



ACTOR, FEATURED STORY, INTERVIEWS, MOVIES, TELEVISION

## Actress Tamlyn Tomita on *Star Trek: Picard*, Celebrating Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, and More

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**BY BRYAN ABRAMS**

Actress **Tamlyn Tomita** was one of the four panelists in our first-ever virtual Film School Friday event this past April. Tomita appeared alongside (remotely, of course) *Fear the Walking Dead* and *9-1-1: Lone Star* cinematographer Andrew Strahorn, *Watchmen*

scribe Stacy Osei-Kuffour, and *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* composer Brandon Campbell. The panel discussed, among many topics, the collaborative nature of film and television, what it takes to create a character (whether it's on the page, on-screen, with the right lighting or in the notes), and how everyone is coping with productions being shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the pandemic, of course, that was first and foremost on her mind when I spoke to her after.

"My loved ones are all healthy, safe, and staying at home," Tomita says as we begin our conversation, as every interview has begun over the last two months, with questions about how people are coping during these uniquely bizarre and terrifying times. The previous weekend in New York, it seemed every person not working an essential job was outside, which is now an alarming sight. Tomita discussed a similar phenomenon in California. "Last weekend in Southern California there were 80,000 people on the beaches because it was 90 degrees. It's the dilemma we're faced with. It harkens back to the elementary school bomb or earthquake drills; we need to take communal action. I think that's the kind of thing we all need to exercise now, as politely but efficiently as we can. We have to honor our rights as individual citizens, but also as a community."

Tomita's career, which began in 1985 on the set of *The Karate Kid Part II*—she played star Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio)'s love interest Kumiko—has taken place amidst the backdrop of slow but inexorable changes in the way Hollywood views and portrays actors and crew members with Asian heritage. Her resume includes leading and supporting roles in TV and film, including *The Joy Luck Club* (released in 1993 and focused on the lives of four Asian women, a film near and dear to her heart), Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*, CBS All Access's recent, critically acclaimed *Star Trek: Picard*, and ABC's *The Good Doctor*.

Talk of the pandemic and its resultant freezing effect on the entertainment industry led to a discussion of the industry's changes in representation, especially in the last few years. She's worked her way up in an industry that used to typecast Asian American actors, but also knows the deep influence Asian cultures and filmmakers have had on the industry, even if your average film lover is unaware.

"The American culture is pretty much a global country, think of Superman or Iron Man," Tomita says. "Then think of *Star Wars*, which was inspired by Akira Kurosawa's storytelling. It's the good versus the bad." Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and *Seven Samurai*, in particular, are huge touchstones for a legion of filmmakers. "These are universal stories. I've seen the doors of opportunity open for actors of Asian American and non-white heritage. It seems like the speed of those doors opening has been increasing over the last ten years. We're getting to see Asian American actors celebrated alongside big stars, like Constance Wu next to Jennifer Lopez, and we're seeing a lot less of the stereotypical depictions of Asian American characters. Look at Mindy Kaling's *Never Have I Ever*; the main character is this cool Valley chick whose story reflects my experience growing up,

even though she's Indian-American. I can only imagine this happens for every immigrant family when the kids are born or grow up in America. The truth of the matter is we fit into all these worlds, we have this wonderful fluidity from being the all-American girl to the all American Asian girl, or the African American or Latina or Native American girl. These are all universal stories."

The universality of Tomita's experience will be seen first next week; she's featured in the Center for Asian American Media's docu-series *Asian Americans*, which premieres on May 11 and 12 on PBS platforms in celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (APAHM), now officially proclaimed Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. The five-part series will examine what the 2010 U.S. Census identifies as the fastest-growing racial/ethnic group in the United States. The Center for Asian American Media is a partner of the Motion Picture Association.

*During PBS's ASIAN AMERICANS session at the Television Critics Association Winter Press Tour in Pasadena, CA on Friday, January 10, 2020, narrator Tamlyn Tomita ("The Good Doctor"); comedian and featured participant Hari Kondabolu; producer Renee Tajima- Peña; and producer/director Grace Lee discussed the new docu-series ASIAN AMERICANS. Photo Credit: Rahoul Ghose/PBS*

Tomita has seen just how profound the changes in the industry have been first hand, hearing stories from the legendary Pat Morita, of *Karate Kid* fame. "It's seeing the collective evolution of attitudes, I'm so happy that, for the most part, Asian American actors today aren't saddled with the baggage of discrimination Asian Americans felt in the 50s and 60s," she says. "I got to hear those stories from Pat Morita in *Karate Kid*, about Asian American actors being cast as the Charlie Chan or the Geisha. For the most part, many actors today are free of that kind of bitterness, and now, as we're delving deeper into Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we're going back to those stories. Look at Ryan Murphy's *Hollywood* and the character of Anna May Wong (played by Michelle Krusiec), or how Rudolph Valentino was preceded by Sessue Hayakawa, the exotic lover of the 1910s and 1920s. Our history as Asian Americans is rich, and because I've been in this business since 1985, I've been the recipient of these stories personally, and I can see the progress we've made."

One of Tomita's recent performances, as the powerful Vulcan spymaster Commodore Oh on *Star Trek: Picard*, gave her particular joy. "Pun intended; it was out of this world," she says. "The audaciousness of bringing back the second installment of a beloved franchise, and how respectfully they undertook the storytelling of a beloved character 30 years later, into the twilight of his life, was fantastic. And introducing a new set of characters on the crew, while integrating characters from other installments of the franchise. It was so graceful, the respect for the fan's knowledge. I'm still flabbergasted I got to be a part of it."

Tamlyn Tomita as Commodore Oh of the the CBS All Access series STAR TREK: PICARD.  
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Tomita navigated becoming a part of a world with a rabid fan base such as *Star Trek* by relying on skills honed over a successful, four-decade career. “The pressure of entering the *Star Trek* universe and all that encompasses; the language, the physical traits, the mannerisms, it’s an awesome task,” she says. “All I can do is whittle away all that pressure by carving out my character and distilling what she wants, how she’s going to proceed in each scene, and really concentrate on that and let everything fall away, including whether I was portraying a Vulcan correctly. And I was directed with a loving

hand by the directors, and the tones and attitudes I could strike were done via a collaborative effort of a huge amount of people, all of whom really knew everything about this *Star Trek* world. It was a joyful privilege to be a part of.”

Tomita thinks of friends she’s worked with over the years, like Ming-Na Wen, whom she starred in *The Joy Luck Club* with. “I’ve known her since 1993 and she’s wanted to be in the *Star Wars* franchise from that day!” Tomita says. “She’s a total *Star Wars* geek, and now she’s in *The Mandalorian*! It’s such an exciting time to see the stories that are out there. Along with Mindy Kaling’s *Never Have I Ever*, there’s Alice Wu’s *The Half of It*, Alex Yang’s *Tigertail*, and they keep on happening at such an accelerated pace. I think it’s a wondrous, fantastic time to be an actor of Asian American descent because we’re telling the stories with an Asian flavor, but they’re really American stories.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### Bryan Abrams

Bryan Abrams is the Editor-in-chief of *The Credits*. He's run the site since its launch in 2012. He lives in New York.

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