

Jerome Robbins Dance Division

# Coloring Book

Volume 12 : Asian American Dancers



New York Public  
Library for the  
**Performing Arts**

May 2021

## *Introduction*

This year, for Asian Pacific American Heritage Month we bring you a tribute to the many Asian American dancers represented in our collections. Here are ten artists who have contributed to dance in the United States, both onstage and off. You can find short biographies of each artist starting on page 11.

As always, we invite you to share your masterpieces and tag us on Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag #danceincolor, or you can email them to [dance@nypl.org](mailto:dance@nypl.org).

Happy coloring!

The staff of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

*Special thanks to Arlene Yu her continued work on this project.*

### About the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Founded in 1944, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division is the world's largest dance archive with an international and extensive collection that spans seven centuries. We provide a community space for dance professionals, researchers and the general public, offering programs and exhibitions, a dance studio for special projects, educational activities, residencies, fellowships, documentation of performances and oral histories and, of course, dance reference services, all free of charge.







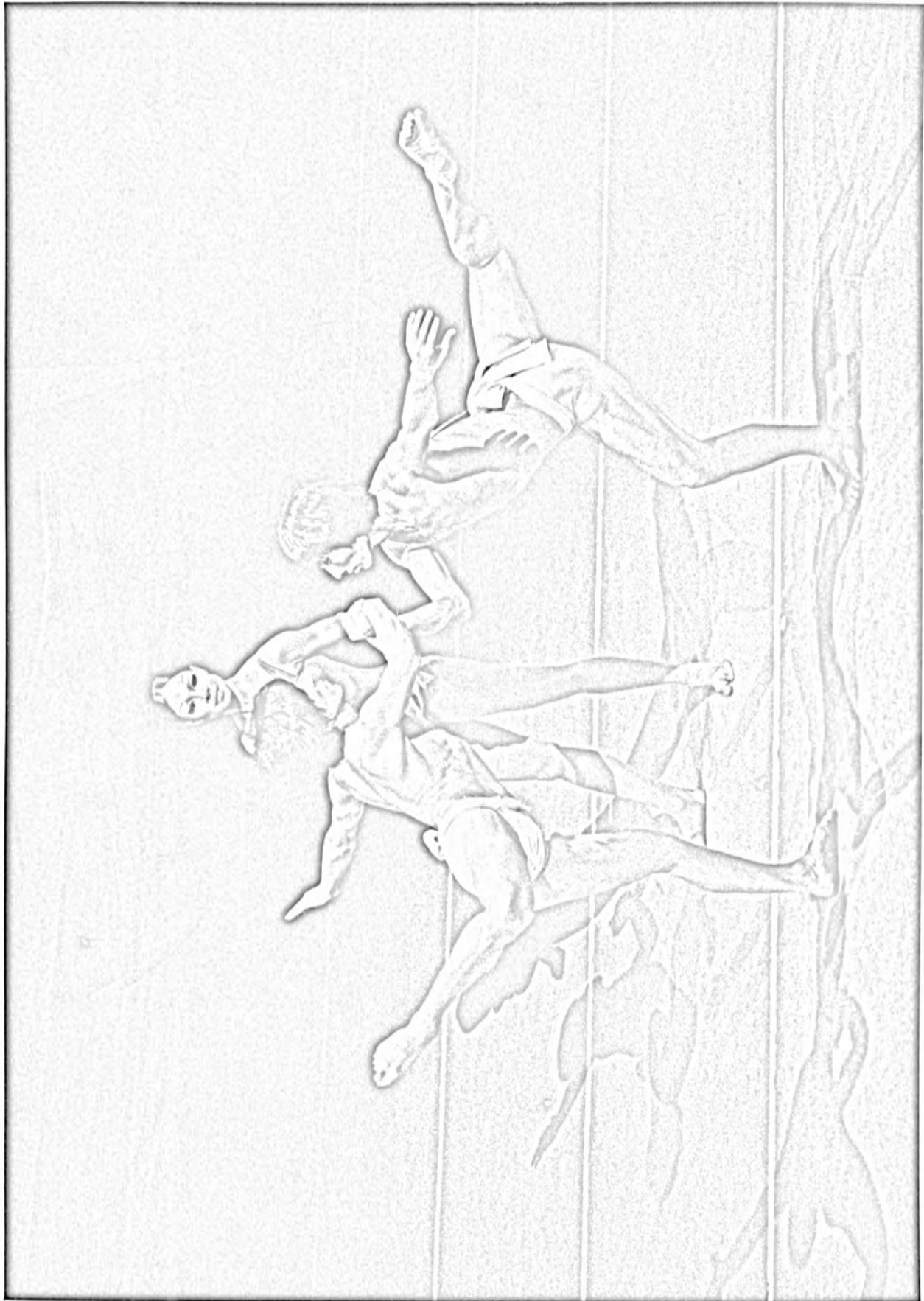






Photo: Kenn Duncan

SAEKO ICHINOHE & COMPANY, INC.  
Saeko Ichinohe and Company, Inc.  
345 WEST 55th STREET, SUITE 1-H  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10019

C. 2  
2019

SAEKO ICHINOHE  
in  
"IMPRISONED SOUL"





