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## Documentary Filmmaker Christine Toy Johnson On The Art Of Inclusion

By Irene Vitale · [Leave a Comment](#)



In a twenty-year career that has spanned Broadway, film and television, Christine Toy Johnson has played everything from cops and doctors, to cats and cheerleaders. And as an Asian-American, she also has run into her fair share of discrimination. She's been passed over for acting gigs because of her ethnicity, and was even told by a casting director that she wasn't the "regular girl" he was looking for.

Regardless, Johnson has built an impressive acting resume — her latest gig has her appearing opposite Laura Linney on Showtime's critically-acclaimed new series, *THE BIG C*. Meanwhile, she's become a devoted anti-discrimination advocate, serving on the board of The Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, and as co-chair of Actors' Equity Association's Equal Employment Opportunity Committee. An accomplished screenwriter and playwright, Johnson also is using her craft as a vehicle to affect change, — creating her own production company, ReImagined World Entertainment, with husband Bruce Johnson. "We started a few years ago," she explains, "in order to start telling our own stories of underdogs

triumphing over adversity in film and theatre projects."

Her latest production, the award-winning documentary film: *Transcending: The Wat Misaka Story*, achieves just that, and is a shining example of her ongoing quest to promote diversity in entertainment. Here, she speaks with girlsTalk.com about how the documentary began, and shares her thoughts on the future of anti-discriminatory advocacy in the arts.

**gT:** In *Transcending*, you tell the story of Watura "Wat" Misaka, the first person of color to be drafted into the NBA, in 1947. What inspired you to make the film?

**Johnson:** My husband Bruce and I first saw Wat Misaka's picture in our friend Paul Osaki's office at the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California in September of 2006. We were fascinated to learn about Wat's story and started to ask questions. Why had we never heard of him? What kind of racism must he have endured as a Japanese American kid playing basketball during World War II? We started to do research, and as our fascination continued to grow, so did our dismay that his accomplishments were not acknowledged as more than a trivia question in a few sports history books. We applied for and received a grant from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program (the first of three grants from them), which enabled us to buy the equipment and arrange the travel necessary to start filming interviews — and three years later, we are still fired up about sharing this story!

**gT:** The film is still making the rounds on the festival circuit and has won multiple awards. What changes has the film brought about? And is it true that you even got President Obama's attention?

**Johnson:** In making the film, we have seen lives impacted and dreams affirmed. In screenings across the country, people from ages nine to ninety, have moved us with their tales of inspiration from hearing how Wat Misaka triumphed over adversity. At a time when racism against Japanese Americans was at its all-time high, Wat became not only the first draft pick ever for the New York Knicks, but the first collegiate draft pick in professional basketball history.

Until recently, Wat had not been acknowledged by either history books or the Basketball Hall of Fame as the barrier-breaker that he was. Sixty-two years later, because of the press our film has gotten and the subsequent connections made, we watched him get welcomed into the NBA Legends Organization during the 2009 NBA All Star Weekend, and on August 8, 2009, were so proud to witness the inclusion, at long last, of Wat Misaka's profile in the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame! I turned to Bruce that day (who had worked tirelessly to make that particular piece of the puzzle happen) and said, "If nothing else happens with this film, this makes all the work worthwhile!" But then more thrilling things continued to happen: President Obama invited Wat to the White House and thanked him publicly for his contribution to history — and the Knicks brought Wat back to Madison Square Garden in December to honor him center court! So now we know that anything is possible — and that our work can create many ripples!

**gT:** Looking back at your advocacy efforts over the last decade, have we come as far you'd hoped? What more needs to be done to promote inclusion in the arts today... and what direction is your advocacy work moving?

**Johnson:** You know that old saying: "The more things change, the more things stay the same?" In a sad way, I think this might be applicable. Certainly we are seeing more diverse representation of people of color and people with disabilities on film, television and in the theatre than we did ten years ago. Opportunities are much more prevalent, especially for the younger generation of actors just arriving to New York and Los Angeles. But there is still a perception that diverse and inclusive casting poses a risk to commercial productions; or conversely (and even more dangerously) that there is no longer a problem — which leads to a certain complacency and cessation of forward motion.

Ironically, now that our advocacy has created more opportunities for this younger generation I mentioned, those of us who have been waiting our turn are now often feeling the ageism of show business. Recently I commented to a Broadway producer that there was a whole in my head from banging it against the wall so long in frustration. She replied, "But you *are* making a difference." And that's satisfying to be reminded of, from time to time, even when I lose sight of that difference. It's imperative that we keep the dialogue going, and keep telling our diverse stories. A lot of people keep saying that we need to open the minds of the writers, directors and producers. I agree with this, but think it is only part of the solution. We also need to produce more diverse works by more diverse playwrights — and give these stories, the windows on a more complete array of experiences, to our audiences.



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### About Irene Vitale

Irene Vitale is the founder and editor-in-chief of girlsTalk.com, and strives to promote positive images of women in the media. As the former senior editor of *Soaps In Depth* magazine, she spent ten years interviewing many daytime celebrities, including Kelly Ripa, Donny Osmond, John Stamos, Kim Zimmer, Vanessa Marcil and more. A graduate of Montclair State University, Irene also earned a Master's degree from William Paterson University, where she later served as an adjunct professor of communication. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and two children.

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