Season 8, Episode 5 Sumo Wrestlers vs. Firefighters Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's the early 1800s. You're watching the sun set on the largest city in the world, Edo, Japan, known today as Tokyo. The sun has just dropped beneath the horizon in the distance, and the last bit of light drains from the orange sky. You light a candle. A breeze comes through the window, catching a spark off your flame, which lands on the paper wall beside you. A black singe mark blooms into an orange circle, picking up speed as it gets larger, larger, larger and then erupts into flames. The fire begins licking upwards at the wooden beams crossing the ceiling. It spreads to the next wall. Gray smoke fills the air just above your head and churns into angry black swirls. You struggle to breathe. You run to the window and scream for help. In the distance, you can hear a bell ringing. Down the road, a throng of men approach on foot.

Kit Brooks: They would've pulled up in a gang that would've been this very intimidating group.

Lizzie Peabody: It's the fire brigade. This is Kit Brooks, curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. Kit says, some of these firefighters would've worn heavy jackets soaked in water, but others would've been nearly naked, wearing only loin cloths and tattoos. But not just any tattoos, dragon tattoos

Kit Brooks: In East Asia, dragons live in the sky. They bring storms and are creatures of the water. So, the idea of adorning yourself physically with dragon tattoos is a way of this talismanic protective function.

Lizzie Peabody: You watch this horde of brawny tattooed men approach. At the head of the group is the fire chief. In a city of wood and paper, the fire chief is like a god, arguably even more powerful in this moment. He yells to his men to get to work, but they don't use water to put out the fire.

Kit Brooks: Even the idea of putting out fires didn't exist. The way that you combated fire is to destroy the buildings surrounding the fire. So, to clear a space of land so that the burning debris and the ashes couldn't light something else on fire.

Lizzie Peabody: The firefighters run up ladders to the roofs of your neighbor's homes. They start tearing off the tiles and throwing them to the ground. Others build long sticks with metal hooks at the end, which they use to grab at the facade and tear the walls down. Neighbors gather, staring at the flames and the acrobatics of the firefighters. But then the crowd begins to part, and you see the banner of another fire brigade snaking its way closer. The first fire chief turns and yells, "This is our turf." "In your dreams," the other fire chief screams back. Then the chiefs are nose to nose. In the commotion, someone pushes someone else, then there's a punch. The

men fighting the fire drop their tools and run to support their chief. An all-out brawl breaks out. The flames grow unchecked and take hold of your neighbors' partially disassembled homes. The entire block is now inflamed, as the firefighters, many of them clearly drunk, were all in the street. Your home is gone for good, which unfortunately was not uncommon at this time. Kit Brooks says, there was even a popular saying in Edo, Japan.

Kit Brooks: The flowers of Edo are fires and fights. They spring up like flowers. So, these fires would pop up like this, and also fights would as well. There was this idea that firefighters were almost as dangerous as the fires they're trying to put out.

Lizzie Peabody: Firefighters held a unique position in Edo, Japan, not quite hero, not quite villain, feared, but loved. This ambivalence is front and center in a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. It's called Antiheroes and Underdogs. It includes ink prints that depict scenes just like this one.

Kit Brooks: When you look at this image, you can see under the light of the moon, but everything is lit up by this inferno, this incredible amount of smoke and flames. The building is almost melting, as it's just burning down with the intensity of this fire, but you can see just the amount of firefighters involved in firefighting.

Lizzie Peabody: The exhibition is full of old prints that tell a story, almost like a graphic novel. You can see the action unfold in the images. Scene by scene, stories unfold. One of these stories shows a real-life event. It's the story of another brawl, one which solidified the firefighters as the ultimate underdogs.

Kit Brooks: A group of drunken firefighters started a fight with two sumo wrestlers.

Lizzie Peabody: The fight that followed was so legendary, it has been reproduced in artwork, writing and even a Kabuki play. This time on Sidedoor, we bring you the story of the Me Brigade Riot, when a group of drunken firefighters took on the only people in Japan quite possibly tougher than they were, sumo wrestlers. It ended in a winner-take-all death match. So, who won and who lost? Who is the hero and who's the villain? It might just depend on who tells the story and when. We are telling you that story right now, well, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: 1805, Edo, Japan, it's a brisk spring afternoon. Three firemen from the Me Fire Brigade are walking down the street, joking, laughing. They see that a sumo wrestling tournament is underway in the Shinmei Shrine. They say, "Let's check it out."

