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Reiko Sato

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By Samuel Clemens



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ISBN: 979-8-88589-567-5

**Dedicated to Hollywood's Asian-American
performers**

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Introduction

Reiko Sato was one of Hollywood's most talented dancers. After enduring a difficult childhood where she was placed in an internment camp during World War II, she studied ballet rigorously. She became an in-demand performer in Hollywood and on Broadway. She had



respectable roles in stage productions like *The Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Kismet* while starring in movies like *Flower Drum Song* (1961) and *The Ugly American* (1963).

Unlike a lot of starlets of that era, Reiko's glamour ended when the cameras stopped rolling. She dressed plainly, disliked makeup, and preferred a frugal and minimalistic lifestyle. Those who knew her liked her a lot, and remembered her as being everything that Hollywood wasn't. Nobuko Miyamoto described her as being "the most unusual, nonconformist, otherworldly creature I'd ever met" while Kayko Sonoda described her as shy despite her larger-than-life presence onstage.

Reiko is also known for her decades-long relationship with actor Marlon Brando.

Although they never married, she was his

companion throughout his hectic career, inner demons, and turbulent marriages. She even acted as a caretaker of his island Tetiaroa while helping raise his son Christian Brando. This biography goes in-depth into the life of someone who was not only talented, but someone who paved the way for numerous Asian-American entertainers to achieve success in Hollywood. She was a pioneer in the industry, and her story deserves to be told.

Early Years

Reiko Sato was born on December 19, 1931 in Los Angeles, California. Kenichi Sato was a Zen Buddhist Priest from Mie Prefecture, Japan who had sailed to California on the Tatsuta Maru to manage a temple, while her mother Chieko Kyogoku was a practicing Christian who was a server at a restaurant. She had two brothers, Keiichiro and Koji with the latter being younger than her.

Reiko began dancing at the age of 4 at the urging of her mother. Chieko was a stereotypical “stage mom” who wanted her daughter to achieve the things that she

hadn't. She excelled at Ballet and studied Modern as well. Unfortunately, her father never got to see her progress as he and her two brothers moved to Japan so that Keiichiro could train to be a Zen Buddhist Priest like their father. They would occasionally visit Reiko until World War II began.

Reiko and her mother were relocated to Yuma County, Arizona and placed in an internment camp, as was common practice during World War II. Her friend, Nobuko Miyamoto, described Reiko's recollections of the sudden and traumatic event:

On December 8, the day after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, my friend Reiko, who was ten, went to school and heard speakers blare President Roosevelt's speech declaring war on Japan. At recess kids taunted her and asked if she had webbed feet. All of a sudden I was

the enemy. The next day White men came to her house and took away her father, a Buddhist priest. They later sent him to Japan. She never got to say goodbye, and she never saw him again.

This was a lonely period for Reiko. She had a lot of friends in Los Angeles, but her mother was more overbearing towards her in this entirely-Japanese community. She preferred that her daughter limit her association with other Japanese people, as she wanted to assimilate with Americans and felt that having Japanese friends would hinder her ability to do that.

In a facility that included hundreds of Japanese people, Reiko -despite her mother's wishes- made quite the impression with the community. A lot of the children liked her, but saw that she was clearly unhappy. A girl

who attended class with Reiko found her to be pretentious. One of her teachers described her as unusually mature for such a young girl. Charles Kikuchi, a captive who would author *The Kikuchi Diary: Chronicle from an American Concentration Camp* documented his experiences during World War II and recalls befriending Reiko and her infamous mother in 1943:

I also met Reiko Sato, a cute 11 year old girl... She and I had quite a conversation. Her situation emphasized to me the lonesome aspect among the Nisei. She just does not have any friends to play with yet. Her mother had quite a reputation as a prostitute in camp, but now I don't think that is true. I think that vicious rumor went around camp about her because this woman cultivated the Caucasians more than the Japanese. The

other Japanese in the community did not like it so they spread the rumor around... Her job keeps her until quite late into the evening so that Reiko is pretty much by herself. She has a very unusual personality development for such a young child.

The irony is that shortly after meeting Reiko, Charles wrote in his journal that Reiko would “probably go on to do dancing as a career.” His prediction was right. He had also observed Reiko’s sadness during her childhood. Reiko yearned to go to Japan with her father and brothers. Her mother had that same desire, but it wasn’t a possibility until the war ended. Reiko felt that despite her westernized ways, she would be more accepted in Japan. There was prejudice against the Japanese, and Reiko was a victim of it. She even recalled a terrifying experience where she and her

mother were at a restaurant, and a Caucasian woman grabbed her menu, tossed it, and spit on her.

Her mother urged her to endure these hardships, as Japan wasn't a safe place during the height of World War II. Charles gave Reiko some comforting advice that she took to heart; he told her to change peoples' opinions of Japanese so the Japanese would be more accepted. It was something that would be a priority of hers for her entire life.

Despite this, Reiko did have a good Japanese-American friend from the internment camp named Yoshiko Julia Nakasone. Her daughter Rene remembered Reiko has being a mentor to her mother:

Reiko took my mom under her wings, and my mom looked up to her as a big sister. During

my mom's stay, Reiko taught her how to put on make-up, how to do her hair, and how to dress in style. For the rest of her life, my mom would never leave the house without being perfectly coifed and dressed for success.

World War II ended and Reiko returned to Los Angeles with her mother. Sadly, her father had passed away in Japan from a bout of Tuberculosis. She never saw her older brother Keiichiro again, as he chose to stay in Japan; he abandoned his plans of becoming a priest, founding Cosmo Public Relations Corporation in 1960 in Tokyo. He married Taeko Matsuda, the daughter of Takechiyo Matsuda, who was Speaker of the Japanese Parliament and the Minister of Education. They had a daughter Kumi Sato, who would manage the business after Keiichiro's death.

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