Maurice Seydoux  
74







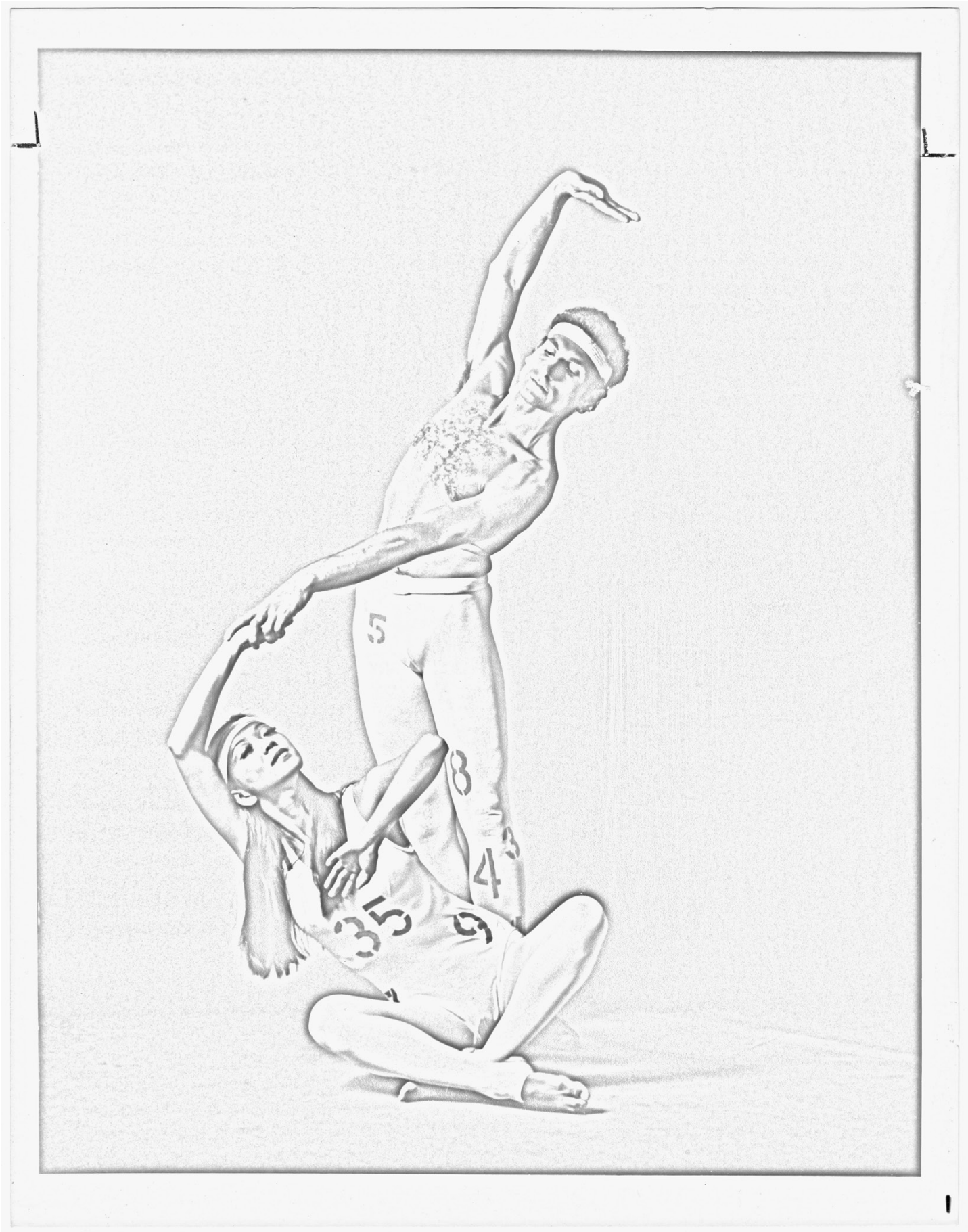




INDRANI

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| 1 | <b><i>Yuriko in Embattled Garden</i>, choreography by Martha Graham. Silver gelatin print, Martha Swope / © The New York Public Library. United States, c. 1965.</b> |
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Yuriko Amemiya Kikuchi, known professionally as Yuriko, was born in San Jose in 1920 but spent much of her childhood in Japan, first to shield her from a flu epidemic that had carried away her father and two sisters, and later to study dance. She studied with a student of Baku Ishii, often called the father of Japanese modern dance, and toured and performed around Japan before returning to the U.S. after her high school graduation in 1937.

With her return as an adult to the U.S., Yuriko began working as a florist and a seamstress, skills she had gained in Japan, and also continued studying dance. Her training now included Japanese classical dance, a suggestion made by her teacher to increase her marketability.

In 1942, Yuriko, her mother, and her stepfather were, like 120,000 other Japanese Americans on the West Coast in World War II, stripped of their property and rights and incarcerated in camps. The Amemiyas were first sent to the Tulare Assembly Center in California, and later to the Gila River Relocation Center in the Arizona desert. The sewing and modern dance skills Yuriko had acquired in Japan paradoxically made her popular and trustworthy to U.S. War Relocation Authority administrators, and she was paid to set up a dance school and perform at Gila River. She also successfully applied for “resettlement” in New York in the fall of 1943, once that option became available.

