cultural Revolution: 1966–76

So many high-ranking Party members publicly criticized the Great Leap Forward’s failure that Mao began planning another purge in 1964. Launched in the summer of 1966, this targeted campaign to punish those in higher echelons of power erupted into a national movement, the Cultural Revolution. In response to Mao’s belief that the working-class needed to rise up and gain revolutionary experience, many people answered his call and released years of frustration at Party officials for communist rule. Mao shut down schools and created the Red Guards, young high school and college students given the power to overthrow authority and reeducate “capitalist roaders,” those who pretended to follow socialist egalitarian ideals but who believed in capitalism. Dedicated, passionate, and sometimes violent, the Red Guards were motivated to overturn the “Four Olds”—a pejorative phrase referring to the ideas, customs, culture, and habits of pre-communist China. They raided houses to destroy cultural and religious artifacts and subjected many Party officials and intellectuals to “struggle sessions”—verbal harassment, public humiliation, beating, and rehabilitation. Moyer Li recalls
seeing the principal at her local school being beaten, and the deputy denounced by his seven-year-old daughter. However, conflict began to form between rebel factions intent on seizing control during the chaos, and the officially sanctioned Red Guard, who were often just as brutal.

As the Cultural Revolution intensified, ordinary Chinese people were expected to memorize quotations from Chairman Mao, published in *The Little Red Book*. Everyone was required to self-criticize and proclaim any capitalist or elitist thoughts—regardless of whether they were true or not—since the act of proclaiming was more important than the content. Large-character posters were posted everywhere, either as public self-criticism or as specific attacks on other individuals for counter-revolutionary behavior. In his memories of the period, Chinese novelist Yu Hua recalls, “An era when everything was painted in black and white, when the enemy was always wrong and we were always right; nobody had the courage to suggest that the enemy might sometimes be right and we might sometimes be wrong.”

By January 1967, the fighting between factions of Red Guards and between the Red Guards and the rebels was out of control, with rural factions even overthrowing committees and stealing official seals to legitimize their orders. Mao sent in the military to regain control and defused the youth-driven Red Guards by sending as many as 16 million students to the countryside, where they did hard labor and were rehabilitated to proper communist thought. In *The Great Leap*, Wen Chang was re-educated in the provinces until his skills in English were needed as a translator in Beijing. This was the only way to escape work in the countryside, as jobs were assigned and any insubordination carefully recorded in each individual’s dossier.

Although many of the practices of the Cultural Revolution continued for the next several years, much of the passion and violence of the first two years calmed down over the remainder of the decade. Mao continued to play factions against each other, constantly changing the boundary between acceptably revolutionary and traitorously counter-revolutionary in a way that people compared to flipping pancakes. The Cultural Revolution only ended with Mao’s death in 1976 and the removal of his main political supporters.

Throughout this period of massive social and political change, millions of Chinese citizens continued to support Mao’s beliefs. “I know that I myself never stopped believing in the Cultural Revolution, even as I was being persecuted,” said Ji Xianlin, a professor of Eastern languages at Beijing University during the Cultural Revolution who was subjected to struggle sessions and imprisoned for nine months. “Many of the persecutors were also victims of the revolution, just like the persecuted; the two simply happened to find themselves in different positions.”

**Tiananmen Square Protests: 1989**

Within 15 years of Mao’s death, China opened up to the West. Deng Xiaoping, a high-ranking Party official who carefully outmaneuvered his opponents to become the leader
of the People’s Republic of China, opened the economy to free enterprise and the larger international market. This era also saw the coming of age of a generation born in the latter half of the Cultural Revolution. Having experienced a stronger economy with fewer shortages and greater intellectual freedom (and without the capitalist traditions that might have made them targets), many young Chinese became politically active, just like the students in *The Great Leap* who grow in noise and confidence. These young people demanded dialogue with their government and challenged perceived ideas on free speech, economic inflation, and political corruption.

On April 15, 1989, Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary who was ousted by Deng for being too soft on protestors, died. Mourners began to gather in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, which had long been a location for political rallying during Mao’s leadership. At Hu’s funeral on April 22, three students knelt on the steps of the Great Hall of the People with a petition to speak with Premier Li Peng, a traditional gesture of both defiance and supplication. The Party refused to acknowledge the request.

On April 26, the *People’s Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China) published an editorial claiming that the students were seeking to destabilize the country. In response, tens of thousands of Beijing University students marched on Tiananmen Square. Hundreds of students began a hunger strike on May 13 in a call for political reform, forcing China’s leaders to cancel a Tiananmen Square tour for visiting Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev, a huge embarrassment for the administration.

On May 19, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang visited the striking students. “We came too late,” he told them regretfully; the government would not listen to them. After Ziyang’s visit, the students abandoned the hunger strike in favor of a sit-in throughout Tiananmen Square. The army attempted to move into the square but the protestors used their bodies as a blockade and attempted to convince the soldiers to stop supporting the government. The Party leaders approved military action to end the “counter-revolutionary riots” on June 2 and covertly moved soldiers and ammunition into the area. On the following night, thousands of soldiers cleared the square with gunfire. Gunshots continued throughout June 4. By June 5, all of Beijing was under military control. On June 9, Deng Xiaoping made a speech honoring the soldiers for their actions, without acknowledging the deaths of civilians.

The Tiananmen Square protests continue to be a fraught topic to this day. As recently as 2011, the *China Daily*, China’s English language newspaper, published an article claiming that the Tiananmen massacre was proved to be a myth started by Western media. The Tiananmen Mothers, a group attempting to collect the names of everyone killed, is forbidden from mourning openly. Estimates of how many were killed in Beijing on June 3–4 are still unknown but range from the hundreds to the thousands.

**Toward Today**

Almost 70 years have passed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, but there is still a great deal of information that has been hidden or lost. Many scars
remain from the widespread tragedy of these events; it some took writers 20 years to commit their experiences to paper. Government censorship also forbids topics such as the Tiananmen Square protests in any academic or popular spheres, and Chinese history textbooks only recently started including information about the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward.

The working-class revolution that Mao envisioned has ended—loyal Party members can amass wealth without accusations of being “capitalist roaders” or “counter-revolutionaries”—but Mao’s personality cult has carried on his legacy. Mao Zedong Thought is so pervasive that his image and ideas are now lauded by the current young generation. There is support for a return to a “China model” that does not adhere to free-market capitalism but relies on Party control. As echoed in The Great Leap, history is cyclical; each step forward into the future brings a longing for an idealized vision of the past.