Frank Feltens: Three firemen tried to walk into the match into the site without paying. Do you know that rubbed the sumo wrestlers the wrong way.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Frank Feltens, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. He says it's also highly likely that these firemen were a little bit drunk at the time.

Frank Feltens: I wonder if they were ever really fully sober, especially when they're with their friends.

Lizzie Peabody: The firefighters wander in off the street and expect the sumo wrestlers to pause and acknowledge them, sort of pay tribute to the firefighters who rule this neighborhood. But the sumo wrestlers are not so pleased that these firefighters just wandered in like they own the place. This is a shrine. It existed on a plane above and beyond the common streets of the firefighters' domain.

Frank Feltens: Fire brigades at the time had policing power over their district within the city, but sumo wrestlers had policing power or authoritative power over shrine precincts.

Lizzie Peabody: Like firefighters, sumo wrestlers held a unique place in Edo, Japan. Only a select few children were chosen to become sumo wrestlers. They were plucked from society at an early age and put into training. It was like being selected by God to play for his football team.

Frank Feltens: Sumo originated as an entertainment for spirits and deities in shrines.

Lizzie Peabody: It originated as entertainment for an invisible audience?

Frank Feltens: Exactly. Exactly. So as part of the rituals performed at shrines, and then gradually morphed into this public spectacle, public sport.

Lizzie Peabody: Sumo wrestlers were like professional athletes, celebrities and religious leaders rolled into one. They were elite members of society.

Kit Brooks: In the Edo period, sumo wrestlers were always associated or kept, as it were. They were kind of a pseudo property of feudal lords. They were permitted to wear a sword, which only samurai were allowed to wear swords. So, they operated in this pseudo-samurai environment. I think people do think of them as being quite stuck up.

Lizzie Peabody: So back at the shrine, there's this standoff. The firefighters are like, "Hey, you're on our turf. Come say hi." The sumo wrestlers are like, "No. This is our turf. You can't barge in like this. We're not coming to say anything."

Frank Feltens: That rubbed both of them the wrong way, that they were not greeted and that their authority was not acknowledged by either party. So, I think that was the biggest slight of it all, that there was this clash of classes.

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Lizzie Peabody: Whoever was at fault, this interaction is what led to the Me Brigade riot in real life. But if you were to see the Kabuki theater version of these events that premiered 85 years later, you'd get a completely different picture.

Frank Feltens: It begins with an episode that is actually, by all accounts, not part of the original story.

Lizzie Peabody: The Kabuki theater production opens on some sumo wrestlers who are having a party in a fancy teahouse in Edo. They're getting kind of loud, a little bit rambunctious.

Frank Feltens: But the firefighters are having a party in the room next to it.

Lizzie Peabody: In the play, the Me Brigade Fire Chief Tatsugoro, goes over to the rowdy sumo wrestlers and he asks them if they wouldn't mind keeping the noise down. A real-life fire chief probably would've had some choice words and maybe even a punch to throw their way, but that's not how Tatsugoro reacts in the play.

Frank Feltens: Tatsugoro walks over and says, "What's going on here?" The sumo wrestlers treat him in a very condescending way. So, he is very much flummoxed by that.

Lizzie Peabody: Insulted.

Frank Feltens: Insulted, very much.

Lizzie Peabody: Tatsugoro tries to be nice to the sumo wrestlers. They insult him, call him names. Still, he's deferential. Ultimately, he walks away, turning the other cheek, so to speak. There's not a lot of ambiguity in this version of the story. The sumo wrestlers are clearly being jerks. They're not nice guys to the extremely reasonable Tatsugoro, who just wants to have a nice time at the tea house. So, if you're in the audience of the Kabuki play, it's clear where your loyalties lie, with the firefighters. There's a reason why the story is presented this way in 1890. It has to do with how Japan had changed since the actual events took place, 85 years earlier.

Frank Feltens: The feudal system had collapsed. Japan was no longer isolated from the outside world. It had frequent interaction with the Asian continent, with America, with Europe. The emperor had moved from Kyoto to Tokyo. A constitutional monarchy was established. Japan was an entirely different country.

Lizzie Peabody: In the late 19th century, this new Japan was trying to reestablish itself, both to foreigners looking in from afar and to its own people. What did it stand for? What did its society value? Who were its heroes? What were the stories being told about them? One way to solidify these ideals was through one of Japan's most popular forms of media at the time, Kabuki theater.

