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From Heart Mountain, Wyoming, to the Heart of Little Tokyo: Japanese American Resilience in Los Angeles

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Articles

From Heart Mountain, Wyoming, to the Heart of Little Tokyo

Japanese American Resilience in Los Angeles

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Arnab Banerji

Located in the heart of the city's Little Tokyo Historic District, a visit to Los Angeles' Japanese American National Museum (JANM) is a humbling

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experience. JANM exists by active community collaboration.^[1] The museum's exhibits tell the story of a group of people who persevered in their hopes of making America their home even as "white" America pushed back on accommodating and accepting people of Japanese ancestry. Anchoring the museum's display is a wooden structure. The sparse and rickety edifice is frugally-built and a less sturdy version of the log cabins that one finds in the Great Smoky Mountains in the American South. The wooden structure is one of the few surviving housing structures bought and relocated to the museum from the Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming. It represents one of the most dismal and yet often overlooked chapters of modern American history—the forceful removal, relocation, and imprisonment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans to inland detention facilities from the coasts during World War II.

The wooden structure with its modest interiors greets visitors as the first object of display in the museum's second floor. Beyond the wooden structure lies an exhibit that includes everyday objects, historic photographs, and useful anecdotes that support the visitor in navigating what is bound to be a fairly new immigrant narrative for most people. The open floor plan that one traverses to explore the first couple of rooms

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comes to an abrupt halt as visitors make their way past the thick glass doors into the section devoted to the Japanese internment. Although, it might simply have been an architectural choice to separate this section of the exhibit. I couldn't help but imagine a curatorial intent behind forcing visitors to push open a pair of heavy doors to enter into an area earmarked for exhibits depicting life during a state-sanctioned sequestering of fellow citizens. Like the sudden, swift blow to Japanese American aspirations of realizing their American dreams, the visitor is transported, beyond the glass doors, from the tranquility of everyday Japanese American life to the hostile badlands of middle America.

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Little Tokyo, the neighborhood that houses the museum is today a symbol of resistance and

MUSEUM IS TODAY A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE AND resilience. A gateway to Japanese immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the neighborhood was home to some 30,000 Japanese Americans before it was swept clean during Executive Order 9066 in 1941-42.^[2] During the war years, the once burgeoning neighborhood became a ghost town before being populated by large groups of Hispanic and African-American laborers. These workers who had arrived in the city lured by defense manufacturing jobs were unable to find housing because of restrictive housing covenants and occupied the abandoned Little Tokyo structures.^[3]

Bronzeville, as the area came to be referred to during World War II, was the site of the Zoot Suit riots between white sailors and Hispanic residents of the area.^[4] After the war, Japanese residents gradually started coming back to Little Tokyo. Under the leadership of the Little Tokyo Business Association, the area was rebuilt and revitalized around 1947 and is today a thriving tourist and business destination, even if escalating costs have forced the bulk of the Japanese American residential communities to move to Torrance, Gardena, West Los Angeles, and Arcadia.^[5]

The Little Tokyo neighborhood is framed by the JANM on one side and the Aratani Theatre on the

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JANIMI ON ONE SIDE AND THE ARATANI THEATRE ON THE other with the Little Tokyo Village plaza, with its convenience stores, confectioneries, and restaurants separating the two pivotal landmarks. The Aratani theatre managed by the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) has been a point of pride for the Little Tokyo district. Since opening its doors in 1983, they have hosted some of the biggest names in Japanese theatre, music, and the arts.[\[6\]](#)

The East West Players (EWP) is another stalwart of the neighborhood. EWP was founded in 1965 by Asian American actors. Now in its fifty-third year, the company is the longest-running professional theatre of color and is seemingly the largest producing organization of Asian American work.[\[7\]](#) Snehal Desai, who is the EWP's producing artistic director, explained how the East West Players is located at an interesting intersection of the city in that it is surrounded by the Los Angeles Police Department, City Hall, the erstwhile *Los Angeles Times* building, and a stone's throw from the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and the Music Center. This puts it squarely in the middle of the multiple loci of power—intellectual, political, and administrative—in the city. And yet the nation's oldest and largest Asian American company holds on dearly to its diminutive appearance, housed in a

former church.^[8] It seems the company deliberately stays away from the glitz and glamor of the entertainment world even as it continues to produce and promote high caliber work that celebrates the diversity of the American experience.