Chasing Bravery
An Interview with Director Lisa Peterson

By Elspeth Sweatman

Theater director Lisa Peterson may have stopped playing basketball in high school, but the game’s rhythm and camaraderie have seeped into her work. “I’ve always used basketball as a metaphor in rehearsal,” she says. “The way the team works together to get the ball in the basket is akin to what it’s like for a cast of actors to play the language of, say, a George Bernard Shaw play. I often bring a ball into rehearsal and have people toss it as they speak a line, just to get used to the idea of throwing words across the stage and back again. It’s a great way of focusing and energizing language.”

In her 30-year career, Peterson has directed classic and contemporary plays at many of America’s leading theaters, including New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theater, the Mark Taper Forum, La Jolla Playhouse, Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Now, the two-time Obie Award winner and Berkeley Repertory Theatre associate director brings her A-game to The Geary for the first time. We sat down as rehearsals began to discover her game plan for The Great Leap.

When did you first meet playwright Lauren Yee?

Before I ever met Lauren, I’d seen a recording of a workshop that we had done at Berkeley Rep of Cambodian Rock Band (2018). That’s a very different play from The Great Leap, but it shows her facility and the size of her imagination. We were introduced about a year and a half ago by [A.C.T. Associate Artistic Director] Andy Donald for the workshop of The Great Leap at The Strand. At that point, Lauren was already preparing for the Denver [Center for the Performing Arts] production. She had just come from a workshop there, where she’d done a lot of rewriting.

Lauren is great to work with because she loves theater and she loves actors. She likes to be in the rehearsal room; she’s a theater beast. [Laughs] She’s incredibly smart. She’s very clear about what she’s doing, which is impressive for someone who has been playwriting for only a few years.

What did you learn from the New Strands Festival reading?

How the play lives onstage and how fast it needs to go. I realized how rhythmical and muscular it is; it’s almost like music. You have to play it right. I remember thinking how
strong all four actors need to be. It’s dynamic to read on the page but the humor and the depth of feeling, you can’t really tell until you see it, until you hear it in the mouths of the actors.

Is that rhythm, muscul arity, and humor something that happens organically in rehearsals?

Yes, but you have to recognize it. You have to ask the actors to think about it. In a way, that’s one of the main jobs of a director: to conduct the play as if it’s a musical score. You pick a tempo, encourage the actors to think faster, and decide when things will pause and when they’ll pick up again.

Are you a director who likes to do research?

It depends. A lot of my research is focused around the design process, which happens months before we start rehearsal. Together with the designers, I did a fair amount of visual research because we’re creating a world that’s made out of the reality of San Francisco and Beijing in 1989. What was San Francisco like then? What did an outdoor basketball court in Chinatown look like? What did Beijing look like? What did people have in their homes? Even though our particular design ended up fairly abstract, we needed to know where it was set.

But I’m not a big researcher, to be honest with you. I am very improvisational, so I primarily respond to what the playwright has given me and what the actors bring into the rehearsal room. My favorite part of directing is being in the room, in the moment.

How would you describe your vision for this production?

Basketball-court-meets-film-strip. [Chuckles] I’m working with scenic designer Robert Brill, who I have worked with for more than 25 years. He is a minimalist; he’s a genius at creating spaces that seem to have very little in them but are composed in just the right way. But then, he has this quirky sense of humor added to that, a bit of a pop aesthetic. I haven’t been able to work with Robert for a long time because he became a big Broadway designer. I could never get him, although I often tried. So it’s been a great pleasure for me working on this play with him.

In a way, the play takes place on a basketball court. I don’t think that’s just my vision; that’s what the play wants. In the opening stage direction, Lauren says that the play is written as a game. So I knew that we needed a minimalist, open space where the language would be the primary element, but the space also needed to have something basketball about it. Robert became obsessed with the idea of the floor. This is going to sound crazy but we’re actually using the hydraulic, built-in rake in The Geary to tilt the floor toward the audience just a little bit so they get the full effect.
A Note from A.C.T. Artistic Director
Pam MacKinnon

With each Geary Theater production this season, I have asked guest directors and designers to push the action into the laps of our audiences. The “split screen” parole offices and apartments in Sweat, designed by Andrew Boyce, played the lip of the stage with just eight feet of depth so that we were part of the most vulnerable moments in that play’s near present. Also, Allen Lee Hughes’s opening light cue momentarily blinded us into being a little more awake, instead of settling in for a story.

Taking it to the next level for my production of Edward Albee’s Seascape, we removed rows of seats up front to pour David Zinn’s sand dune into the house, blurring the lines of where the action can be played, a visual invitation to climb into the play. The height of the dune brought the actors up to the mezzanine level, so that those audience members might first meet lizards Sarah and Leslie eye to eye. Also, the airplane sound cues by designer Brendan Aanes roared through the house, playing from the back of the stage—open for all to see—way up to the second balcony, awakening not just the character Charlie onstage, but also us. We were all in a large room together at a moment in time, participating in the story.

Now with Lauren Yee’s The Great Leap, director Lisa Peterson and scenic designer Robert Brill are using the Geary’s raked stage, a design choice which was an integral feature in the early years of this company under William Ball. The stage, itself, is designed with this very feature available to slant from upstage to downstage—hence the terms—as much as one inch per every foot. Quite steep. The Great Leap’s basketball court is far from flat, so that we can see the floor itself, even from the lower orchestra seats, and also feel the actors’ energy tipping our way. Lauren’s play is a call to action. The design is a physical manifestation of this core theme. More to come!
And the film strip element?

The play begins and ends with a photograph. The main clue that Manford has about his father is a photograph. What links Saul and Wen Chang to the past is a photograph. We talked a lot in the design process about capturing history, capturing a moment, and how important that is in giving the play its historical context. It’s a basketball play—it has the rhythm of basketball—but it’s also about a historical moment. One of the great things Lauren has done is to plop this American kid down in the middle of a giant historical moment in Chinese history. He doesn’t understand the importance of where he is, but the audience knows. Because the play is about how photographs capture history, our design has become like a film strip; it’s not high but it’s very wide left to right.

What other aspects of *The Great Leap* are you looking forward to exploring in rehearsals?

I’m interested in the duality of the two different time periods—the past of the early ’70s and the present of 1989—and of San Francisco and Beijing. I’m also curious about the absence of the mother in the play. She’s described as a kind of Amazon, a great basketball player, and a fearless person. She did what Wen Chang couldn’t do; she escaped. In a way, Wen Chang is chasing her bravery. I have a thought about how to represent the spirit of the mother in the rhythm of a basketball. I’m not going to say too much more about it, but I love that scene when Wen Chang is talking to her while she’s offstage practicing and we don’t hear her voice, just a basketball. I think it’s very challenging. That’s one of the scenes I can’t wait to stage.