In New York, Yuriko worked as a seamstress and became a member of the Martha Graham Dance Company, as well as teaching classes at the Graham School. She danced the role of a Follower at the premiere of *Appalachian Spring* at the Library of Congress in October 1944, and remained with the company, touring worldwide, until 1967, when she received a Guggenheim which allowed her to pursue creating her own work. She is perhaps most celebrated as a dancer for Graham, but Yuriko also performed on Broadway in *The King and I* (1951-1954) and *Flower Drum Song* (1958-1960).

Yuriko premiered her own choreography in 1945 in a piece called *Thin Cry*, about her incarceration. Two other works also grappled with her wartime experiences, both with set designs by Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi: *Shut Not Your Doors* in 1946, and *Tale of Seizure*, featured in two Graham concerts in 1948. She would later found her own company and stage and direct Broadway shows.

Yuriko still lives in Manhattan.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Yuriko) no. 6.



2 ***Takako Asakawa in Ecstasis*, choreography by David Hatch Walker. Silver gelatin print, Martha Swope / © The New York Public Library. United States, 1977**

Most often identified as a dancer for the Martha Graham Dance Company, Takako Asakawa was born in Tokyo in 1938. She studied and danced in Japan, visiting, among other places, Los Angeles in 1960 and Rio in 1961 before moving to New York in 1962.

Asakawa joined the Martha Graham Dance Company that year, but also danced for Donald McKayle and Company, as well as appearing in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *The Tempest*. Over the next ten years she would dance for Pearl Lang, Alvin Ailey, and Lar Lubovitch as well, although she maintained her ties to Graham. In 1964, she also appeared as Eliza in the Lincoln Center Theater revival of *The King and I*.