// EWP was founded in 1965 by Asian American actors. Now in its 53rd year the company is the longest-running professional theatre of color and the largest producing organization of Asian American work.

With Little Tokyo as its setting, the memories enshrined in the Japanese American National Museum as reminders, East West Players and the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center as partners, and the Aratani Theatre as its venue, *Allegiance: A New Musical Inspired by a True Story* made its Los Angeles premiere in March 2018. Before it arrived at Aratani, the George Takei starrer had had its world premiere at San Diego's Old Globe and a brief Broadway run at New York City's Longacre Theatre. The musical had been in the works since 2008 when Takei and his husband Brad initiated a conversation with its creators, Jay Kuo and Lorenzo Thione, about creating a musical

that would embrace and put the experience of Takei and several thousands like him who survived the Japanese internment during the Second World War into a stage performance. The conversation started in the aftermath of two back to back chance meetings between Takei and Brad, and Kuo and Thione while attending shows in New York City. Takei was particularly moved by the song "Inutil" during a performance of *In the Heights*, which the four attended together. And the conversation that ensued convinced Kuo and Thione that Takei's family experience would produce a moving show.[\[9\]](#)

The George Takei story itself is a celebration of the Asian-American version of the American Dream. Born Hosato Takei in 1937 in Los Angeles to an Issei (first-generation) father and a Nissei (second-generation) mother, Takei was christened "George" after the British monarch of the same name. In 1942 Takei and his family were forcefully relocated first to Santa Anita, then to Rohwer, Arkansas, and finally to the Tule Lake War Relocation Center, Northern California as part of the Japanese-American internment during the Second World War.[\[10\]](#) After the war and the release of the former internees, Takei and his family moved back to Los Angeles where his father took up a petty job to support his family. The world war not only

to support the family, the home that he only claimed a part of Takei's childhood, but it also took away an aunt and a young cousin who were found dead in a ditch in Hiroshima in the aftermath of the U.S. atomic attack on the Japanese cities.^[11] Takei originated the role of Hikaru Sulu in *Star Trek* and went on to achieve both critical and popular fame for this iconic television role. Since *Star Trek*, Takei has appeared in numerous films and television shows. Starting in the late 2000s, he embraced various social media platforms and became a social media celebrity with millions of followers across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Takei also recently launched a YouTube series called *It Takes Two* with his husband Brad. Using his iconic status first as a popular and beloved television star and more recently as a social media phenomenon, Takei has been vocal about pressing social issues, most notably LGBTQ advocacy and rights. Takei says, "Raising awareness of the JA internment has been my life mission," and with *Allegiance* Takei has opened up a national conversation on Japanese internment while simultaneously touching on its overall national shame as much as it is a personal history for the veteran actor.^[12]

The most recent Los Angeles avatar of the play opens with a celebration in the Kimura household in Salinas, California where the family are shown to

in Salinas, California where the family are shown to be artichoke farmers. Sammy (Ethan Le Phong), the young son of the family is portrayed to have just returned from college where he has been elected as class president. His father Tatsuo (Scott Watanabe) is quietly proud of his son, but still manages to push him to do better. This mentality rings true for most Asian parent stereotypes in that they seem impossible to satisfy. Kei (Elena Wang), Sammy's sister and Ojii-chan (George Takei) make up the rest of the family. The celebration is short-lived as the family receives the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Sammy is eager to prove his allegiance by enlisting, but the family instead is forced to join other dazed and confused families as they make their way to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, "where their multifamily barrack is meager protection from choking dust and bitter cold."[13]

The Japanese internment in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks was one of the darker episodes in the modern history of the United States. Responding to the anti-Japanese sentiment sweeping through the country after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued the infamous Executive Order 9066. This executive order gave sweeping authority to the Secretary of War and his military personnel to designate restricted areas and

exclude certain members of the population from these prohibited military areas.^[14] Under the aegis of the executive order and under the sweeping authority granted by it, the Western Defense Command announced that all people of Japanese ancestry would be relocated from the West Coast.^[15] Notices began to appear in Japanese communities in April 1942 instructing families of Japanese ancestry to make preparations and report to designated areas for relocation. Defiance of the order could lead to arrest and imprisonment.