There have been a lot of sports plays recently with *The Wolves*, *The Nap*, and *The Royale*. What do you think is behind this rise in sports plays and what does sport let us explore onstage?

Sports are dynamic; they bring an energy onstage. We’re fascinated by people who play sports because they seem superhuman. If you’re looking for a dramatic subject, competitive sport puts you right away in a world that’s highly energized and dramatic. Also, the thing about sports is you really don’t know how it’s going to end. It’s open-ended. In theater, we have to make it feel like the story could end in any number of different ways.

Why this play now?

This play is about becoming brave and choosing to stand up against something that doesn’t seem right to you. It has to do with stepping out beyond yourself. That’s a message that we can always use, but I feel like we’re in a moment in history when we are all trying to encourage each other to stand up for ourselves and make the world the
way we want it to be—the way we think it should be—and not settle. Everybody in the play is crossing a line. What Manford does, that takes a lot of guts.

The other thing is that there’s a wonderful collision of cultures in the play between Chinese American, Jewish American, and Chinese. To think about China, to engage with China for San Franciscans in 2019 is to really look at the past and also look into the future.

You’ve directed everything from Shakespeare to Caryl Churchill to Naomi Wallace. How do you choose what projects to work on?

I like works that tackle big ideas and that play with language in one way or another. When I read The Great Leap, I immediately thought, “This is like an E.E. Cummings poem.” [Laughs] I like to do things that seem hard to me. I learned when I was a young director that it’s important to keep people guessing in terms of what they think you can do, so I try to do as many different kinds of things as I can. But each thing I do has some radical or forceful idea in it. Theater is our way of talking to each other deeply about where we’re at right now.

How did you get into directing?

When I went to Yale University, I had a teacher named Bart Teusch who had the instinct that maybe I was a director. He taught a directing seminar and asked me to take that class. The first time I ever directed (a scene from Woyzeck) I knew directing was what I was meant to do. I liked being an actor but I always knew I probably wasn’t going to be a professional one. The minute I started directing I knew I’d found my place.

What advice would you give a young artist who’s thinking about working in the theater?

Do as much of it as you can. When I was in high school, I did the school plays, but my friends and I also made a little theater company. We had such a passion for it that we wanted to make it ourselves. When I was at Yale, the theater department didn’t actually produce plays; all of the work was done by students just putting things up with each other. You’d pitch a play, pool your friends together, and you’d make it. That’s the best way to discover if you love it enough to commit yourself to it. Just do it, without permission, with your friends, as much as you can.
The Edge of Your Seat
The Links between Sports and Theater

By Simon Hodgson

There are great sporting events—the Olympic 100-meters, the Super Bowl, or the final of a Grand Slam in tennis—that are occasionally described as “theater.” But rarely does the reverse, theater described in sporting terms, happen. Although playwrights have occasionally reached for athletic protagonists (think of the former football star Brick in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or baseball player Troy Maxson in August Wilson’s *Fences*), the worlds of theater and sport have largely remained separate.

One reason is that it’s hard for actors to replicate the athleticism and virtuoso skill of world-class sports stars. “The difficulty is finding someone who’s got the acting chops but also has the physical agility,” says A.C.T. Casting Director Janet Foster. Richard Bean, the British playwright who wrote about cricket in *The English Game* (2008), spoke about the difficulty of reproducing the sport using actors. “We all know that films about [soccer] are usually terrible because you want to show that wonderful all-conquering Leeds United, and you get some fat bloke from some agency to play [stocky midfielder] Billy Bremner. It just never looks right.”

Sports fans may idolize their heroes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they will translate that passion into seeing a play about sports. “This is a model that’s still unproven,” said Gary Stevenson, a marketing professional whose career included work in the Women’s National Basketball Association and Major League Soccer before he invested in *Lombardi*, a Broadway football play that closed without turning a profit. “Selling a ticket to a play,” says Stevenson, “is a lot different than selling a ticket to a sporting event.”

Some sporting storylines may even alienate audiences. Patrick Marber, the Tony Award–nominated playwright of *Closer*, revealed his own apprehension about writing a play about a semi-pro soccer team, which played at London’s National Theatre in 2015. “I had the idea for *The Red Lion* with a slightly heavy heart because I thought I would be writing a play without women in it, and one that really is about men in a particularly male environment. I knew that I was limiting my audience with every page I wrote.”

So are theater and sports the night and day of entertainment? Though the supporters of each may guard their culture fiercely, there may be more similarities between the two than either set of spectators suspected.

OPPOSITE Actor BD Wong. Photo by Cheshire Isaacs.
The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd

In a room deep below the bustling crowd, a group of performers prepares for a great entertainment spectacle. They put masks over their heads, they cover their bodies with brightly colored outfits, they rub greasepaint on their faces. As they step out into the arena, the crowd roars. Is this a grand drama on the boards of The Geary, or the Super Bowl? The idea of performance—sporting or theatrical—is full of crossover, and costume is just one shared element. While we are used to seeing actors transfigure to create three-dimensional characters onstage, the same transformation takes place in the world of sports. Think of football players, layering their bodies with helmets, shoulder pads, gloves, and mouthguards. Or ice hockey goaltenders, whose wire-mesh faceguards and throat protectors make them look more like samurai warriors than athletes. Or motor-racing drivers, whose head-to-toe synthetic suits are treated with fire retardant in case of flames. In all three sports, these "costumes" are just as essential as those on a stage.

The arena too is an area essential to both activities. Not only does it focus the attention of the crowd, like a crucible, but it also enriches the event with history and the glorious ghosts of past players. Young actors stepping out onto the Geary stage remember the names and faces of all those who have climbed the same steps from the dressing rooms—Sarah Bernhardt, Laurence Olivier, Robert Donat, Judith Ivey, and John Douglas Thompson. Similarly, today’s athletes recall the heroes of Fenway Park in Boston, Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, or Stade Roland Garros in Paris as they step out onto the field of play. On some occasions, the same space is utilized by both actors and athletes—17th-century French playwright Molière frequently saw his work performed within the walled confines of tennis courts.

Although the players’ performance is limited to a defined area, a whole supporting cast play their parts around it. Just as theater understudies wait in the wings for their opportunity to perform in case an actor is sick, soccer reserves await their chance to step up from the bench. In theater, the backstage crew—stage managers, stitchers, sound engineers, designers, wig crew, ushers—are duplicated in sports by a host of supporting roles: coaches, assistants, trainers, masseurs, waterboys, managers, ball girls, tacticians, and scouts.