Asakawa began choreographing in 1971, and in 1972 she presented her own work at the Jacobs Pillow Dance Festival. She and her first husband also formed their own dance company, Asakawalker, which debuted at Japan House on September 28, 1977 and performed over the next four years. In 1981, however, Asakawa returned to perform full time with the Graham company at the age of 43, and would continue dancing with Graham well into her fifties. She continued choreographing, and her commissions have included works for Ailey II, Ballet Philippines, Radcliffe College, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, and Oklahoma University. She has also staged Graham works for American Ballet Theatre, Paris Opera Ballet, and Het Nationale Ballet, among others, and has taught Graham technique widely. Asakawa was on the board of directors of the Joyce Theater from 1990 to 1999, and has served as a panelist for the New York State Council on the Arts.

Asakawa still lives in New York City.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Asakawa, Takako) no. 63.

3 ***Masazumi Chaya (right), Michihiko Oka (left), and Sara Yarborough (center) in According to Eve*, choreography by Alvin Ailey. Silver gelatin print, Fred Fehl. United States, 1973.**

For almost 50 years, Masazumi Chaya worked for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, first as a dancer, then as a rehearsal director, and finally as Associate Artistic Director. He was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1947 and trained in classical ballet, appearing as a dancer on Japanese television before moving to New York at the age of 23. He then performed with the Dance Repertory Company, which later became American Ballet Theatre II, for two years before joining Ailey.

Chaya danced a number of works by Ailey, including *Blues Suite*, *Revelations*, *Night Creature*, *The Mooche*, *Streams*, and *Hidden Rites*, as well as works by others such as Goh Choo San's *Spectrum*. Where he really shone, however, was in his ability to recall details and teach works to others, and Chaya consequently became rehearsal director in 1988, when he retired from performing. From then until his full retirement in January of 2020, Chaya was known as the "keeper of the flame" for the Ailey company, nurturing its dancers and safeguarding the choreography and staging of its repertory. He received a *Dance Magazine* award in 2019 for his work.

Even in retirement, Chaya continues to serve Ailey's legacy as Project Director for the Alvin Ailey Choreographic Legacy Project, which will catalog and digitize archival and production materials and plan for the production of dance capsules to aid in the licensing and maintenance of all of Ailey's works.

Fred Fehl photographs, call number \*MGZEB 18-2790, box 1, folder 3.



4 ***Devi Dja*. Silver gelatin print, unknown photographer. United States, c. 1941.**

Devi, or Dewi, Dja was born in 1914 in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia, while it was still the Dutch East Indies. Indonesian sources state that her original name was Misri, and U.S. sources give her the last name Redjo. She later adopted the given name Soetidja, becoming Devi Dja by the time she began performing in 1926 as part of the Opera Dardanella, a troupe featuring Europeanized productions, including adaptations of Hollywood movies like *The Mask of Zorro* and *The Thief of Bagdad*. The troupe visited British India in 1936 and performed in vaudeville shows alongside Apache and eccentric dancing numbers.

By 1936 Dja had married Dardanella's director, but the company was falling apart as it left for a European and U.S. tour. When she arrived in New York in 1939 to premiere at the Guild Theatre in Manhattan, the diminished company was called "Devi Dja and her Bali and Java Dancers" in a news announcement. Throughout her tours Dja and her dancers were variously referred to as Japanese, Siamese (Thai), Balinese, and Javanese.

Performances were sold based on descriptions of the "lovely," "filigree beauty" of "native dances" from cultures called "perhaps the oldest and highest in the world." *Time* magazine, however, said that the "climax of the evening came when the temple-dancers forgot about the temple, and swung out in a lowbrow song & dance from modern Bali, accompanying themselves with corny, Hawaiian-style music on a steel guitar and a couple of mandolins....[T]he bronze-skinned Balinese broke down and grinned, swayed like jamming jitterbugs, wailed a torch song or two, and showed that East is meeting West as fast as the flicker of an exported Hollywood movie."

