

[Play](#)

'Allegiance,' a musical inspired by George Takei's internment story, comes to Hawaii

By [John Berger](#)
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From left, Kristian Lei, who plays Kei Kimura, Dann Seki, who plays Sam Kimura, and Ethan Le Phong, who plays a young Sam Kimura, star in George Takei's play "Allegiance," opening on March 28 at the Hawaii Theatre.



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Miguel Cadoy III, right, who plays Frank Suzuki, takes a photo of fellow castmates Kristian Lei, left, Dann Seki and Ethan Le Phong. “Allegiance” tells the story of a Japanese-American family sent to an internment camp after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

“Allegiance,” a musical theater treatment of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, was inspired by the experiences of film, TV and stage star George Takei — who is perhaps best known as Sulu in “Star Trek.” It opened on Broadway in November, 2015, with Takei starring as camp survivor and combat veteran Sam Kimura.

On March 28, Manoa Valley Theatre presents the Hawaii premiere production of “Allegiance” at Hawaii Theatre.

Takei and his family were among the more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast — many of them American citizens, the others immigrants who had come into the United States legally but were denied the opportunity to become citizens — who were sent to internment camps in the spring and summer of 1942.

The United States declared war on Japan the day after Japanese forces attacked Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941. There were concerns on the West Coast that some members of the Japanese community gave their first loyalty to Japan — and, that if Japanese forces landed in California, some local Japanese would aid the invaders. People of Japanese ancestry living in an Exclusion Area were sent to the camps.

ON STAGE

"Allegiance," Presented by Manoa Valley Theatre

>> **Where:** Hawaii Theatre

>> **When:** 7 p.m. March 28; continues 7 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday through April 7. Also at 2 p.m. April 6.

>> **Cost:** \$35-\$75; ages 13+

>> **Info:** 528-0506 or hawaiitheatre.com

Takei was 5 when his family was sent from Los Angeles to the Rohwer War Relocation Center in the rural swamps of southeastern Arkansas. Internees were allowed to take up to 50 pounds of their belongings with them. They had to make whatever arrangements they could for everything else.

He was 8 when they were released from the Tule Lake Segregation Center in northern California in 1945.

"The internment shaped who I am. It was a defining experience in my life," Takei said, taking the call on March 5 from Vancouver, Canada, where he is working as both an actor and as cultural consultant for "The Terror: Infamy."

"The Terror" is related to Takei's experience as well: The 10-part AMC network mini-series is set during World War II, and follows a young man's attempt to understand and fight a malevolent entity responsible for a series of deaths among Japanese-Americans in an American internment camp.

The mini-series is the latest in a growing list of projects Takei has undertaken in recent years to make sure that the internment of the internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans on the West Coast is not forgotten.

"The internment has been one of the subjects that I've been speaking at universities on all over the country, and, indeed, in England at Oxford and Cambridge. I've become something of a go-to guy as far as the internment is concerned," Takei said.

Takei shared the story last year in "American," a short film about an elderly internment camp survivor whose memories of his experiences are stirred up by a young woman looking for information about her grandfather. He has also been working closely with the illustrator of "They Called Us Enemy," a graphic novel treatment of his childhood experiences as an internee at Rohwer and Tule Lake, scheduled for publication in July.

"I want the story be known by future generations," Takei said. "It's so important for young people to have a sense of how history shapes us — and can shape us when we're very young."

In "Allegiance," the Japanese-American family are California farmers, sent to Wyoming after the attack on Pearl Harbor. A young Sammy is turned away when he attempts to enlist — but he doesn't give up on his goal of proving his loyalty to America. Hardship and romance ensue in what the New York Times described as a "singing history lesson," influenced by classic dramatic musicals such as "Miss Saigon."

DANN SEKI plays the dual roles of Sam Kimura in the present day, and Sam's grandfather — known by the Japanese honorific Ojii-chan — in flashbacks. Kristian Lei plays Sammy's older sister, Kei Kimura.

Ethen Le Phong portrays a young Sammy. All three musical theater veterans say they feel personal connections to the characters they play.

Seki, the only one of the three born a citizen of the U.S., says his father, a Hawaii-born combat veteran of the original 100th Battalion, never shared much about his experiences. Seki channeled some of that reticence in playing Sam Kimura, a combat veteran for whom the emotional scars of the conflict have never healed.

“He was very proud of serving, I think, but I got more information about what he did from talking to some of the other guys,” Seki said on March 7, while the cast was assembling for a rehearsal.

“It’s a story that I’ve been more interested in in the last few years,” he said. “We have the movies about the men who went to fight the war — the 100th (Battalion) and the 442nd. Now we’re trying to tell the story of the folks who stayed in camps.

“The third leg that we still need to look at are the folks who chose not to go — the ‘No-No Boys,’ the people who said ‘No, this isn’t right.’ I think their story should be told as well — and we do address it in ‘Allegiance’ a little bit.”

Lei, who was born in the Philippines but raised in Waianae, identifies with the experiences of Sam’s older sister, Kei Kimura, for several reasons, including the fact that Lea Salonga, who originated the role in New York, is a friend. Lei is the most-featured vocalist in “Allegiance,” in a role praised by the New York Times for providing the musical highlight of the production.

Lei knows first-hand the experience of having a loved one in a war zone: Her husband is a Green Beret and a Purple Heart recipient.

Her character Kei is forced to postpone her career to raise Sam after Kei’s mother dies. Lei identifies, saying she “grew up immediately” helping her mother care for her younger brother, Joshua, who has cerebral palsy.

“It’s very personal,” Lei said.

“I have a nisei (second- generation Japanese-American) grandma, and I wanted to do something to honor her. ... But the performance that you’re going to get is not just me finding some kind of meaning. It really is my experiences that I’m bringing to the role.”

PHONG WORKED with Takei in a Los Angeles production of “Allegiance” in 2018; he reprises his role of Sammy for MVT.

Phong’s family came to the United States from Vietnam when he was 3. Phong’s father, who worked with the American forces during the Vietnam war, was one of the thousands of Vietnamese who were left to fend for themselves when the United States pulled out.

“I was drawn to Sammy because of his struggle to find himself throughout the story,” Phong said. “Being born as an American, he didn’t have any of that history of being in Japan. I don’t remember anything of Vietnam, so there’s that relationship that I can bring to Sammy’s role.”

Phong's feelings while taking the oath of citizenship also give him insights into the experiences of the internees — and the loyalty oaths they were confronted with during their internment.

"How could you go fight for this country, who put us in this environment?" Sammy asks, on behalf of the internees.

"When I became an American citizen, the question was asked, 'Will you pledge your allegiance?'" Phong said.

"I had to think about it — I'm becoming an American citizen, so depending what Vietnam might do towards this country, where I have been raised in and where my loyalty is, I will have to fight with the Americans, even though I am Vietnamese," Phong said. "Just like Sammy," regarding Japan.

Takei's production schedule won't allow him to be in Honolulu for opening night, but his heart will be in Hawaii when the curtain rises.

"I learned about American democracy from my father, who bore the pain and the anguish and the degradation and the sense of total alienation (of internment). I owe so much to that extraordinary man," Takei said. "He taught me that we have a great system, and we've had a history of great presidents, but they are all fallible people, and we who cherish those ideas have to be personally and actively engaged."

"I'm an actor, so I use my chosen profession and art and craft to make that statement."