

On Beauty

All-American Girl Margaret Cho
Targets Her Next Victim

• Writing | Joel Lyons • Photography | Austin Young

“I don’t like the way balls taste. They’re a little salty and they’re not in my diet.” Few in the realm of stand-up comedy can eloquently and efficiently execute this type of raunchy discussion of their social life, but even fewer are as effortlessly funny as Margaret Cho.

From a performance standpoint, she’s been an assassin, a revolutionary and was notorious years before that Spelling chick could lay claim to the title. Her impressive résumé stretches more than two decades; includes endorsements from Bob Hope, Jerry Seinfeld and Arsenio Hall; and features a sitcom, several movie appearances and a number of successful stand-up tours.

For Beautiful, her latest international show, Cho has her sights set on the institution of beauty. She relays a story on her Web site of how a DJ once asked her, “If you woke up tomorrow and were beautiful, what would you do? If you were a blond, blue-eyed, 5-foot-11 and weighed 100 pounds, what would you do?” Rather than take offense — or perhaps because she did — Cho snapped back, “Well, I probably wouldn’t get up in that case, because I’d be too weak to stand.” Thus began her assault.

“There needs to be a shift in consciousness about beauty and making the standards more livable,” she says in a phone interview with 944, criticizing fashion’s lack of diversity on the runways, both in body shapes and skin tones. Cho can speak from experience on entertainment’s obsession with appearance. During her groundbreaking television show, *All-American Girl*, Cho was told to lose weight, leading to crash dieting that reportedly resulted in kidney problems. Additionally, executives told her she “was too Asian,” but soon hired a coach to teach her to “be more Asian.” The confusing nature and other creative changes led to the show’s cancellation after just one season.

“[Fashion and entertainment are] where our standards of beauty come from. No matter how many ways we try to change it, their standards haven’t changed much, so I find that pretty upsetting,” Cho says. If her commentary sounds thought provoking compared to other stand-up acts, it’s because Cho proudly takes a political stance with her work.

“I’m queer, I’m an Asian American woman, I’m very political, very feminist [and] very much about queer politics,” she says. “All these issues blend together, so everything is coming from this perspective.” Though these identities are salient for Cho, her appeal extends far beyond women, Asians, political enthusiasts and gays, as the intertwining of these issues are peppered with constant line-crossing at every opportunity to include sex and the occasional joke about

body functions.

Typically, Cho borrows her tour’s promotional artwork from pop culture references, and Beautiful is no different. Inspired by film fixture *A Clockwork Orange*, she suggests not reading too much into the imagery. “Well, I just liked the eyelash thing,” Cho says, noting that she took a large portion of her fan base into consideration for the final poster. “The picture from that shoot is a naked picture. It was cropped so you can’t tell because I didn’t want to upset the gays too much,” she says.

Marketing material aside, the bulk of Beautiful will take the 39-year-old, who sees her age as the new 19, into familiar territory: exploring life through the lenses of her intersecting identities, along with her reflections on beauty. “It’s all new material, it’s all very fun, it’s really sexy, it’s really dirty, it’s pretty raunchy, hardcore and wild,” she says. “I think it’s my most raunchy show yet — which is saying a lot — so I think people will enjoy it.” Also new to her routine will be original songs, performed by Cho herself and inspired by Cyndi Lauper.

“She helped me kind of find my voice,” Cho says. “I did [a] tour with her and we do this big finale where we sing ‘True Colors.’ It’s a beautiful song and it just kind of helped me learn how to sing. She’s a wonderful teacher and a great inspiration to me.” Cho is also inspired by the fodder for the jokes in her performance. Don’t expect her to hate on her competition (she and Kathy Griffin are very good friends), the most popular person on MySpace (not Tom, but Tila Tequila, whom she admires) or a troubled pop star (she sympathizes with Britney Spears). Instead, folks like a certain shamed Idaho senator should duck for cover.

“I want to be compassionate to people and save up for these people that deserve [it],” she says. “I’m mean to people like Larry Craig, because to me the hypocrisy of somebody who would be so against gay rights, so against gay marriage and so anti-gay all around, yet totally be cruising for dick in the airport bathroom, that to me is so funny.” Not surprisingly, Cho won’t be taking shots at any recently fallen stars.

“I really loved Anna Nicole Smith and [her death] was really devastating to me,” Cho says. “She really changed my whole perspective on beauty. When she first came out in those Guess ads, she was big and she was gorgeous. She really showed me that a big girl could rock out and I was so moved by her.” Cho, who appeared on Smith’s reality TV show, says the death of her friend was tragic and feels the same about that of Heath Ledger. “[He] was somebody who was filled with so much potential and was such a beautiful guy, and yet someone [who] was



really brave, too, in being able to take on that memorable role in *Brokeback Mountain*, even though he was straight,” Cho says. “It was so impressive and amazing. I thought that [his death] was really, really sad.”

Cho remains positive about life, her career and her own image. She celebrates television shows such as *How to Look Good Naked*, hosted by Carson Kressley, that empower women to be beautiful regardless of their weight. She embraces body art, as evidenced by tattoos visible in some of the photographs she’s recently taken. Additionally, she’s a dancer, which she says has increased her self-esteem, and encourages women to find something physical that they enjoy to bring about the same feeling. But should life’s stresses ever try to consume her, she’s confident she’ll have the last laugh.

“I have comedy as an outlet to talk about things that are frustrating to me or stories that are painful,” she says. “But it’s so fun because I’m freed of the experience and the pain [by] sharing it.”

Margaret Cho performs at Dodge Theatre April 18. For more visit www.margaretcho.com