As World War II broke out and the Japanese invaded Indonesia, Dja settled in Hollywood and worked in film, including advising on *The Moon in Sixpence* (1942) and performing in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945). She remarried twice, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1954, and visited a now independent Indonesia in 1959. Dja continued to dance and teach dance in the U.S. until her health failed her, and she died from cancer in 1989.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Dja, Devi) no. 13.



5 ***Saeko Ichinohe in Imprisoned Soul*, choreography by Saeko Ichinohe. Silver gelatin print, Kenn Duncan / © The New York Public Library. United States, c. 1986.**

Saeko Ichinohe was born in Japan in 1936 and began studying modern dance at the Baku Ishii Dance Studio in 1952, joining the company on tours throughout Japan in 1955. By 1962 she was choreographing as well as dancing, and she won a national choreographic award in 1967.

In 1968, Ichinohe won a Fulbright scholarship to study in New York at the Juilliard School. She added another choreography prize to her resume that year, winning the Boston Ballet's Vestris Prize for Choreography for her work, *Suspicion*. Two years later, at the age of 34 and a year before she graduated, she founded the Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company, which would perform and teach until 2014.

From 1971 to 1972, Ichinohe was artist-in-residence at the Norsk Ballettinstitutt in Oslo, and taught at the Nederlands Dance Theatre and the London School of Contemporary Dance, as well as the Toho Gakuen Music School for children in Tokyo, where she taught eurythmics. In 1971, she won yet another choreography award at the Cologne International Choreographic Competition.

In 1973, the Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company was sponsored by the Asia Society on a tour of the U.S., called "East Meets West." The company began producing performances geared toward introducing Japanese culture to school children in 1978. Much of the work Ichinohe produced was on Japanese themes, and descriptions of it inevitably talked about the "fusion" of European and Japanese dance. Perhaps her best known work is *The Tale of Genji*, based on the eleventh century Japanese novel, which received its full-length premiere in 2000.

But Ichinohe also continued choreographing for other companies as well, including the Eglevsky Ballet and Philadanco, and she was one of the founding members of the Asian New Dance Coalition in 1979. In 2008, at the age of 72, she performed Ruth St. Denis's 1906 Orientalist dance *Incense* as part of her company's season. She was still performing at the company's 40th anniversary in 2011.

Ichinohe coached opera performers at the Metropolitan Opera and other companies in Japanese movement for productions of *Madama Butterfly* for many years, and received a commendation from the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs for her work promoting mutual understanding between the U.S. and Japan in 2006.

She passed away on May 7, 2020, receiving an obituary only in the Japanese American Association of New York's online newsletter.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Ichinohe, Saeko) no. 27.





**6 Ruth Ann Koesun in *La Fille Mal Gardée*, choreography by Bronislava Nijinska. Silver gelatin print, Maurice Seymour © Ronald Seymour. United States, c. 1949.**

The daughter of a Chinese American physician in Chicago's Chinatown, Ruth Ann Koesun was born on May 15, 1928. She studied ballet with eminent teachers in Chicago before joining Ballet Theatre, today's American Ballet Theatre, in 1946. By November 3, 1947, she was featured on the cover of *Life* magazine for a photo essay on "Ballet Beauties," and her combination of virtuosic technique, "dainty" beauty, dramatic range, and lyrical sensitivity made her popular among choreographers. The role for which she was best known was the sweetheart in *Billy the Kid*, but she also could dance the villain in *Undertow* and the classically demanding Bluebird role in *Sleeping Beauty*. She was the only dancer to have performed all three female roles in *Fancy Free*, dancing two in one performance when another dancer failed to appear on time. She remained with American Ballet Theatre, with occasional ventures into summer stock theater and other smaller group performances, until 1969, when she was 41.

