



Cho, Margaret (b. 1968)

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Margaret Cho.
Photograph by Phil Nee
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"Comedy was all I ever wanted," declares Cho in her memoir *I'm the One that I Want* (2001). "When I began, I don't think anyone believed I would go anywhere," but the bisexual actress turned stand-up comedian has become one of the most prominent Asian Americans in show business and in glbtq culture.

Born to Korean immigrant parents on December 5, 1968 in San Francisco, California, Moran "Margaret" Cho draws from her "bi-cultural" experience as Korean-American as well as from everyday queer culture to forge her seductive style, which is enticing and amusing and never fails to surprise.

Her humor is a distinctively witty and candid kind of truth-telling. It is funny, yet it is also enlightening; it teaches even as it amuses.

For Cho, comedy offers the occasion for good laughs while it also allows her the freedom to contest, reverse, and play with stereotypes. It also helps her make sense of her sexual, racial, and ethnic differences, which she says often come in direct conflict with her self-identified Americanness--an identity that is often denied her because of the shape of her face and character of her eyes.

Comedy, thus, helps Cho deal with the pain of racism and discrimination, as well as with drug addiction, a false haven that eased her pain temporarily but almost destroyed her life.

Cho inherited her comedic gift from her father, who writes joke books in Korean--although Cho admits she is often unaffected by Korean jokes and by Korean letters because of her American upbringing. She describes Korean words, for example, as "looking like a bunch of sticks" on the page.

Cho draws from her experience as an assimilated daughter of more traditional parents to educate Americans about generational cleavages among grandparents, parents, and teenagers--prominent themes in Asian-American literature and an arresting focus in her own book.

Cho emphasizes that she eats with a fork and not with chopsticks. Her point is that being Korean does not necessitate using chopsticks anymore than eating tortillas and tacos directly implies that one is Latina or Latino.

Hence, when Cho performed before an appreciative crowd at Carnegie Hall, she joked about being the first Korean-American to set foot on the stage "without a violin."

Yet Cho has not always enjoyed stardom and prestigious venues. Indeed, she has had to deal with the cold fact that roles for Asian Americans are limited. She has had to fight to overcome stereotypical casting, a problem that people of color often face.

Cho's penchant for comedy commenced in San Francisco, when she entered the McAteer High School of the Performing Arts, aspiring to be an actress. Her first professional performance was at a comedy club, in

which she appeared as part of the Batwing Lubricant, her high school improv collective. Upon graduation in 1988, Cho studied theater at San Francisco State University, but soon left to pursue her real passion, stand-up comedy.

Cho perfected her talent at the Rose & Thistle, a stand-up comedy club above a bookstore her parents ran in San Francisco. Then she won a comedy contest whose first prize was opening for Jerry Seinfeld.

She soon took her show across the country. She appeared at malls, colleges, theaters, and comedy clubs. She became especially popular on the college circuit, performing hundreds of concerts. This trajectory led to her "discovery," with showcase clips of her act on A&E, Fox television, MTV, and VH1, and to performance stints on *Star Search International*, where she represented Korea (despite being an American citizen), and *The Montel Williams Show*.

In 1994, Cho burst into the big-time with the ABC sitcom, *All-American Girl*, the first comedy show about an Asian-American family. Although it was supposedly based on her life and on her stand-up comedy show, the producers attempted to remake her to fit their stereotypical expectations.

In many ways, the show was a disaster, both professionally and personally, but it brought her to national attention and it provided fodder for her comic mill.

Asked by the producers of *All-American Girl* to lose weight, Cho dropped forty pounds in two weeks before filming the debut episode. The night after filming was completed, her kidneys collapsed. She was also coached to become more "Asian" in the same fashion that she was showcased as "foreign" and asked to be more "Chinese" by the talent coordinator of *Star Search International*.

These attempts to make her fit within preconceived categories has fueled her protests against demands for ethnic authenticity and against arbitrary standards of beauty and body image.

After the cancellation of *All-American Girl*, Cho was almost destroyed by a bout of alcohol and drug addiction. But she resumed her stand-up comedy career and appeared in several films, the most notable of which was Randall Kleiser's poignant *It's My Party* (1996), where she plays the best friend of a gay architect suffering from AIDS.

Frustrated by the paucity of good film and stage roles being offered her, Cho wrote her own one-woman show and scored a triumph. *I'm the One that I Want* (1999) addresses critical issues of race, gender, sexuality, AIDS, and drug and alcohol addiction even as it showcases her comedy. The show toured the country, attracting a diverse audience. It was subsequently released as an independent film.

Notorious C.H.O. (2002), her second one-woman show, has also been successful both in the theater and on screen. Somewhat edgier and raunchier than her previous show, *Notorious C.H.O.* puts a distinctively female spin on machismo.

In 2003, Cho embarked on her third sold-out national tour, *Revolution*. The CD of *Revolution*, released in the fall of 2003, was nominated for a Grammy for best comedy album of the year. The concert film *Revolution* premiered on Sundance Channel in June 2004 and was released on DVD in August.

Cho's most topical work to date is her show *State of Emergency* (2004), designed to motivate people to vote in the 2004 Presidential election.

Cho is the proud recipient of the first Golden Gate Award, given by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Discrimination (GLAAD), a distinction she shares with Elton John and Elizabeth Taylor. The citation recognizes her as "an entertainment pioneer who has made a significant difference in promoting equal rights for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity."

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