

MARGARET CHO – ARTIST PROFILE

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

She is our woman warrior of the new millennium. Slicing through racial and sexual boundaries with a razor-sharp sword of wit, she's transcended the traditionally-unremarkable trajectory of most stand-up comics, single-handedly transforming herself into a cultural force to be reckoned with. A self-described "Korean-American fag-hag, shit-starter, girl comic, trash-talker," Margaret Cho is one of those great artists who has taken the personal and made it universally recognizable, turning her own pain into the pleasure of our collective perception. We see ourselves in her, and we hear what we've always wanted to say coming fearlessly out of her mouth. She is a voice for many who have been silenced through the years ~ Asian Americans, gay men and women, and outsiders of all sorts ~ those who have been systematically dismissed and ignored. Blunt honesty like hers has rarely been widely-well-received, and she's sometimes paid for being the lone outspoken one. Like the woman warriors before her ~ Joan-of-Arc, Marie Antoinette, Mae West, Madonna ~ Ms. Cho has had her share of criticism and castigation, but it has all gone to further her strength and integrity. She has the stuff of a survivor, and being such a groundbreaker, she needed it.

Raised in the heady world of San Francisco in the 1970's, Ms. Cho was influenced by the disparate populace roaming the streets ~ everyone from drag queens to ancient hippies to drug addicts to leather guys and gals, along with her Korean family and the Asian population of the Bay area. These all informed the girl who first stepped into the comedy spotlight at the tender age of sixteen in a club above her parents' bookstore. Comedy was her saving grace, and it gave her a chance to be seen, even if she didn't always feel it.

Following successful stints touring colleges, Ms. Cho landed herself the American Comedy Award for Female Comedian in 1994. Appearances on the Arsenio Hall show and a Bob Hope special helped to raise her profile, and by the time her ABC sitcom *All-American Girl*

premiered she was a bona-fide star. Yet for all this, the trappings of fame and fortune did not bring happiness.

Critics charged that her failed sitcom wasn't funny, the politically correct claimed her act perpetuated Asian stereotypes, and it seemed for the moment that there was no pleasing anyone. For most people this would have been a difficult time; for someone so lacking in self-love and self-esteem, it was almost unbearable.

"Working in Hollywood, and not being traditionally beautiful or tall or skinny or blonde or even a guy, I felt invisible a lot of the time," she wrote in her autobiography *I'm the One That I Want*. This sense of not being seen goes back to her childhood, and is a feeling to which many minorities can relate. In the tradition of some repressed artists, Ms. Cho took her experiences and formed them into the stuff of her comedic talent. And like most comics, her ability to make people laugh masked the hurt and emptiness that had characterized much of her life.

"Comedy is a rare gift from the gods, an awesome invention. It propels you right into the heart of the universe," she has said. "After you get the audience into that kind of frenzy, and you are being worshipped like the false idol you are, how do you leave the stage and transition back into real life? How can you just come down? How can you ease back into mortality? What will you do for an encore? What is there left to do but set yourself on fire?"

That intoxicating euphoria, the kind that could get her higher than any drug and more giddy than any shot ~ so elusive and addictive and glorious ~ was it enough? And how does one maintain such exhilarating bliss? There may not be a good way to sustain it, and so we turn to self-destructive behavior to fill that gaping hole. Cho's inability to "see herself" ~ a societal symptom going back to her childhood ~ would find her looking into the seductive eyes of liquor, drugs, unrequited crushes, and unworthy lovers.

"I thought I was immune to it and that it wouldn't affect me," Cho says of her use of drugs and alcohol. Asians weren't shown dying of overdoses or heading off to re-hab ~ hell, Asians weren't being shown at all. How could it be a problem for her as a Korean-American? She

attributes some of her excessive drinking and drug use to “a lack of visibility, a lack of representation. It’s as if we don’t exist in a lot of ways.”

That lack of visibility was a driving force in her life. Her racy material screams “Look at me!” in a way to compensate for feeling invisible. The attention-getting antics she sometimes exhibits are ways of putting herself out there, a bold proclamation of “I am here – I exist” put forth to give a face to those of us often ignored. One can challenge the system by shattering the stereotypes, smashing them with the antithesis of meek, screaming and shouting to counter the pre-conceived notion. Or, one can manipulate in a more subtle manner ~ winning people over with a softer, but perhaps more powerful, use of wit and cleverness. Ms. Cho has done both in her widely-varied career. Which has effected the most change and response?

“I think it’s particular to who’s hearing your message,” she contemplates. “I’m lucky – I don’t have to do just comedy. I can do different types of performance, motivational experiences, and other expression.” In fact, just living her life as she does may be the greatest contribution Cho will make. As an Asian-American making her way in the entertainment world, Ms. Cho has already made in-roads for greater acceptance and awareness. She’s paid her dues and she’s survived.

These days Ms. Cho has reconciled the thrill of being on-stage and in the spotlight with the reality of her off-stage life. Even coming down from an exhilarating performance is easier. “It’s a weird experience. I love it, but there’s something very strange about transitioning back into being normal. But I’m older now; I can deal with all that stuff better. I learned to deal with the lifestyle without being too destructive.” She still has her demons (“Boredom, stagnation, artistic frustration”), but they seem to be the very things that drive and inspire her artistic evolution.

Though Ms. Cho is currently in a relationship, she admits that it isn’t the fairy-tale ending in which society conditions us to place faith. “Relationships are still hard for me,” she concedes. “Being in a relationship doesn’t solve everything. It can be a pain ~ dealing with someone else’s issues. It’s not the happily-ever-after we’re told it is.” Continuing to challenge the

myth of happily-ever-after, Cho goes on to say, "It's like we have to have our own self-esteem validated by other people. Why can't we just feel good about ourselves?"

It appears that Ms. Cho is working towards that goal. Her last two tours (and movies), *I'm the One That I Want* and *The Notorious C.H.O.*, were exercises in acceptance and self-realization. Critical and commercial successes, both projects chronicle the growth and maturation of an artist and a human being. She continues to be emboldened by her gay fans. In 2000, GLAAD presented her with its Golden Gate Award, given to the entertainer who has championed equal rights for gays and lesbians. Her hilarious f-word addled appearance on *Sex & the City* was another gift to her gay minions. A mix by Junior Vasquez appears as part of *The Notorious C.H.O.* Her act frequently promotes and supports gay marriage rights, and Ms. Cho has long-ago reached icon status in the gay community.

Hers is a life of self-exploration, and in her journey we can't help but see some of ourselves. In her honesty and forthrightness she offers an inspirational guide to self-acceptance and self-love. Ms. Cho takes us to task over our own faults and shortcomings, our intrinsic shame and doubt, forcing us to re-examine long-held stereotypical views, and we, in turn, love her for it. She is our All-American, fist-pummeling, freedom-fighting ass-master, and no one else does it better.