Frank Feltens: Kabuki was a way to spend the day. You wouldn't just go for a performance. You would go in the morning and stay the entire day and watch a string of performance, eat there, talk. Scenes of the Kabuki theater that you see in pictures from the time are raucous. People are yelling at each other. They yelling at the guys over there, selling bowls of rice, another guy selling suckers. I mean, this is basically almost football stadium type of atmosphere.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow, okay. Not how I pictured the theater. Kabuki theater was full of explosions and spectacle, absolutely stunning special effects for theater at the time. But by the time this play was performed in 1890, Kabuki was becoming less crowd pleasing and more high-minded. Old heroes were given modern situations. It would be like making a film about the American Wild West with a climate change storyline.

Frank Feltens: For that reason, in the late 19th century, around 1890, that period, you see all these newly written Kabuki players popping up, that sort of talk nostalgically about the good old past, but with a moral spin on the present as well.

Lizzie Peabody: So, when the sumo wrestlers insult Tatsugoro in the play, he doesn't grab the sumo's sword, hold it to his neck and say, "You want to say that again?" He deescalates the situation. He goes home to talk about it with his wife.

Frank Feltens: His wife, Onaka is saying, "You've got to do something. You've got to fight to defend your honor. Who are you even, if you don't fight?"

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, no. Tatsugoro listens to his wife. He decides that his honor has been insulted and he must defend it. He also feels compelled to stand up for the common man.

Kit Brooks: Firefighters were very much men of the city. They were men of the urban classes. They would've lived on your block. You knew all these people. Compared to sumo wrestlers, it's just a very different kind of presence that they had.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Kit Brooks again. Kit says that in the play, Tatsugoro sees no other option. The firefighters have to fight.

Kit Brooks: They have principles, and they stick to them. That's kind of what makes them admirable, even if you don't think that they should be abandoning their families for this level of dispute.

Lizzie Peabody: Fire Chief Tatsugoro rallies his firefighters for battle. They toast each other with glasses of water, a firefighter tradition.

Kit Brooks: They exchange these ceremonial cups of water, which is like an agreement that you're parting forever, because there's an understanding that they're going to fight to the death.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. The reluctant Tatsugoro steps up to meet the moment. In this decision, he becomes a champion of the lower class, the ultimate underdog, standing up to the elitist sumo wrestlers. What happens next? We'll find out after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's the day of the Me Brigade Riot of 1805. Fire Chief Tatsugoro is ready for battle with the two sumo wrestlers who have besmirched his honor.

Kit Brooks: Tatsugoro is drinking at home. He's preparing to say farewell to his family. He hears the bell ringing, which is going to signify the end of the sumo wrestling matches. He rushes to the scene because he knows all his men are gathering there.

Lizzie Peabody: In the Kabuki theater version of events, the firefighters are planning an ambush on the sumo wrestlers. The firefighters wait for the crowd to slowly trickle out of the shrine.

Kit Brooks: Tatsugoro is very keen to make sure, we need to wait till everything is finished. We need to wait till all the civilians are out of the arena before we start.

Lizzie Peabody: The firefighters ready their weapons for ambush. The sumo wrestlers have no idea what is coming. In the real-life version of these events, it's not clear exactly what happened, but we do know that two famous sumo wrestlers were involved. They faced roughly 40 to a hundred firefighters. To get a sense of just how two men could do this, you have to understand the sheer mass of a sumo wrestler's body.

Kit Brooks: It's just a very different kind of presence that they had. They're these one-man mountains walking down the street.

Lizzie Peabody: This is true even today. If I were to see a sumo wrestler on the street, would I be in awe?

Frank Feltens: You would be. I am. They are tall, broad and big. I've never, ever seen a sumo wrestler in sweatpants and t-shirt outside, always in perfectly manicured kimonos. Just the way they look, the way they behave, the way they come with this retinue of people barely by themselves.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, they have an entourage.

Frank Feltens: Exactly. So, there is pizazz all over them, basically.

Lizzie Peabody: They're celebrities.

Frank Feltens: They are celebrities of the truest kind.

Lizzie Peabody: In the Kabuki play, the sumo wrestlers were the perfect foils for the firefighters, a clash of classes and a contest of, who really is the toughest? Firefighters use their muscles for practical purposes, like putting out fires and saving lives. They saw the sumo wrestlers muscles as being for show, dancing around, flexing for crowds and looking good. The firefighters were like, we'll show you what a real tough guy looks like.

Kit Brooks: They attack the two sumo wrestlers. It's this fight that breaks out between the people using the different kind of equipment that is associated with their professions. So, whereas the firefighters are using these tobiguchi hooks and trying to smash ladders over people's heads, the sumo wrestlers are fighting with the benches that the spectators would've sat on.

