

# Eat Your Heart out

**Brenda Song Dishes on Past Roles, Future Plans and Celebration in Representation**

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**You could try to put Brenda Song into a box. You could see her for her Asian American heritage. You could see her as the ditzy hotel heiress from a beloved Disney sitcom. You could typecast her, take her for face value and keep her in the boxes of roles she's played before.**

**You could do all that—but you'd be wrong.**

**I**n truth, underestimating Brenda Song is probably one of the biggest mistakes you could possibly make. She's blessed with a magnetic personality, a sharp intellect and an effortless beauty that no one can deny, but, on top of all that, she has a willpower and work ethic that have taken her (and her career) to new heights.

"I've never not remembered a time when I didn't want to be performing," she says. "I started in this industry very, very early. I was 3—almost 4 [years old]—in the Arden Fair Mall in Sacramento, and in the middle of the mall, they were doing this model search." A talent scout watched Song mimicking their catwalk and approached her mother, giving her the "whole spiel." Song's mother, unimpressed by the presentation, finished up at the mall and took the soon-to-be starlet home.

"My parents had me very young," Song explains, "so they were very, very young and very, very poor. My grandparents, at the time, thought that to get on TV, you had to somehow get into the TV." But even from a young age, Song was the decider of her own fate. "A few weeks later, I was really sick, and all I could talk about was this acting school, and I wouldn't take my Robitussin. I know I was only 3 or 4, but I was talking, and I wouldn't shut up," Song says. Struggling to get her chatty (if not persistent) granddaughter to take her medicine, Song's grandma struck a deal with her: "If you take this medicine, I will take you to this acting school."

"So my grandma took everything out of her savings, which was \$527, and took me to this acting school—which, obviously, wasn't legit," she recalls. "But through them, I met a real agent."

From there, Song kept pushing for her career. She began with print work right away, then around her sixth birthday, her family found another agent and moved to LA; shortly after, Song booked her first commercial. "Even after I booked my first series, my mom used to joke, 'We have to go back when you stop working!'" notes Song.

"It didn't even become a career until I was 16," she says. That year, her mom, a four-time breast cancer survivor, was diagnosed for the first time, Song had just booked "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody" and she had just gotten accepted into college. "I loved school—I was an overachiever, and my dad was a second-grade teacher—and my dad said, 'Hey,

if you want to do this, this has to become your career.'" Up until that point, performing was an "after-school activity" or a reward, but her father's advice was to either go to college and figure out what she wanted to do, or to go all-in with performing. "At 16, I made the career choice," Song explains. "I just never thought about doing anything else."

Although we know the story of her aspiring career has a happy ending, it was not without its hurdles. "I had to learn rejection at a really young age," she says. "[It came from] auditioning [as a kid] and knowing that people weren't even looking up because I wasn't blonde-haired, blue-eyed—because I didn't fit the image."

"Of course there were speed bumps," she says. "Going into auditions, I knew I couldn't play Harrison Ford's daughter; it was very limited." But with her pragmatic, after-school approach to performing and her parents' support, Song stayed motivated. "My mom would always say that there was only one me, and if they're not looking for me, it's okay. There are more than enough opportunities out there, and I can't change who I am, and do I want to?" she explains. To this day, that mentality gets Song through the rejections and tears, as well as the moments when she doubts her choices.

Even recently, she found herself at a crossroads in her career, where she was questioning what was next and where exactly she fit in. She had played a plethora of roles through Disney, including the iconic London Tipton in "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody" and Wendy Wu in *Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior*, as well as various TV shows and movies.

Song saw Disney's "color-blind casting" as a gift. When she originally booked "Suite Life," she was actually going in to play Maddie, a smart, sweet hotel employee. Ashley Tisdale, Song's blonde peer, was going in for London, the hotel heiress—but the producers decided to switch their roles. According to Song, "They truly were just casting for who was right for the part."

And while London's character goes against the way Asian Americans are typically portrayed on-screen, she fell into other boxes when it came to casting. "When I was on 'Suite Life,' all the roles I kept getting offered were these ditzy roles," she explains. "And then when *Wendy Wu* came about, people would ask, 'Why would you jump into the stereotype of Asians doing martial arts?'"





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**You Goal, Girl**

• Song’s goals for 2020 are to continue to honor herself personally and professionally.



**Got This in the Bag**

• Five items Song always has on-hand are: concealer, her Kindle, her wallet, her phone and blotting papers.



**Off-Screen**

• In her spare time, Song loves to knit, bake and read, but some of her more serious passions include being an advocate for cancer awareness and helping fund education.



**#SquadGoals**

• While she loves her current girl squad, her dream dinner party would include guests, Michelle Obama, Martha Stewart, Mother Teresa, Victoria Beckham and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



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# “I’m proud of the woman I am. I worked really hard to be her.”