Several Japanese Americans expressed shock at the turn of events. Miné Okubo, an artist from Oakland writes, "To think this could happen in the United States. We were citizens. We did nothing. It was only because of our race. They did nothing to the Italians and the Germans. It was something that didn't have to happen. Imagine mass evacuating little children, mothers, and old people!"^[16] Evacuees were instructed to pack two suitcases and a duffle bag each and were warned that the relocation centers were pioneer communities without adequate infrastructure. 120,000 Japanese Americans, several of them American born citizens left their homes, businesses, farms, and possessions behind as they embarked on a new adventure inland, unsure

about their imminent futures.

Not unlike their real-life counterparts, the play's characters find themselves in a hostile environment and under brutal suppression once at the camp. Throughout the longer first half of the play, however, we see the internees reconciling with their fate and negotiating with the inimical situation, making it work. In the camp, Tatsuo Kimura, the proud Japanese patriarch of the Kimura household refuses to disavow his Japanese identity when he is asked to fill out an insulting questionnaire designed to test the allegiance of interred citizens. This form, reminiscent of several contemporary visa application forms where applicants are asked if they have ever endorsed terrorism or terrorist organizations, is seen as an affront by Tatsuo to the honest life that he has led while pursuing his American dream.

The play ends with an older Sam Kimura portrayed by George Takei, getting ready for yet another Pearl Harbor commemoration. A visitor, who he doesn't know has brought a big brown envelope. In it we find a copy of *Time* magazine, with a young Sammy on its cover, memorabilia that Tatsuo had held on to till his last day, and a purple heart. Sam learns that the messenger is Hanako, the daughter of Kei and Suzuki, named after the slain nurse

from the Heart Mountain camp—Hannah, the girl who Sammy had dared to love knowing fully well that their relationship would be considered illegal before law. Reminded of the past, and all that he had missed during the years that he stayed out of touch with his family, Sam Kimura breaks down as he welcomes his niece back into his life in a beautifully touching moment of familial reconciliation.



The cast performing “Wishes on the Wind” in the Los Angeles premiere of *Allegiance* starring George Takei at the Aratani Theatre, co-produced by East West Players and Japanese American Cultural & Community Center. Photo by Michael Lamont.

Director Snehal Desai says that this play has always had a Los Angeles connection, with Takei being from the city, the first reading of the play taking place in the Japanese American National Museum, and with Los Angeles being home to the

Museum, and with Los Angeles being home to the nation's largest Japanese American population. The director, who also heads the East West Players as artistic director was therefore excited to bring the musical back to its spiritual if not actual home.

George Takei offered a more nuanced take on Los Angeles' relationship to the play in an email interview. The octogenarian writes, "In many ways, the City of Los Angeles is the epicenter of the work we have done to keep alive the memory, history and education about the Japanese American internment."^[17] He points to institutions of socio-cultural significance that call the area home to further his point, "With things like the JANM and the Go For Broke Monument, not to mention the JACCC and the support of venerable institutions such as East West Players, Los Angeles has resources that no other city has to integrate our show's message and story with the rich tapestry of the community today."^[18] But extant resources aside, the history of the neighborhood cements its ties further with the story that the play shares.

Takei walked me through the history of this neighborhood highlighting pivotal existing landmarks that are reminiscent of this recent painful history: "Both the JANM's first 'building' and East West Players' original Union Church building are historic landmarks of the internment of Japanese Americans. The JANM's first home was

the former Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, which was first built in 1927 and served as the headquarters of the Shin sect of the JA Buddhist community until the evacuation order.”[\[19\]](#) Takei continued, “Union Church was founded by JA Christians and was built to contrast with the traditional Buddhist ceremonial entrance of the Buddhist Temple on the east side of the same block. With the evacuation order coming down, JA Christians were gathered in front of the Christian Union Church and from there, they too were bused to Santa Anita Race Track.”[\[20\]](#)

