

The Cho you don't know

You may know her as a comedian, but Margaret Cho takes on many roles in her life. The Korean-American speaks on her sexuality and LGBTQ activism in the media.

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Margaret Cho has been doing stand-up comedy since her early teens. In 1994 she starred in an ABC sitcom, "All American Girl" that was created around her stand up comedy. The show, though short-lived, was the first television show that prominently featured an Asian American family in mainstream media.

Cho has dipped her toe in many different creative pools. She is a comedian, an actress, a fashion designer, a burlesque dancer and a musician. Much of her work has been a form of activism for the LGBTQ community. Cho has been married for 10 years and is very open about her polyamorous lifestyle.

On Nov. 15, Cho will bring her new stand up routine, "Mother" to the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall. Though she has no children of her own, she does have a mother (who is an inspiration for some of her comedy material). Cho is also a sort of mother figure herself within the queer community, a title she proudly touts.

I first asked her about the realities of being a Korean-American woman.

Margaret Cho: It has everything to do with the way we're perceived. I think we are just kind of invisible. It's a feeling of not existing. The way race is perceived – I don't know how it is for men or how it is for white people. I have assumptions, but I don't really know.

Sue Zalokar: With one hand you speak highly of commitment – you've been married for 10 years – with the other hand you are, well, pleasuring someone else under the table. Can you talk about a polyamorous lifestyle and why it works for you and your husband.

M.C.: It is really about the way that I am and the way that I've made my life. It works even though it goes against what people think about in society. It gets talked about way more than it actually gets done.

People are curious, certainly. My sexuality has so little to do with my life. It's one of those things for me that as I'm getting older, fades into the background. Women's sexuality is something that is talked about but also mysterious. When someone is open about it, you get a lot of questions. I talk about it way more than I do it and think about it.

S.Z.: You went to nursing school.

M.C.: I did, very briefly. I couldn't deal with the human body. There were these particular aspects of being around the body in that way (that I couldn't deal with). I went to a school that didn't have a lot of money and we had really old cadavers that we used over and over and over again. That was just too much.

S.Z.: That was before "All American Girl?"

M.C.: Oh yes, way before my professional acting and comedy career. I wanted to be a comedian and I wanted to be an actor and I wanted to do all of this stuff, but I wasn't

sure what was going to happen.

S.Z.: When did you do your first stand up routine?

M.C.: I was 14 or 15 in high school. I did a show in school. When I was a little bit older – I was going to a performing arts high school – my teacher signed me up for open mics in comedy clubs. Now that I look back on it, I think it might have been kind of inappropriate, but at the same time it was really encouraging to me as a young woman. I was doing sets in comedy clubs when I was quite young.

S.Z.: "Drop Dead Diva." You just finished season five.

M.C.: Yes. It's airing now.

S.Z.: And the show is well known for its support of LGBT communities.

M.C.: Every year we have a sort of big gay episode and this year it was about gay athletes coming out.

S.Z.: The first season of your new series "In Transition" just wrapped up.

M.C.: As a comedy, it's very broad. It's about women who are transitioning from prison to a halfway house and then back into society. It's a lot of fun.

S.Z.: You have some overtly political views, is there any social significance to your subject matter for "In Transition"?

M.C.: We never really see what life is like for women when they leave prison. This is my attempt to sort of explain that. We see people (in media) becoming criminals and we see them in prison, but we don't see what happens afterward. It was also an opportunity to do a project with some of my friends that was really broad and fun.

S.Z.: Yes! I love the scene where the character Concha Valenzuela makes omelets with powdered milk, eggs and salsa in a plastic bag in the microwave. On canteen day in a prison, that really happens.

M.C.: I've known people who have been in different level (prisons). So I have a little bit of knowledge. But our writers are the ones with that savvy.

S.Z.: Here's one I have always wondered about: is it racist for a Korean-American woman to make fun of Korean-American women, or do you get a pass?

M.C.: It sort of depends. When I talk about my mother, I don't perceive her race. That is how my mother is and that is how she talks.

S.Z.: Tattoos.

M.C.: It's a passion. A lot of people that I'm close with are great tattoo artists and very tattooed. It's part of my being. I love the art form. I love the art that I have.

S.Z.: One of the things with tattoos is always looking to the next ink. What are you

planning?

M.C.: I actually need to finish all of the stuff that I have. I have many pieces that aren't completed. The ones I want to finish most quickly are the ones on my knees – which are the presidents Washington and Lincoln – their portraits from the one and

the five dollar bill.

S.Z.: Why did you put them on your knees?

M.C.: That is where they fit! At the turn of the century, circus ladies commonly tattooed the presidents on their knees!

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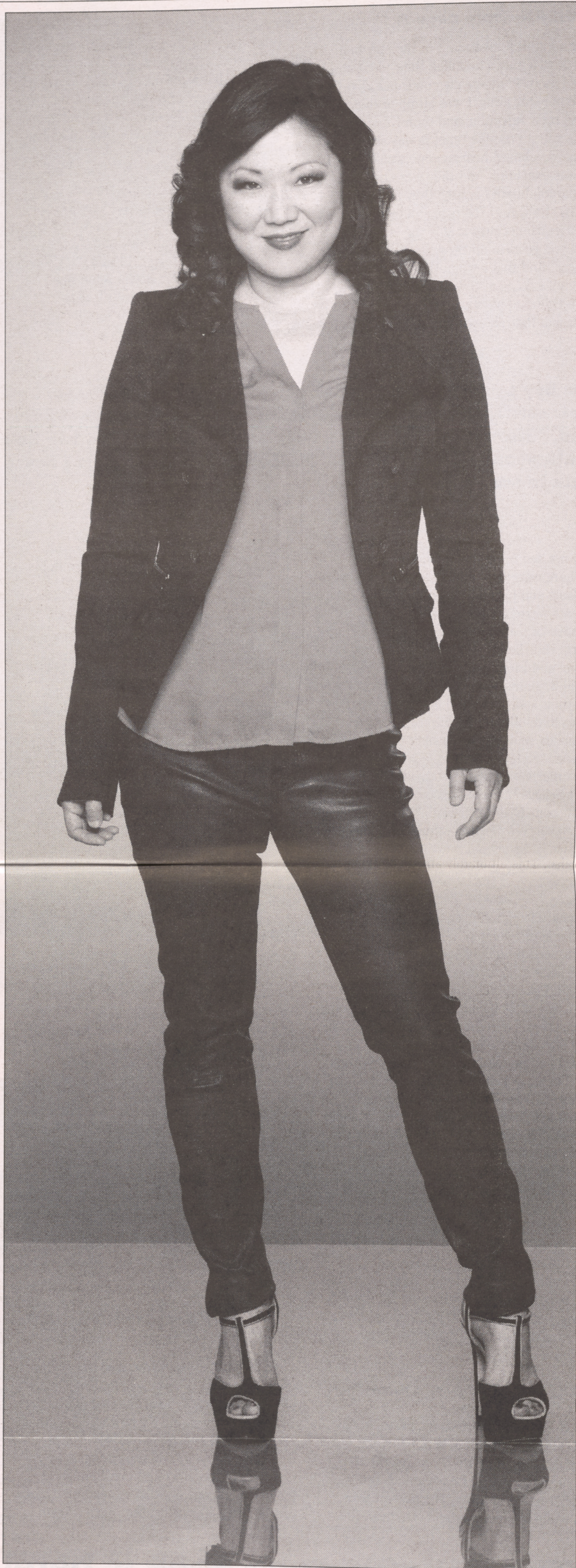


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