Lizzie Peabody: This sounds like WrestleMania or something.

Kit Brooks: It does. Yeah. I think people have compared sumo wrestling to... it's part sport, it's part religion, it's part theater. This is definitely that. This is one of those no-holds-barred, people smashing chairs over each other.

Lizzie Peabody: Firefighters flip into the air and run up ladders without using their hands. It's the sort of acrobatics you might see at Cirque du Soleil.

Frank Feltens: You also have this famous scene of firefighters jumping up on the roof of the stable and throwing these tiles down at their opponents.

Lizzie Peabody: There's running and jumping and punching and grappling. Sumo wrestlers are flipping firefighters in the air, tossing them aside. The firefighters keep coming, leaping and lunging and then...

Frank Feltens: This official appears and says, "Hold on a minute, everyone. We're going to bring this in front of the magistrate." Then they all say, "Yes, of course. We're going to stop fighting immediately," and then the play ends.

Lizzie Peabody: What? Yep. This battle royale, like the third act in a big action Marvel movie, when all the Avengers are finally attacking, right at that moment, a pencil-nosed bureaucrat comes in and says, "Hold on. I think we can figure this out in small claims court," and everyone's like, "Okay, cool."

Frank Feltens: This is really such an anti-climactic moment. Really, it tries to show how this newer version of Kabuki theater is trying to be much tamer and also much more-

Lizzie Peabody: Politically correct?

Frank Feltens: ...politically correct. Exactly. Trying to nurture these law-abiding citizens, if you have a fight, if you have a problem, go to the authorities. Don't fight it out yourself. This is

probably the least exciting ending of any Kabuki play I've ever seen, to be honest with you. Let's fight this out in court. Bye.

Lizzie Peabody: In real life, the fight played out differently. No official appeared. The riot only stopped after dozens of men were injured and one firefighter was killed. There was no moral, just senseless violence. So, it's interesting to see how this story gets tweaked and adapted for the time period in which it's told. A changing Japan with new values, a macho brawl with no clear hero or villain gets turned into a clash of classes, with a twist of morality at the end. Kit Brooks says, in real life, the firefighters would not have been the heroes of this story. Even in the play, they're not really the good guys, but they are the characters you root for.

Kit Brooks: My sympathies lie with the firefighters. So, I think probably the way that I interpret this is that, I'm very much on their side.

Lizzie Peabody: Why?

Kit Brooks: I think I would say is the firefighters are the relatable guys. They're the people you can understand.

Lizzie Peabody: That's basically what an antihero is. They're not really good per se, but they're relatable. Who's more relatable out of the firefighters and the sumo wrestlers? The ones who have a few drinks to deal with their demanding job and get a little wild from time to time, or the perfect God-like celebrities who never wear sweatpants to the Cheesecake Factory? Frank says, that's why he and Kit created this exhibition of Antiheroes and Underdogs, because this artwork reveals who people related to in 19th century Japan, both in art and at the theater.

Frank Feltens: There is an entire genre in Kabuki theater that focuses entirely on people at the fringes of society, people in the gray Areas. The firefighters fit into that category perfectly because they just embody the underdog. Essential to the survival of the city, but at the same time, they were also at the lowest tier of it. So, that made for a natural kind of hero.

Lizzie Peabody: And while there's no clear winner in the Kabuki theater version of the Me Brigade Riot, I can tell you who won in real life. Unequivocally, it was a complete blowout on the side of-

Speaker 4: Wait, wait, wait.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Speaker 4: Hold on. Winners and losers, I think we're losing sight of what's really important. We should make sure we all go do our taxes in a timely manner.

Lizzie Peabody: You know what? What a great idea. Let's do it. Can I deduct this terrarium I bought for all these leaches?
Speaker 4: Honestly, I don't think you can deduct that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: To learn more about the Underdogs and Antiheroes exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, you can check out our newsletter. We'll share some images from the exhibition, including some paintings of the Me Brigade Riot. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. Let us know what you think of the episode, or share your own show ideas with us on social media. We're @SidedoorPod on Twitter and Instagram. You can also email us your suggestions or show ideas at sidedoor@si.edu.

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Lizzie Peabody: For help with this episode, we want to thank Frank Feltens and Kit Brooks.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Natalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tammy O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant.Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from our colleagues at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

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[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I love your telling of the ending. I'm picturing this nerdy little guy showing up, being like, "Hey, wait a minute. Stop it."

Frank Feltens: I picture this, the playwright like, "How am I going to make this end? They can't kill each other. I'm just going to make them fight it out in court." It's like, okay.