And if the historical past was not reason enough for the city to have a unique stake in the *Allegiance* story, Takei points out that, “*Allegiance* still lives here in LA” with the “JACCC, the Isamu Noguchi sculpture in the plaza, the Go For Broke Memorial Monument and in a cozy side plaza beside the JACCC, the Memorial Honor Court of War Veterans are all stirring reminders of the sacrifice, anguish as well as the resilience and indeed the true patriotism expressed in so many countless ways by JAs during the war years. One cannot *not* be aware of our history in Little Tokyo today.”[\[21\]](#) Hillary Jenks has studied Little Tokyo as a *lieu de mémoire*.
[\[22\]](#) The place of memory serving as places that “not only recall the past but also represent lost alternate futures, making them constant

reminders of the social and political consequences of previous choices rather than depoliticized diversions.”[23] Takei’s deft recalling of the various nooks and crannies of this “ethnic” enclave in downtown Los Angeles, the presence of historically significant landmarks, and the inspiration that they lent to the creators of *Allegiance* to formulate and share the story signifies the importance of this neighborhood as a continued determinant of Japanese American identity even when gentrification rapidly changes the demographic makeup of the area surrounding this neighborhood. However, the changes effecting the community today won’t be the first time that this stretch between City Hall and the Los Angeles river have had to forcefully undergo a change of character to accommodate rapid social changes.

// JACCC, the Isamu Noguchi sculpture in the plaza, the Go For Broke Memorial Monument and in a cozy side plaza beside the JACCC, the Memorial Honor Court of War Veterans are all stirring reminders of the sacrifice, anguish as well as the resilience and indeed the true patriotism expressed in so many countless ways by JAs during the war

years. One cannot *not* be aware of our history in Little Tokyo today.

The forceful Japanese American relocation under Executive Order 9066 opened up a vacuum that was quickly filled by other minority communities—especially African Americans and Hispanic Americans. The Bronzeville period of this neighborhood was a result of the rapid westward migration of African American populations during the war. Segregated housing laws did not allow this new population to find reasonable accommodation resulting in the city's newest residents squatting in houses and structures abandoned by the Japanese Americans. Takei reminds us how Little Tokyo landmarks, like the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, were opened up to welcome the new African American Baptist congregation in order to hold Sunday services. Takei imagines that “during the war, this Buddhist Temple rocked with the foot stamping, hand clapping ‘Hallelujahs’ of Southern Baptist Sunday services” in the Providence Baptist Church.^[24] The same holds true for Union Church which also “welcomed African American congregants until the return of the JAs after the war.”^[25] The African American settlers in the Japanese enclave were hopeful of turning the struggling neighborhood around but popular perception of the area as “the

area, but popular perception of the area as the city's most notorious problem neighborhood quickly overshadowed Bronzeville boosterism."[26] The neighborhood struggled under the pressure of the sudden growth in population driven by Los Angeles' racist and restrictive housing laws. The *California Eagle* aptly summarized the situation, "With 95 percent of our town locked, bolted, and barred against us the Negro is bound into a ghetto as fast as any which binds the Jewish people in Germany today."[27]

The pressure on the already strained resources increased with the return of the Japanese American internees back to Los Angeles from their encampments. Takei recalls relocating back to Little Tokyo after he and his family were finally released from the camps. By then Bronzeville was a shadow of its confident resilient former self and was "skid row." In Takei's words, "It was a place for the poorest of the poor, and it was to be honest a harrowing experience—dirty, crowded, and crime-ridden."[28] The relocation was horrific enough for Takei's sister to wish that they were back home to the camps, which Takei suggests were "at least clean even for a prison camp."[29] The African American residents of Bronzeville and the Japanese American stakeholders of the erstwhile Little Tokyo tried finding common ground to resist the racist segregationist policies and practices of

the racist segregationist policies and practices of the Los Angeles city council and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) respectively. In spite of concerted efforts from community leaders and some positive movement in reconciling the differences that separated the two communities and their efforts to achieve financial and social recognition in white America, "the events of the war had set in motion a divergence of experience between Black and Japanese American[s] that would ... prove too wide to reconcile."^[30] The shrinking landscape of the symbolic Little Tokyo "became a target for Civic Center expansion in the in the 1950s."^[31] The development forcefully replacing residents with parking structures and the new police headquarters. The bureaucratic encroachment of the city into Little Tokyo was resisted by the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Authority or LTRA which was created in 1963 to prevent "external land grabbing."^[32] In the 1970s, the LTRA development plan joined forces with the Community Redevelopment Authority (CRA) and Little Tokyo subsequently began its transformation. It thus was turning into a commercial area bearing the kitschy signs of Japanese-ness that would attract a tourist population often at the expense of the ubiquitous Japanese American features that it had celebrated since it was settled in the late nineteenth century.