The very definition of space—the lines on a lacrosse field or the four inches of a gymnastics beam—opens up an entirely new concept common to theater and sports: rules. Every performer, along with their supporting team, is subjected to rules. For theater staff, those rules might range from the runtime of the show to theatrical conventions—how actors in a scene speak to each other without taking notice of the audience, or how Shakespeare’s acts often end with a rhyming couplet. For sportspeople, the guidelines are often codified into rulebooks and enforced by uniformed referees.

What Happens Next?

Theater and sports don’t just intersect on their technical elements. They are each oriented around the same fundamental building block: drama. Whether it is a young Chinese American desperate to make it onto the plane for Beijing in The Great Leap or
a veteran point guard taking the money shot in a playoff basketball game, we want to know what happens next. The concepts of drama, conflict, and storytelling run through both sports and theater. “Everything is condensed. And that’s what we get from good drama, good plays. Life, concentrated,” says Paden Fallis, actor, director, and playwright of *The Play about the Coach* (2007).

In the sports pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* this month, as journalists dissect the college basketball tournament March Madness, they’re using—in addition to stats on free throw percentages and win-loss records—the same elements of storytelling used by playwrights from Sophocles to Sarah Ruhl. Who has the momentum? Which team is the underdog? Which player faces their last chance at college glory? In televised sports, commentators function like a modern-day chorus, framing the action for viewers, setting the scene for the second half, or building suspense as the action nears its climax.

Because conflict (the competition between rivals in sports; the power-play between characters in theater) fuels storytelling, we long for the clarity of heroes and villains. Sometimes in theater, those roles are pre-assigned, such as the wicked De Flores in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s tragedy *The Changeling* (1622) or the witty Rosalind, the heroine of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Sometimes, as in *Macbeth*, the character evolves into a villain. Similarly in sports, crowds can identify a villain quickly from his actions (such as Real Madrid soccer player Pepe, specialist in unseen fouls, or baseball player Ty Cobb, who took pleasure in sliding into opposing second basemen spikes raised). Alternatively, a player can make a mistake that tars them with the label, as with Steve Smith, the Australian cricketer banned for a year after conspiring to change the condition of the ball, or NFL quarterback Tom Brady, who was caught in 2015 requesting staffers to deflate footballs.
Building Common Ground

Brady’s slip may have been made four years ago, but “Deflategate” lives on in America’s collective cultural memory. It is this longevity, once expressed in trivia questions but now spread electronically through memes and gifs, that reminds us of the principal reason why theaters continue to pursue audiences of sports fans. In America, sports are the great bridge that connects us. Republican or Democrat, urban or rural, young or old or anything between, we will all come together to cheer for the Green Bay Packers, or Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles, or golfer Jordan Spieth, or the San Jose Sharks. From bars to bodegas, sports are everywhere—they are the screensaver of our culture.

The ability of the arts and sports to reach millions make sports stories an attractive target for playwrights and theaters. “There is a huge audience out there for sporting stories,” says actor and playwright Maxine Peake, who wrote about real-life cyclist Beryl Burton in Beryl (2014). “Thirty percent of the audience at the first run at West Yorkshire Playhouse had never been to the theater before, and I imagine the majority of those people were cycling fanatics and/or Beryl Burton admirers.”

Millions of people in America today view the world through the lens of sports. Walk down the streets of a sports city such as Boston, Chicago, or San Francisco, and you’ll see residents wearing the jerseys and the colors of their city’s teams. In Pittsburgh, the
choice of which colors to wear are even easier to figure out, as all the major professional
teams (the Pirates in baseball, Steelers in football, and Penguins in hockey) wear black
and gold. For many current playwrights, sports is a lens that enables them to explore
and reflect our contemporary culture—a jumping-off point for other human stories of
underdogs and inequality, dedication and corruption, love and power.

*The Great Leap*, which takes Geary Theater audiences from the hardscrabble
basketball courts of San Francisco’s Chinatown to the Forbidden City of Beijing, looks
like a sports play, but it also investigates father-and-son dynamics as well as the complex
cultural ties between China and America. *The Wolves*, Sarah DeLappe’s fast, fierce
depiction of teenage female soccer players that will be presented this season by A.C.T.’s
Young Conservatory, captures the charged energy, anger, and hope of a generation. And
*Toni Stone*, the new play by Lydia Diamond about the first woman to play baseball in
the Negro Leagues, may be set in the 1940s, but its story of a woman in a man’s world
reverberates today.

Cities across America are leaning in to sports stories. In 2019, Lauren Yee’s *The Great
Leap* is lined up to play at theaters in Minneapolis, Vancouver, and Philadelphia, after
successful recent runs in Seattle, Denver, and San Francisco. Even the critics are starting
to shift; just look at the last 15 years of Pulitzer Prizes, in which three sports-themed
plays have made it to the “final round”: Richard Greenberg’s baseball drama *Take Me
Out* (2003), Kristoffer Diaz’s wrestling tale *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* (2010),
and Sarah DeLappe’s soccer story *The Wolves* (2017). Sports and theater may have
different audience bases, but the shared DNA of these two great cultural pursuits is
bringing them ever closer.

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Images in Air
A Conversation with Projection Designer Hana S. Kim

By Annie Sears

When Hana S. Kim was accepted into UCLA’s School of Theater, she intended to study scenic design. But after she stumbled upon projections, she realized that her background in film—as well as her BFA in graphic design from Seoul National University—equipped her to work at this intersection of film and theater. “Projection for the stage is a weird combination of pre-recorded and live,” says Kim. “It’s something completely digitally fabricated becoming super tactile. I love that hybrid aspect of it.”

Kim is now an award-winning designer, holding a Bay Area Theater Critics Circle Award for projection design; a Helen Hays Award and a StageScene LA Award for scenic design; a Sherwood Award from Center Theatre Group; and a Princess Grace Award. Although she mostly works in southern California, she has also assisted with two designs on Broadway and with arts organizations here in the Bay Area, including Z Space, Magic Theatre, and the San Francisco Symphony. Earlier this season, she designed projections for our production of Sweat. As she began conceptualizing Lauren Yee’s basketball story for The Geary, Kim spoke with us about how projections enhance theatrical storytelling, and specifically how her projections will enhance The Great Leap.