Koesun then worked for the Jane Addams Hull House Association, a community organization for Chicago's underserved and poor communities, as its Dance Director. She left Hull House in 1971 for a two-year stint as a principal dancer with the First Chamber Ballet Company of New York before joining the Association of Illinois Dance Companies as its Executive Director. She also served on the Illinois Arts Council and received an Excellence Award in performing arts from the Organization of Chinese Americans in 1985.

Koesun was the dance archivist at the Newberry Library from 1989 until her death in 2018.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Koesun, Ruth Ann) no. 29.



**7 Yeichi Nimura in *Flag Dance*, choreography by Yeichi Nimura. Silver gelatin print, Constantine © Constantine Hassalevris. United States, c. 1939.**

He was born Tomizo Miki in Suwa, Japan in 1897. He never knew his mother and early on lost both his father (at age six) and grandfather (at age fifteen), after which he moved to Tokyo and worked at various jobs. One job was on a ship bound for Seattle in 1918, where he disembarked. He never returned to Japan.

He adopted the name for which he became known, Yeichi Nimura (新村英一), and drifted across the U.S. for two years until he landed in New York, where he began taking classes in ballet, the Denishawn style, and Spanish dance. He was briefly hired by Michio Ito to appear in the 1927 Orientalist revue *Ching-a-Ling* and, taken on by Ito's manager, began getting hired for other performances, including at the Neighborhood Playhouse and on Broadway. Nimura also choreographed his iconic pieces *Javanesque*, *Ceremony*, *Cosmic Poems*, *Wizard Cat*, and *Spear Episode*, premiering a recital of his works in 1930, beginning to teach his own "plastique" dance style, and briefly opening a dance studio in 1931.

Nimura then toured around the world and the U.S. from 1932 to 1940 with Ito's former manager and one of his students; he married the former in 1947 and the latter in 1964 after his first marriage ended in divorce. He was rapturously received in Europe, with one reviewer comparing him to Nijinsky. A second U.S. tour was canceled in 1937, however, after the U.S.S. Panay was bombed by the Japanese; the Panay had been helping Chinese forces fleeing from Japanese invaders of Nanjing. Nimura was able to give performances on the East Coast and Canada, but began to focus on teaching and opened the Nimura Studio in Carnegie Hall. The studio later became Ballet Arts, which continues to operate today out of New York City Center.

Nimura returned to choreographing in the late 1940s, producing the Broadway musical *Lute Song* (1945) and concert pieces such as *Tropic Etude* (1960) and *Ondine* (1960). He also supported visiting Japanese artists, including the Azuma Kabuki Dancers and Musicians (1954 and 1955) and the Takarazuka Opera Company (1959), and was awarded the Japanese Order of the Sacred Treasure in 1969. He published an autobiography in Japanese in 1971, and established the Nimura Award to support Japanese dancers in 1973 before his death in New York in 1979.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Nimura, Yeichi) no. 12.



**8** *Sono Osato as the Siren in Prodigal Son*, choreography by David Lichine. Silver gelatin print, Alfredo Valente © Richard Valente. United States, c. 1940.

Sono Osato was born in 1919 in Omaha, Nebraska, the daughter of a Japanese photographer and a Japanophile Irish-French Canadian mother. Her parents married in Iowa because it was illegal for Japanese to marry whites in Nebraska, where they had met at a dinner with film star Sessue Hayakawa. (In marrying her father, her mother lost her U.S. citizenship under the terms of 1907's Expatriation Act.) By 1925, the Osatos had moved to Chicago to be closer to her mother's family, and she began studying ballet. In 1934, when she was just 14, Osato auditioned and was accepted into the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Osato, the company's first American and its first dancer of Asian descent, refused to adopt the common practice of Russifying names at the Ballet Russe. She danced with the company, which was always on tour, until 1941, when she joined Ballet Theatre (today's American Ballet Theatre) as a soloist. Her "exotic" beauty fascinated photographers.

The day after Pearl Harbor, Osato's father was arrested by the FBI at his home in Chicago and detained in Illinois—before Executive Order 9066 resulted in the incarceration of the Japanese—despite his wife's many attempts to free him. He was later released, but was not allowed to leave the city throughout most of World War II. Osato herself was barred from Ballet Theatre's Mexico tour in 1942 and its West Coast tour in 1943, even though she had temporarily adopted the name Sono Fitzpatrick, using her mother's maiden name.