^[33]



The forceful “Japanization” of the area was also resisted by second generation Nissei Japanese Americans who spearheaded efforts to locate within the boundaries of Little Tokyo memory artifacts and promoted ethnic, historical, and cultural venues in the neighborhood. As the child of an Issei father, and a Nissei mother, George Takei seemed to have been at the hub of the Little Tokyo redevelopment. Looking back at the 1980s effort to stop “*Japanization*,” Takei recalls how

In the late '80s, actress Beulah Quo and I spearheaded the fundraising drive to adaptively reuse the old Union Church as the new home of the EWP. Just before the turn of the century, in the late 90s, the EWP staged its gala opening with a

new artistic director, Tim Dang, a new 250 seat theater and a spectacular production of Sondheim's "Pacific Overtures." When EWP presents stories of the internment, it is told in a building that resonates with the heartbeat of the people who were gathered right in front of those four Ionic columns. Union Church today is a living landmark that tells the story that happened in and around its walls.[\[34\]](#)

Jenks' refers to the 90s effort to resist the touristic commercialization as a "suffocating piling-on" of cultural memorabilia. The urge to pile on memory seemed to have stemmed from the need of the community to retain Little Tokyo as a *lieu de mémoire* (a place of memory). A location like this is peppered with landmarks that serve to remind the community of their Japanese roots. Fundamentally, the "internment demands they remember."[\[35\]](#) It is no surprise, then, that Takei celebrates the current avatar of his former neighborhood as a "vibrant JA community that welcomes all people to enjoy, discover and learn from the cuisine, the performances and our cultural heritage. It is not simply a 'commercial' district. It is a healthy, living and lively community with a unique cultural and historic heritage."[\[36\]](#) Locating *Allegiance* in this part of town which is so integrally connected to the story that the play shares therefore becomes as

much of a political decision as it is a logistical necessity.

Allegiance, the musical is a reclamation of a history and curating it for retelling strictly from the victim's perspective. The creative team at the helm of the show chose to soften the critical and historical blow by not creating a scathing drama, but rather a mellifluous musical that, barring its occasional highhandedness, holds its act very firmly together. And in the process the play weaves a musical journey that is reminiscent of the classic American musical. It is interesting that both *Allegiance* and David Henry Hwang's *Soft Power*, (which held its world premiere barely a month after *Allegiance* closed) both use music that is not fiercely original but somewhat of a throwback to the greatest among the showtunes. Much of mainstream criticism of these new works have therefore criticized the music for not being original. It seems a deliberate choice on the part of the creators to critique erroneous representations of Asia and Asian-ness in much of mainstream musicals. It is also a quick draw for the crowds who are then introduced to a history, this new perspective, or even a story that they would have been hitherto clueless about. However, the musical as a form still has its ways of encompassing expressions that are beyond what has been used as definitive

examples. Takei explained that every evening he witnessed audiences celebrating the work of the team both during the Broadway run of the show and beyond. And this popular reception seemed to have carried more weight for him and the others in the *Allegiance* creative team over the not always favorable critical responses that the team garnered. Audience enthusiasm and support continue to be the mainstay for musicals like *Allegiance* and *Soft Power*, which may quite possibly only continue to be unfavorably reviewed by mainstream critics who judge these works on the same parameters as most mainstream musicals, and without the nuance of the historical lacuna that the musicals aim to address.

East West Players' artistic director and the director for the Los Angeles edition of *Allegiance*, Snehal Desai, mapped out the journey that led to the musical's eventual coming to Los Angeles during an informal afternoon chat in the EWP premises in downtown Los Angeles. After the Broadway opening, the EWP felicitated members of the Broadway company at the EWP annual gala. George Takei himself continues to serve as a co-chair with his husband Brad of the EWP council of governors and has nurtured and nourished the company for the entirety of its existence. It was therefore only natural that the EWP were involved

in conversations regarding the musical's future after the Broadway run. And after plans for a national tour were shelved EWP teamed up with JACCC and the production team to bring the musical home to Los Angeles.

