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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Arthur Dong: Forbidden City, USA

I first heard about the golden era of Chinese-American nightclubs through Arthur Dong's 1989 documentary *Forbidden City, USA*. In the hour-long film, Dong focused not only on the most famous of these nightclubs, the Forbidden City, which opened in San Francisco in the late 1930s, but also the time period that gave rise to Asian-American performers following their dreams. Dong inter-



Photo/Zand Gee
 Filmmaker Arthur Dong (left photo) has released a new book, *Forbidden City, USA: Chinese American Nightclubs 1936-1970*, which includes historic interviews and photos.

cut candid interviews with past performers and archival footage of their acts for more than five years to create a celebratory film that aired on the Public Broadcasting Service's American Experience. Nearly 30 years after he first began interviewing nightclub performers, Dong compiled a book, *Forbidden City, USA: Chinese American Nightclubs 1936-1970*. It contains startling photographic gems and inspiring interviews that were not included in the film. Dong has become a scholar of this time period and has amassed the largest collection of photos and memorabilia from what otherwise might have become forgotten history.

I can't help being drawn to the celebratory aspect of the stories he gathered. When reviewing the history, however, there isn't a great deal of joy that is readily found. Make no mistake, the people Dong interviewed endured racism, were openly barred from Hollywood as anything but stereotypes, and were estranged from their families for pursuing their dreams. Yet one can't help but feel delight upon seeing photos and film footage of performers Dorothy (Takahashi) Toy in a Ginger Rogers long gown and Paul Wing in Fred Astaire top hat and tails dancing in harmony with each other.

The new book also contains artistic and still risqué photos of Sally-Rand-like bubble dancer Noel Toy. Dong said Toy "performed pretty much in the nude." Because she was so daring during her time, he didn't know what to expect from her, but found Toy to be "down-to-earth and pragmatic and very proud of her body."

Asian-American nightclub performers broke new ground that defied stereotyping. Their shows were well attended by white audiences and celebrities such as Ronald Reagan. Clubs like the Forbidden City were a place where myths — that Asian girls were bow-legged, that Asians didn't have talent like

white performers, and other untruths — were dispelled in front of a mainstream audience.

Dong said they didn't set out to change history; they were just living their lives, not thinking about historical background. They did what they could to survive and follow their dreams.

"What they accomplished was so celebratory," Dong said. "They didn't think about fighting a

barrier to advance equal rights. They fought because they wanted to sing and dance."

Dong interviewed more than 100 people and he estimates he has at least 100 hours of audio and film interviews. When he began in 1985, he had to meet them in person, as there was no Facebook or e-mail, so he flew across the country because a good

many of the performers had left San Francisco. The interviews had a feeling of being among close family because they spent a lot of time together while stories were shared. He said he's still meeting people and hearing stories despite the fact that not many of these groundbreaking performers are still alive. Because the clubs lasted through 1970, he was able to meet many from the latter part of the time period.

Through the years, Dong stayed in touch with a lot of the performers, sometimes attending dinners and reunion gatherings. Many of them went to his film premieres. He got a little teary eyed admitting that he misses the social interactions since so many have passed away.

When asked about his favorite interviews, Dong paused for a long time. How could he choose? Then he started talking about Tony Wing, a leading male dancer who didn't care what people thought. Dong especially loved his humor. "He told the funniest dirty stories," he said. "He made me turn off the tape recorder!"

Dong debated about how much he wanted to reveal about Wing and several other performers regarding their sexual orientation. Because many of the interviewees are deceased, Dong decided he didn't want to fully disclose what he had learned, but he said there are hints in the book about at least five gay, lesbian, or bisexual performers.

He also talked about an interview with a

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