What attracted you to projection design?
I grew up with a lot of film materials at home in Korea because my father was curating film festivals, so I learned at a young age that you can tell stories through visuals. I particularly remember Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters, a film about a Japanese writer. The visuals were very beautiful, and the storytelling was so theatrical. Then when I went to undergrad, I learned about two-dimensional media. But I wanted to learn more about three-dimensional media and environmentally supporting a story. Projections are a weird overlap, a really exciting way for me to use my graphic skills in a three-dimensional space. While taking a projection design class at UCLA, I thought, “Oh, this is way more interesting than what I thought I’d be doing!” Then I turned from scenic to projection design.
What can projections accomplish that other design mediums can’t?
Projection is ephemeral, yet specific. This might be a weird way of saying it, but it’s an image that can be in air. The image feels solid, but it’s not solid at all. Making something appear and disappear like magic—that’s something that video can do really well. Live-feed projections are really interesting for that reason. With a live-feed camera, you can project what’s happening onstage, but also manipulate it. You can get an illusion of what’s happening right in front of you in real time. Video is very effective at messing up reality.

Projection is still a relatively new design element, so many audience members don’t know much about it. As a designer, where do you begin?
Projection can be so many different things. Sometimes it can be a scenic support—really just background—or it can be a special effect. Sometimes it can be a poetic commentary. I usually focus on one of these three directions for how I want to use video in the show. When I read the script or libretto, I think, “How can I support this material visually?”

What tools do you use?
A lot of designers use Photoshop and After Effects. I usually make my own media, animating and recording a lot myself. I create my own digital content, and then I calculate where to put the projector to cover the surface I want to cover. Projection is a light source, so anything that diffuses light or won’t reflect light isn’t a good surface. Anything that sucks up light, like black or velveteen, won’t be effective; we won’t be able to see the image on it. At the same time, a mirror or another reflective material won’t be good because it won’t reflect the image in a way that our eye can recognize.

I bet that requires a lot of collaboration with the scenic designer. Do you like that, or as a scenic designer yourself, is it easier to have control over both elements?
I’m a strong believer in collaboration. It’s always exciting to see someone else’s idea—how that person thinks of the space—and consider how to merge my stuff with it. If I do both elements myself, communication is easier because I can just talk to myself in my head. [Laughs] I have my style, and I always try to surprise myself, but it’s exciting to be surprised by someone else.

What about collaborating with the lighting designer?
That’s a huge part of the tech process. Because it’s all light sources, it’s easy to get washed out unless you’re just using your own LED wall. Even then, if you shine light on it, it’ll be a little difficult. Whether the lighting designer decides to have spill over onto the projection surfaces—it just requires collaboration in tech.
What else happens in the tech process?

Well, you have to inspect the playback system to make your content cue-able. A live show isn't like a movie. It's not like you turn it on and that's it. It has to flow with the live actors' pacing. There will be cues that the stage manager controls that go with the onstage actions or dialogue, following the speed of the play, because it will be different every time.

You're still very early on in the design process for *The Great Leap*, but what are you envisioning right now?

The play really focuses on four characters, but the context of it is so important. Where in time? When in time? I plan to provide that bigger context through video. Lisa and I have talked about using the aesthetic of news media, maybe playing a bit with newspaper. When you look at it, it has a halftone pattern, using lots of small dots to create the image. I've been looking into some vintage Chinese news prints, and thinking some about the pop art movement.
My design will also support the scenic elements and the rhythm of the basketball playing. In the script, playwright Lauren Yee says that the play should be like a basketball game. The rhythm of the language and how the characters react has a great tempo. Multimedia can be very helpful in achieving that—the effortlessness of it appearing and disappearing, creating visual rhythms that go with the play.

Where will you get your material? Do you think you’ll be doing a lot of animation?
I think it’ll involve a good amount of shooting, especially for the end of Act Two. I’m curious about how we’ll create this long monologue that’s actually a game.

Do you think you’ll shoot here in San Francisco?
I’d like to. I travel all over, but the more I visit here, the more I feel quasi-local. My affection for the area grows deeper. I’m excited that the show is set in San Francisco.

Projection seems to have become the fifth staple of design: scenic, lights, costumes, sound, and now projections. Do you see projection being incorporated into all theater productions in the future?
Projection can enhance many stories, although I am a believer that there are shows better off without video. I don’t think anything is mandatory to storytelling, but using media can help tell a story that’s bigger than life because of its spectacular quality. There are pros and cons there, because I personally think the essence of art isn’t spectacle. But incorporating media into live storytelling lowers the boundary to enter this genre for people who maybe feel like they don't belong in a theater. It feels more approachable, and you’re more curious about it—especially younger audiences who are used to a certain degree of stimulation. Media itself is becoming such an integral part of our lives. We’ve always had media, but now there are so many channels for it in our everyday life. So media can certainly help you to enter into theater and get to the point where you won't need the spectacle to stay interested.
A Great Leap Synopsis

Act One

Prologue, Beijing, 1971. A grainy image of two basketball coaches shaking hands flashes across the stage.

An indoor basketball court at the University of San Francisco, 1989. Seventeen-year-old basketball fanatic Manford is giving his pitch to Coach Saul. If he is put on the team, he will score points, win games, and shoot over whatever, whenever, whoever is getting in his way. Kid, what’re you doing? Saul says. USF is playing Beijing University next month, Manford explains. There was an article in the Chronicle. He has to play. You interrupted my practice, says Saul, and you injured my point guard, but I should put you on my team? Manford tells the coach that he’s the best player in the bay, and Saul’s team sucks. Come back in the fall, Saul says, or better yet, when Manford hits puberty. USF was 8–20 this year; Manford can change that. Let’s make a bet, he says. If he makes 100 free throws in a row, he’s on the team. OK, says Saul. Manford takes the ball.

Beijing, 1989. Wen Chang is writing a letter. What Saul says in the Chronicle interview isn’t true. He didn’t bring basketball to China. Wen knows; he was plucked from obscurity to be the translator when Saul came to teach American-style basketball in Beijing in 1971. The cultural ministry wanted Wen to take notes on everything Saul said so that the Chinese could set up their own team at Beijing University. But the slang and curses Saul used weren’t in Wen’s dictionary. His balls-to-the-wall view didn’t mesh with the rigidly organized world that Wen knew. The idea of never waiting for someone to give you what should be yours was an alien concept.

At a 1971 game played for the ministry, Saul mentioned that the coaching position at Beijing University would be offered to Wen. Wen didn’t want the job, but knew he must accept it. When you’re ready, gimme a call, Saul said. He’ll come over with his team and crush Wen’s team. Give me 18 years, Wen said. They shook hands.

