

THEATER

It's hip to be Cho

Comic fave returns with an edgy new show

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

It's safe to call Margaret Cho—who describes herself as “a Korean American, fag hag, shit-starting, girl-comic trash talker”—one of the country's pre-eminent gay icons. After a failed 1994 ABC sitcom, *All-American Girl*, she rose from the post-network ashes to achieve a singular revival of the career she left for television.

Her last standup tour, the confessional one-woman show *I'm the One That I Want*, sold out two nights at Portland's Crystal Ballroom and later was released as a popular feature film for which the community turned out in droves at the 2000 Portland Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Film Festival.

Cho, who previously had included gay-themed bits in her standup routines, made queerness a recurring theme in *I'm the One That I Want*, extensively discussing her identification with gay men and the time she slept with a woman while performing on a lesbian cruise ship.

Cho returns to Portland this month with her new show, *The Notorious C.H.O.* The title is a play on the name of the late Notorious B.I.G., a controversial gangsta rapper.

“It was kind of like it was a joke, like I was gonna be really hip-hop,” Cho says on the phone from Hawaii, where she is vacationing before her West Coast dates. “It's not really like that at all, though I use quite a lot of the imagery and the music in the show 'cuz I'm a big fan of rap, so it's certainly an element of it.”

Cho's closeness to the gay community goes way back. In *I'm the One That I Want*, in addition to a vivid discussion of gay male porn, she says she virtually was raised by drag queens.

“There's always been that connection,” she says, “because that's a big presence in my life. I have a lot of gay friends and I always have, so

when I have material that seems gay-themed, it's not really gay-themed to me. It's about where I'm at and what's happening, and that just happens to be an arena that's composed entirely of gay men, so that's kind of what my perspective is and that's what my story is always going to be about. It's never been intentional. It just kind of occurred like that.

“I think having a gay following is a natural extension of the people I have in my life. For me, I have more of a connection with gay men, although certainly with women it's building, and I think in this new show it's much more equalized. A lot of the female standup comedians I know are lesbians and kind of function as men in many ways...this is a very male business, very male. I'm a mannish woman, also. I have a lot of testosterone.”

Citing Richard Pryor as a primary influence and Chris Rock as a peer, Cho sees her work as an art form that she hopes will provoke and edify as it entertains. She isn't worried about offending people as she pokes fun at sensitive issues, including ethnic and sexual stereotyping.

“I just look at what I think is funny and entertaining and interesting, and whatever is 'offensive' is really out of my control,” she says. “I don't really go out of my way not to offend people...it's something that may or may not happen. I don't really think about it too much.”



Trash-talkin' Cho was raised in the wild by a pack of drag queens

as *I'm the One That I Want*?

“In a sense, it's even more so,” she insists. “It goes into even deeper detail. Certainly, I've done a lot of weird exploring in the last couple of years that I like to talk about, which is really fun and wild, but...I don't really look at my work as so personal. It is about my life, certainly, but I look at it as people taking my experiences and joining theirs up against it as a kind of transparency, to live out their own reality through mine in a way. So when I do a show, I look at it as being about the audience as opposed to being about me.”

Although the anecdotes in *The Notorious C.H.O.* are drawn from her own experience, Cho avoids using the stage as an analyst's couch.

“When I write, it's very much a dialogue that's going on, as opposed to me just kind of going off on a monologue,” she notes. “You know, doing comedy, you really need a response right away, and that response is like an answer in itself, even though it's just laughter or whatever, so it has to be on equal terms. You can't really be too much of a narcissist if you do this.”

MARGARET CHO performs 7:30 p.m. Dec. 13 in the Grand Ballroom at the Portland Art Museum's Northwing. For tickets call 503-790-ARTS.

So should her audience expect *The Notorious C.H.O.* to be as outrageously uninhibited

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.

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