Desai decided to don the director's hat himself because he wanted someone who hadn't seen the musical to reimagine this edition. Even though he was in close proximity to the musical when it was developing from an idea to a fully realized musical, he had neither seen nor personally heard it. The decision to direct the musical was further motivated by his keen interest in politics, which was something that Desai cultivated during his college days as a political science major while simultaneously pursuing theatre. I quizzed Desai on EWP taking up the challenge of not only producing a play that had struggled to make a mark on Broadway, but also committing to a six-week run in an eight hundred seat theatre. Desai's nuanced response downplayed the significance of Broadway as the benchmark for great theatre. He went on to say that a few decades ago, Broadway was thought of as the place where new voices and new works were to be seen but that has stopped being the case now when Disney is at the helm of several theatres and the entertainment on offer caters to a tourist crowd who watch plays to check

...to a certain extent the main play to check off a bucket list item. And therefore, EWP did not balk from the lukewarm response to *Allegiance* on Broadway. They went instead with the fact that the show was one of the biggest successes at the Old Globe in San Diego. And Angelenos came out in large numbers to support the play. The overwhelming support that the show enjoyed in Los Angeles potentially could have stemmed from the politics of locating the play within the *lieu de mémoire* of Little Tokyo and the attempt of the neighborhood to strike a balance between touristy marketing and community engagement. Desai's refuting of Broadway as a commercial rather than a critical benchmark for contemporary American theatre certainly hints at that direction as well.

// The play temporarily enters the urban space of the neighborhood to offer a performed portrayal of not only the community's reaffirmation of its distinct ethnic identity but also its relationship and resistance to literal and figurative encroachments of bureaucratic and economic forces.

Desai recalls that the Los Angeles edition of the musical came about at what was becoming an

increasingly difficult political climate with regards to immigration. The exclusionary rhetoric employed by the current presidential administration towards citizens, citizens-in-waiting, and immigrants finds echoes in this shameful episode from fairly recent American history. An episode that some Americans are painfully unaware of to this day. Takei took me back to an even earlier political moment that the veteran actor heralded his team into during the 2015 Broadway run of the show. Takei says that the show's creators could never imagine that the play would have such contemporary relevance even though he remembers that the warning signs were already visible. And so in, "2015, as then-candidate Donald Trump questioned whether the Japanese American internment was really such a bad thing, that he would have 'had to have been there.' We then invited him to see the show and reserved a special seat for him every night, so that he could 'be there' and learn this history."^[37] The candidate never took the company up on the offer. Based on his recent experience of visiting the Texan border towns of Brownsville and McAllen, Takei reminded me of the ongoing vilification of immigrant communities and his memory of the internment, that "JAs cannot help but be reminded of our unjust incarceration and [so have] galvanized anew to fight for justice for others."^[38] In Los Angeles

particularly, the location of *Allegiance* near the various loci of power and the Metropolitan Detention Center (albeit not an ICE facility) is a powerful statement when seen in conjunction with Jenks' characterization of the Little Tokyo district as a *lieu de mémoire*. The play temporarily enters the urban space of the neighborhood to offer a performed portrayal of not only the community's reaffirmation of its distinct ethnic identity, but also its relationship and resistance to literal and figurative encroachments of bureaucratic and economic forces.



It was difficult to find tickets to the performance. The search was so difficult that I had to wait until the closing week to finally manage to scalp a ticket. Desai confirmed that the performance played to near capacity during most of its run, reaching

roughly 200,000 folks over its course. Desai also talked about the Wednesday matinees which were for high school students. The company was really excited at the immersive day that the students would be having if they came for the play including a conversation with George, a survivor from the camps, the Go For Broke Monument, which celebrates and commemorates Japanese American soldiers who fought in 442nd Regimental Combat Team. And then visit JANM for a more hands on interaction with the history that they had just seen performed. Desai was thrilled at the way the community came out to support the telling of this important story and at the ways in which various people were able to relate to it on different levels—personal and historical. The company had anticipated some of this response and therefore as Desai confirmed they did their due diligence in terms of their historical homework. It is wise, however as Desai reminded me, to remember that this was the dramatization of a historical moment—a musical based on a true story, rather than a true story as it really was.