An outdoor basketball court in San Francisco’s Chinatown, 1989. Manford stands on the free throw line, staring at the basket. His cousin Connie challenges him to a little one-on-one. I don’t want to play, Manford says. Then why have you been out here for an hour? Come on, you’re missing the playoffs, Connie says. Game 5. The Bulls are down. Manford swears. Why does everything have to be so messed up? Your mom’s funeral was today, Connie replies, and you’re mad at the Bulls? Manford apologizes for leaving the funeral early. So where did you go? asks Connie. To shoot 100; he missed the last shot. He’ll make it someday, she says. Won’t be long before a Chinese player is in the NBA; the players from Beijing University are giants. Manford looks at her. Giants? And Saul has no idea.
An apartment building in Oakland, 1989. You’re following me home now? Saul says when Manford surprises him outside his front door. I’m giving you a second chance, Manford says. Has Saul even studied the Beijing team? No need, Saul says, he chose their coach. Inside his apartment, his phone rings. No Chinese team will ever beat an American team, Saul says. Now, it’s his daughter’s birthday, and he has to take this call. The Beijing players are seven feet tall, Manford blurts. Saul will be embarrassed on national television, and his coaching contract at USF relies on this game. Manford knows basketball, knows Saul’s playing career, and knows Chinese culture. Do we have a deal? asks Manford. Paperwork is due at the noon practice. Manford tells Saul he’ll be there at 7 a.m.

Halftime of the exhibition game, Beijing, 1971. In his letter, Wen Chang recalls a moment when Saul spotted a woman across the court. He nudged Wen, who was rigorously taking notes on the game. Who is she? asked Saul. An old classmate, here to help me interpret your instructions for the ministry. She is also the best player Wen has ever seen. Saul needled him to flirt with her. Wen refused. What, you have a girlfriend or something? Saul asked. I have grown up during the worst of the Cultural Revolution, Wen replied. He only thought of survival. Saul nudged him forward. The translator crossed the court.

Chinatown, 1989. Connie offers Manford a ride to school. No thanks! Manford replies. The counselor called, Connie says, Manford hasn’t been to school in three
weeks. He misses one more day and he won’t graduate. Tell them I got a job doing the only thing I’m good at, says Manford. Basketball?! You’re skipping school for basketball? He shows her the newspaper. He is going to Beijing tomorrow. China has massive, national protests right now, Connie warns. Students are on hunger strikes. The streets rumble with tanks and troops. Stay here, Connie insists. If you’re looking to find yourself, that’s not the place. Holding up the paper once more, Manford asks Connie to really look at the photo of the two coaches shaking hands.

Saul’s office at USF, 1989. Saul is on the phone with his ex-wife when Connie barges in. Manford is forbidden from going to Beijing unless she signs off; he’s a minor. If he goes to China, he will get into trouble. Saul will take care of Manford. No, Connie says, you will do whatever it takes to win the game. Connie hands him a list of American Embassy staff. They know we’re coming, Saul says. Make sure they do, Connie replies. Not entirely reassured, she gives Manford her permission. After all, it is only four days.

Act Two

A bus in Beijing, 1989. Saul gives his team a pep talk. Keep a low profile, do as you are told, and stay out of trouble. Their actions represent America and the stakes are high. They are here at the invitation of Deng Xiaoping; they don’t care about the riots that are happening. Do we need Manford to translate any of that for you? asks Saul. He scans the bus. Where is Manford?

Tiananmen Square, 1989. Manford stands lost in a sea of protestors. Does anyone speak English? He is here to play basketball for America. Yes, U.S.A. The students take up the chant.

Wen’s apartment overlooking Tiananmen Square, 1989. Saul and Wen catch up and exchange friendly banter about the upcoming game. So out with it, Saul says, you didn’t drag me up all those stairs to chat. Manford cannot play in the game; his papers were not submitted in time. Wen hands over a picture of Manford among the protestors. The party is already on edge, and Manford’s actions aren’t helping. This is sabotage, says Saul. He’s my best player. Fax me your starting line-up by midnight, says Wen. If Manford is on it, the game will be canceled.

A hallway in the hotel, 1989. You’re out of the game, Saul tells Manford. The risk is too high. Manford has been waiting for this game his entire life—he’ll be a benchwarmer, a sixth man, anything. You did this to yourself, says Saul, you ran off. Manford digs into Saul. Not taking chances is how he ended up 8-20 and never played pro. I ruined my own career, says Saul. Don’t make the same mistake.
Wen’s apartment, 1989. Manford confronts Wen. You took me out of the game. How did you find me? Wen replies. Manford hands him the Chronicle. No, not the article on the exhibition game. The obituaries. Manford only knew three things about his mother: she was born in China, she loved the Warriors, and the only photo she ever kept was one of two men shaking hands at a basketball game. Tell me who I am to you, Manford demands. Then, you never have to see me again. Silence. He leaves the paper in Wen’s lap.

1971. Wen reads from the letter he is writing. If your lover is scheduled to be sent away for speaking out against the party, what do you do? he asks. He last saw her on a basketball court. She told him she was pregnant. Come to the United States with me, she said. Wen couldn’t face rebuilding his life from scratch again. He never saw her after that.

San Francisco, 1989. Manford calls Connie. Are you safe, she asks. I saw him, Manford says. He wouldn’t say it. Wen should have come to America with Manford’s mother; he had a choice. Your mother was an exception, Connie says. Like Rick Barry forced to switch from the Rockets to the Warriors, Wen wasn’t in control of his future, his life. You never see what’s right in front of you, she counsels. Remember what your mom used to say: Every game is a second chance to live your life all over again.

The day of the game, June 4, 1989. Swarmed by reporters, the teams arrive. No sign of Manford. A whistle blows. Tip-off. Wen and Saul spit out calls. The game doesn’t go like Saul expected. Halftime: Beijing 47, USF 12. As more USF players get injured, Manford bursts onto the court. He reminds Saul that he will score points, win games; he is relentless. Get in there, Saul replies. He takes the court. SWISH. Manford makes a basket. Wen motions to end the game, but then, he realizes. Manford plays just like his mother. The game spins out of control. Across the city, tanks roll into Tiananmen Square.

Seven seconds left. USF, one point behind. Wen receives a note: End this game now. Manford drives for one last shot. WHACK. A punch to the face. He lays still on the court. Saul helps him up. Security guards multiply on the sidelines and party officials disappear from the crowd as Manford limps to the free throw line. He shoots. SWISH. A tie. Beijing 78, USF 78. Time out, Wen calls. He moves towards Manford. Take the shot, he says. The ball bounces. Manford shoots.

June 5, 1989. Amid the sounds of gunfire, Wen finishes his letter as he waits in his apartment for the party to arrest him. To my son, he writes, know that I loved the game even if I never played it. My story may end here, but yours is just beginning. As the faxed letter sends, his door is broken down. For the first time in his life, he resists.
A Great Leap Glossary

To be amicable is to be friendly, without hard feelings.

Asian American studies is an academic discipline that explores the history, experiences, and cultures of Asian Americans. In The Great Leap, Connie is going to graduate school to earn her master’s degree in Asian American studies.