In 1943, Osato married a Moroccan American architect, and shifted her work to Broadway, stealing the show in *One Touch of Venus* and winning the first ever Donaldson Award for best female dancer. A year later, she starred in *On the Town* as Ivy Smith, the central love interest. Her father petitioned to be allowed to visit New York to see the premiere, but suffered a stroke and did not see her perform until February 1945.

Outside of performing, Osato was politically active, teaching ballet and performing for benefits in Harlem and for the National Urban League, agitating for the rights of Spanish refugees fleeing Franco's regime, and signing a pledge not to support theaters with Jim Crow policies. She later published a memoir, *Distant Dances*, in 1980, and became a major supporter of Career Transition for Dancers, establishing a scholarship program to support dancers pursuing graduate education.

Osato died at home at the age of 99 in 2018.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Osato, Sono) no. 5.



**9 *Indrani, executing a dance in the Kuchipudi style. Silver gelatin print, unknown photographer. United States, c. 1955-1965.***

Her mother was a white American woman who had made an extended tour of India to study the country's dance forms and write the first book in English on Indian classical dance, marrying an Indian scientist along the way. Indrani Bajpai Rahman, known professionally as Indrani, was perhaps destined for a life in dance when she was born in Madras, today's Chennai, in 1930.

By 1939, Indrani was touring with her mother's troupe, performing the Bharatanatyam form, and in the next ten years would add Kuchipudi to her repertoire. She also began to learn Odissi dance, which was not well known outside India, and introduced and popularized the form through her performances.

She had eloped and married in 1945 at the age of 15, but in 1952 Indrani was crowned Miss India and then Miss Universe, which brought her international attention and a world tour. India recognized her achievements with the Padma Shri in 1969 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in the performing arts in 1981, and she also received a Taraknath Das Foundation Award in 1992 for contributing to understanding between India and the U.S. Indrani performed for numerous heads of state before settling in the U.S. to tour and teach dance at the university level until her death in 1999 in New York City.

New York Public Library Digital Collections Image ID 1712320, <https://on.nypl.org/3oFfIXK>.

**10 *Ruby Shang and Elie Chaib in Sports and Follies, choreography by Paul Taylor. Silver gelatin print, Kenn Duncan / © The New York Public Library. United States, c. 1974.***

Today she is on the boards of the Asia Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, the Asia Pacific Leaders' Malaria Alliance, the Klosters Forum, and Impact Investment Exchange, but Ruby Shang began as a dancer. She was born in Tokyo on November 16, 1948, the daughter of a Japanese mother and a Chinese father, and studied ballet as a child. She graduated from Brown University with a degree in art history in 1971 and began dancing with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, performing with the company until 1975.

Shang briefly co-directed the Dance Hawaii Company before leaving to form her own company, Ruby Shang and Company, Dancers, in 1978. The company largely performed Shang's own work, and made appearances in New York as well as London, Japan, and France. Shang's work was often site-specific: one piece took place in a dance studio called Fancy Dancer at the corner of 40th and 7th Avenues, while the audience stood in the street.

Beginning in 1980, Shang joined the faculty at Juilliard. She also taught at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and, sponsored by the American Dance Festival, in China and Japan. Shang received a Fulbright-Hayes Award as well as Choreographer Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in recognition of her creative work.

By the late 1990s, Shang's dance career was winding down, and her experience in Asia led her to a position as Country Director for China at the Clinton Foundation in 2003, where she eventually became Senior Advisor before departing in 2015. Shang implemented the Clinton Health Access Initiative in China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, and Vietnam, and also headed the Clinton Climate Initiative in China, Japan, Korea, and Australia, as well as Southeast Asia.

Shang now lives in Singapore.

Jerome Robbins Dance Division photograph files, call number \*MGZEA (Shang, Ruby) no. 2.