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**B**ut Song didn’t see it that way. Aside from having a second-degree black belt, Song wanted to play the part because of how the main character, Wendy, struggles with how her heritage differs from American culture. “I was walking out of one stereotype and into another—and that’s always the case—I think everyone is stereotyped in some way,” she says. “But it’s about letting those go and doing projects you’re passionate about, regardless of what everyone else thinks about it.”

So when she found out that bestselling novel “*Crazy Rich Asians*” was being made into a film, she was eager to audition to be part of the cast—only to find that she wouldn’t be able to audition for any of the roles. “They thought I wasn’t right for it,” she explains. “I was like, ‘The lead character is in her mid-to-late-20s, an Asian American, struggling—how am I not right for it?’ And they were very honest and said that my image was, basically, too whitewashed.”

For anyone who’s seen *Crazy Rich Asians*, it’s clear that one of the primary achievements of the film is how it opened up more Asian American representation in the industry. For too long, the only roles for Asian American and Pacific Islanders tended to be smaller parts that played to certain tropes. Roles like the alluring but deadly Dragon Lady, the wise martial arts master, the meek, quiet nerd and the foreigner speaking in almost-unrecognizable broken English are not only offensive and limiting, but they’re also stale and uninteresting.

“Some actors don’t fit into those roles—I don’t fit into a lot of those roles,” Song explains. “Even though I do martial arts, I have a hard time playing an assassin or a ninja! That’s just not who I am...and for a while that was the only part in mainstream movies that I could audition for.” Fortunately, there is a movement for AAPI representation in the industry, and it’s making headway—especially thanks to popular movies like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Always Be My Maybe* and *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*.

Needless to say, after years of being overlooked for her race, Song was blindsided by the sentiment shared by *Crazy Rich Asians*’ casting department. “I felt like I was being punished for having worked in this industry for so long,” she says. “I didn’t understand, and it really hurt me. I was very confused.”

“I don’t ever expect anyone to hand me work—I just want my day in court,” Song shares. “I have auditioned for so many things that weren’t right for me. A lot of the roles that I booked were not written for a minority—I’ve booked roles that were written for boys—but for something that I thought was so right for me, and I couldn’t even go read for it... It really discouraged me. I thought, ‘If I can’t go read for this, then what am I doing?’”

Despite her work to break out of being cast or not cast based on her minority status, she felt that she had broken through

one box, only to have been put into a different one. “I felt like I was being judged on my past work, and I fought so hard to get away from that already,” she explains.

Then, for the first time in 26 years, Song took time off. “I was in such a weird place. It was the first time in a long time I had felt discouraged,” she admits. But there’s nothing a little travel, self-reflection and new outlook can’t fix. “I came back with this mentality of, ‘I am who I am.’ I am so grateful for every yes and, also, for every no because it made me who I am—not just the actor that I am, but the person that I am.”

Two weeks after returning to work, she had booked the lead role (Jennifer) in Netflix thriller *Secret Obsession*, and shortly after that, she booked Madison in Hulu’s “*Dollface*,” a role which she says perfectly represents where she is in her life and the type of actor she wants to be. “It’s so much fun,” Song gushes. “[Madison] is such a straight-laced, has blinders on, never stops talking, very type A personality that I’ve never gotten to play.”

Not only does she feel a deep connection to her role, but she also loves the storyline and creation process behind “*Dollface*.” The story is about a group of women in their mid-to-late-20s that is (refreshingly) written by an actual group of women in their mid-to-late-20s. “They’re writing about their lives—this is not people writing about what they think is happening out there—this is people writing about what they do every day.”

From defying the monolith with London and embracing the struggle of cultural identity with Wendy to playing an emotionally-charged Jennifer and a dry-witted Madison, Song has undoubtedly proven that she goes beyond typecasting—by race or by genre. “I’ve been very fortunate with my roles,” she notes. “It hasn’t been about my nationality or my ethnicity, and I really appreciate that because I definitely believe that both sides of the story need to be told: the story of the struggle of being Asian American [and] roles about just being a girl in LA...not defined by our culture.”

Song is looking forward to seeing the industry transform into a more diverse, more inclusive space—not just for Asian Americans, but for all minorities as well. “My biggest thing is for the next generation to have something I never had, which was seeing yourself on TV at a young age, knowing that anything is possible,” she says. It’s important to her that kids feel that they are “represented in some way, shape or form,” and that they have opportunities and hope.

“It’s okay to be down and to be confused about what you want, but at the end of the day, you have to be honest with yourself and know that you can’t change other peoples’ opinions of you. And it’s not up to you!” she explains. “I’m really proud of my resume, of the actor I am and the person that I am—and I know I have a lot of work to do on both aspects, but I’m proud of the woman I am. I worked really hard to be her.” ■





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