When Wen Chang says, “Between a rock and something else that is also hard,” he’s mis-phrasing the common American idiom, “Between a rock and a hard place.” This phrase refers to a situation where one must decide between two equally difficult choices.

“Big macher” is a Yiddish way of describing someone who is very important.

Cabbage Patch Kids is a line of toy dolls. Sold since 1978, Cabbage Patch Kids were popular throughout the 1980s and are still manufactured today.

Carpe diem is a Latin phrase whose literal meaning—“seize the day”—refers to grabbing an opportunity.

Chang’an Avenue (which translates to “Eternal Peace Street”) is a major street in Beijing. It is the road directly before Tiananmen gate on the north side of Tiananmen Square, where the Tiananmen Square Protests occurred in 1989. Many central government buildings—including Zhongnanhai, where the Communist Party of China is housed—are also located on Chang’an Avenue.

Wen Chang and Saul refer to Chengdu, a city in southwest China, as Panda Town and reference Ling-Ling and Sing-Sing, two pandas gifted to the US after President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China.

Chink-eyed is a highly offensive racial slur referring to the stereotype of Asian Americans having small eyes.

Colma is a small town a few miles south of San Francisco that is known for its vast cemeteries. In the early 20th century, when San Francisco passed legislation to shift its graveyards out of the city, Colma became the designated location. The town now contains more than 1.5 million graves.

Columbo was an American television series about a Los Angeles homicide detective, starring Peter Falk as the title character. The show aired from 1968 to 2003. When Saul calls Manford “Columbo,” he means that Manford is acting like a detective.

OPPOSITE A view from the Summer Palace in Beijing. Photo by Erin Carhart.
Columbus Avenue is a street in San Francisco that runs diagonally through the neighborhoods of North Beach and Chinatown.

Commie is a derogatory Western term for communist.

Copulate means to have sex.

When a couple divorces, they must determine who gets legal guardianship—or custody—of their children. The parents can agree to joint custody, where both parents have the right to make decisions about the child’s life, or one parent can assume full custody, where they are solely responsible for their child’s wellbeing.

Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) was the communist leader of China following Mao Zedong, from the late 1970s until Xiaoping’s death. He is known for instituting the one-child policy (families were only allowed to have one child), reopening trade with the West, and supporting the Communist Party of China in using force to suppress the 1989 riots in Tiananmen Square.

A diplomat is someone who officially represents their home country while abroad. Diplomats can be granted diplomatic immunity, meaning they cannot be susceptible to lawsuit under their host country’s laws. The building where diplomats work is called an embassy.

A dossier is a collection of documents focused on a specific person, event, or subject.

Duke University is a prestigious, private university in North Carolina. Its men’s basketball team—the Duke Blue Devils—plays in the Division I of the National Collegiate Athletics Association.

The Forbidden City is China’s former imperial palace, located in the center of Beijing. It is called a city because of its size: 98 buildings covering 178 acres, all surrounded by a moat (a water-filled ditch). It served as China’s political center from 1420–1912, and now it is a popular tourist site offering a glimpse into China’s rich history and cultural traditions.

Fuzhou is a city on the Min river in Fujian province in southeastern China. Wen Chang says that he was sent to labor in Fuzhou; agricultural labor was part of Communist China’s rehabilitation programs for intellectuals or those deemed opponents of the state. The northern Chinese province of Hebei, near Beijing, was another location for rehabilitation programs.

Galileo High School (aka Galileo Academy of Science and Technology) is a high school in San Francisco’s Russian Hill neighborhood. Alumni include baseball player Joe DiMaggio and current San Francisco Mayor London Breed.

When Manford says, “Help me, Connie Fong, you are my only hope,” he’s referencing the film Star Wars: Episode VI – A New Hope.

Hoodoo is a Black American spirituality that emerged amongst 17th-century enslaved people in the southern United States. Hoodoo combines a number of West African traditions including using talismans, bodily fluids, and chants. When
Saul uses the term hoodoo, he means general witchcraft or magic.

“I think; therefore I am” is the English translation of cogito ergo sum, a Latin phrase written by René Descartes (1596–1650), a French thinker credited as the father of modern philosophy. The phrase was used as evidence for humans’ existence—our ability to think proves that we exist.

“Ich bin ein beijinger” is a reference to an iconic 1963 speech made by US President John F. Kennedy in West Berlin. Kennedy used the line “Ich bin ein Berliner” (“I am a Berliner”) to underline American support for the people of West Germany in their Cold War conflict with Russia, which controlled the land east of the Berlin Wall. In The Great Leap, Saul interposes Beijing for Berlin.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” is one of the most famous opening lines in literary history, drawn from Charles Dickens’s 1859 novel A Tale of Two Cities. Dickens uses the phrase to contrast the differing political, social, and cultural situations in prosperous Georgian Britain and France, a nation racked by bloody revolution.

John, Paul, George, and Ringo refer to John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr, the four members of British rock band the Beatles. The lyrics of hit 1968 single “Revolution” reference political change and include the line “You say you want a revolution.” Basketball coach Saul also references another Beatles hit, “Eleanor Rigby” (1968).
Basketball Terms

**Division I** is the highest level in US college sports. In the 2018–19 academic year, there were 347 Division I schools in the nation.

Basketball teams have five positions. The **point guard** is the most skillful ball handler. He or she controls the rhythm of the team’s offense and sets up attacking moves. The **shooting guard** is the most accurate long-range shooter on the team, taking shots from the three-point arc. The **center** is a tall, powerful player who uses height and strength to dominate the area beneath the basket. The remaining two positions include **power forward**—a physical player who focuses on winning the ball back after missed shots—and **small forward**, who is less imposing but more nimble.

**Free throws** are uncontested shots at the basket that are given to players who have been fouled when shooting. Each free throw is worth a point and is taken from a line located 15 feet from the basket.

**Full court press** is a high-energy defensive tactic in which the team without the ball swarms the other team across the entire length of the court, rather than just defending the area around their own basket. The aim is to harry the opposing players into making a mistake and then regain possession of the ball.

**Layups** are short-range shots that generally involve an offensive player aiming the basketball to bounce off the backboard and into the basket.

**Pick and roll** is an offensive tactic in which the ball handler uses a stationary teammate (known as a screen) to shield him or her from a defender. When the defender is blocked, the attacker with the ball can either drive to the basket or pass to the screener, who has a clear chance to score.

**A roster** is a list of players.

**Run and gun** is an offensive strategy stressing speed and tempo. Rather than passing the ball between stationary players, run-and-gun teams look to race down the court to score before the defenders can get set.