Japanese American critics vehemently have critiqued what they have termed as outlandish portrayals of camp life and the associated violence that comes with it. They all coherently contend that the “camp was degrading. It was

dehumanizing.”[39] Others have questioned how Frankie Suzuki’s resistance movement has been portrayed in the musical or how life in the camp was not as brutal as the musical would have us believe.[40] Takei offers a nuanced take on the way this painful history was recreated for the stage. He acknowledges that the company was tasked with a “difficult job of creating a story that told many facets of all of our story, with respect to *all* of the camps in one location. This obviously meant that in some cases what we depicted might seem harsher than what some people remember at their own camps.”[41] Based his own experience first at the Rohwer camp in Arkansas and later at the Tule Lake camp for the “disloyals’ in the community,” Takei recalls the harsh reality that “camp was brutal. There were beatings. There was enforced solitary confinement.”[42] Historical fact is significant. An exception can perhaps be made under exceptional circumstances like in the case of *Allegiance*. The musical succeeds in instigating conversations about an issue that a vast majority of the American people are either ignorant about or would rather forget. And the success of the musical in this regard makes Takei’s confident assertion, “I’m proud of the story we told, and am not bothered by those who wanted a different one,” sound like a celebration for a just cause rather than a casual disregard for history.[43]

rather than a casual disregard for history.^[45]

Allegiance is a bold retelling of an episode that is often ignored in contemporary American history. And it is especially important that we revisit this historical period today when America faces several immigration challenges. Snehal Desai drew my attention to the parallels in language used to discuss and describe the Japanese in 1941-42 to the rhetoric from the top-down while discussing Muslims, Central Americans, non-white immigrants, and refugees today. The Los Angeles edition came about at what was becoming an increasingly difficult political climate especially with regard to immigration and immigrants. The exclusionary rhetoric employed by the current presidential administration towards citizens, citizens-in-waiting, and immigrants finds echoes in this shameful episode from fairly recent American history—something that a large number of Americans are painfully unaware of today. There seems to be more uncanny parallels between the time that we are living through in 2019 and the time when trucks rolled up in downtown Los Angeles more than seven decades ago to take citizens away from everything they had worked their entire lives for. The proposed amendments to the census forms, increased surveillance on non-citizens and their social media presence, and the

erosion of civic discourse all seem eerily similar to the period that *Allegiance* puts squarely under scrutiny within its musical framework. More than anything else, this is perhaps the reason why it is such an important piece of work worthy of critical engagement. In several ways, this play is a metaphor for the city of Los Angeles—quietly significant, sprawling in its scope and possibilities, and irritatingly tedious at times. If so, then it is no wonder why it hit the mark here rather than in New York where many interpreted it simply to be this “singing history lesson” by someone who would rather be entertained while remaining oblivious to history.[\[44\]](#)

And on a final point about George Takei, the headliner of *Allegiance* and an Angeleno by birth: I would be lying if I said that I went to watch the musical drawn by its story. I went to the Aratani to see Hikari Sulu in flesh and blood. I came away inspired, intrigued, and in awe of this octogenarian who has worked tirelessly over the greater part of the last decade to share a story that is at once extremely personal and yet universal in its ramifications. And, as if to counter the observation made by Kelvin Yu character Brian in *A Master of None* about Takei being busy with “gay stuff,” the social media phenomenon is a gentle presence on stage, essaying Ojii-chan as an affable grandfather

who never ceases to lose his sense of humor and spirit. The older Sam Kimura, similarly bears the burden of family separation, witnesses war, and yet remained resolute as a soldier.^[45] Throughout the performance, Takei frequently takes himself to the background and makes room for an excellent group of young Asian-American actors to perform characters beyond caricatures and stereotypes. In the end, *Allegiance* celebrates inclusion like very few musicals are able to and, in the process, hopefully inaugurates a new kind of musical entertainment that is not intent on promoting superficiality when embarking on such relevant themes, but even more so informs and challenges the range of thematic possibilities.



George Takei as Sam Kimura in the original Broadway production of *Allegiance*. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

Notes

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[27] Ibid., 161.

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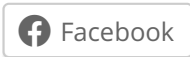


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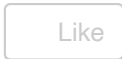
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