**Suicides** are a drill involving short, repeated sprints between two points (often the ends of the basketball court, 94 feet apart).

**Zone defense** is a tactic in which the team without the ball divides the floor around its basket into zones, with each player responsible for protecting a specific zone and denying the team with the ball chances to score. It differs from man-to-man defense, in which each player guards a designated opposing player.
Kamikaze warriors are members of the Japanese military who would go on a mission knowing they would die. They wore headbands called hachimaki, which were often decorated with inspirational phrases such as “Success,” “Number One,” or “Determined to win.” In *The Great Leap*, Saul equates the 15,000 Chinese students protesting in Tiananmen Square to “Japs [an ethnic slur referring to Japanese people] on a suicide mission.” Demanding a conversation with their communist government and freedom of speech in the press, these students were on a hunger strike, a prolonged refusal to eat as a demonstration of commitment to a cause.

Kato is a fictional Japanese character in the Green Hornet storyline. Britt Reid is the Green Hornet, and Kato is his valet by day and crime-fighting sidekick by night. He was portrayed by Chinese American actor and martial artist Bruce Lee in the 1966–67 television adaptation, which is why the show’s popularity skyrocketed in China. There, it was marketed as “The Kato Show.”

A last will and testament is a legal document detailing what should happen to a person’s possessions after their death.

Live Aid was a 1985 concert that raised money for the famine in Ethiopia. Held at both London’s Wembley Stadium and Philadelphia’s John F. Kennedy Stadium, the concert raised over $127 million. Over 172,000 people attended in person, and 1.9 billion watched the live broadcast to
basketball around the globe in the 1980s and ’90s. Jordan inspired many young players because he was cut from his high school basketball team, but continued to work hard until he attained success. He played in the NBA for a total of 15 seasons—13 with the Chicago Bulls and 2 with the Washington Wizards—and won many accolades, including six NBA championships, five Most Valuable Player awards, and the record for most points in a playoff game (63 points), among many others.

Mikhail Gorbachev (born 1931) was the general secretary for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985–91 and president of the Soviet Union from 1990–91. He is best known for instituting perestroika, a policy to diminish

Mervyn’s was a chain of department stores founded in Hayward, California in 1949. By 1975, Mervyn’s had branches all over the Bay Area, specializing in clothing, bedding, beauty products, electronics, and housewares. In 1978, the company became a part of the Target Corporation and had branches popping up all over the country. However, pushed out by other large department stores such as Walmart, Mervyn’s went bankrupt and closed entirely in 2008.

Michael Jordan (born 1963) is regarded by many as the greatest NBA player of all time and is attributed with popularizing

hear artists such as David Bowie, The Who, Paul McCartney, Madonna, Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, and Queen.

centralized government power by encouraging businesses to become self-financing. He also introduced glasnost, a policy permitting the media to criticize public figures. Credited with ending the Cold War peacefully by easing tensions between the USSR and the US, Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1990.

*Mishpucha* is the Hebrew word for family.

A Mongolian is a citizen of Mongolia, a large and landlocked country to the north of China more than twice the size of Texas. *Genghis Khan* (1162–1227), Mongolia’s most famous warrior, led an army of soldiers on horseback that sacked Beijing and terrorized four thousand miles of Asia—the 13th century nomadic invaders that Wen Chang mentions in the play. Khan’s invasion motivated the construction of the *Great Wall*, a vast fortification stretching more than 10,000 miles across China.

Peking duck is an iconic dish from Beijing, featuring primarily thin, crispy skin and little meat. Often served with shredded vegetables and sweet sauce, Peking duck has been around for centuries.

A rabble-rouser is someone who tries to get a crowd riled up, often for political purposes.

*Rain Man* is a 1988 Hollywood movie starring Dustin Hoffman as an autistic man with extraordinary mathematical abilities. It won four Academy Awards, including Best Actor in a Leading Role for Hoffman.

**Ping-pong diplomacy** refers to the improved US relations with China in the 1970s—in which elite table-tennis players from America visited China (and vice versa).

**Rick Barry** (born 1944) is a former NBA player famous for his underarm free-throw shot. Barry played for the San Francisco/Golden State Warriors, the New York Nets, and the *Houston Rockets* throughout his career. He is the only player ever to lead the NCAA, NBA, and the American Basketball Association (1967–76) in scoring.

**Sam Wo’s** is a Chinese restaurant located in San Francisco’s Chinatown. In the 1980s, Sam Wo’s became well known because of one employee: Edsel Ford Fung, the world’s rudest waiter. Fung greeted customers saying, “Sit down and shut up!” He cleared tables before patrons were finished, intentionally spilled food on customers, and sat individuals with strangers.

A *schlemiel* is a Yiddish term for “fool,” often referring to clumsy or incompetent people in the context of a joke.

**Scratch ‘n’ sniff** refers to a surface, usually a sticker or a piece of cardboard, that has been sprayed with a scented coating. When scratched, the coating releases an odor.

A *spiel* is a long speech.

A *super* (superintendent) in a building is responsible for repairs and maintenance of the building.
Suzie Wong is a character from British writer Richard Mason's 1957 novel *The World of Suzie Wong*, which was adapted into a film in 1960. The story follows Robert Lomax, an Englishman who travels to Hong Kong to find inspiration for his paintings. Inadvertently, he has booked a room at a hotel that doubles as a brothel. There, he meets and falls in love with the prostitute Suzie Wong.

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act (1972) mandates that US educational institutions or programs which receive federal funding must not discriminate on the basis of sex, across activities including recruitment, admissions, athletics, education, and financial assistance.

Tourette's (or Tourette Syndrome) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by repeated, involuntary gestures and sounds. The disorder is named for Georges Gilles de la Tourette, a 19th-century French physician who worked on patients exhibiting the symptoms. In *The Great Leap*, Saul claims that his premeditated outburst (made to distract Wen Chang from shooting a free throw) is driven by Tourette's.

To read something verbatim is to recite it word-for-word, exactly like the original source text.
Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do playwright Lauren Yee, director Lisa Peterson, and the design team incorporate basketball into this production?
2. How do the actions of Wen Chang reflect the years he has lived through in China?
3. What skills does Manford bring to the basketball court? How do those capabilities serve him off the court?
4. What other sports stories—both famous and forgotten—would you like to see onstage?
5. In history books, moments of social and political change are often presented through a nostalgic, glorified lens. But for those who lived through those moments, they were rife with violence, terror, and hardship. How does seeing *The Great Leap* make you think differently about history?
6. The characters in *The Great Leap* are courageous, even though they are uncertain of the outcomes of their actions. In today’s uncertain world, what changes would you like to see?

For Further Information


