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Review: Margaret Cho's 'The Sensuous Woman'

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It's the proud, cheery smile that gives her away every time. No matter how provocative or coarse Margaret Cho wants to be - and in her new show, "The Sensuous Woman," she holds the raunch bar very high, or low, depending on your point of view - she's still essentially a nice girl who likes us and wants to be liked.

When Cho flashes that sunny grin after a self-abasing joke about oral sex, say, it plays as an ironic gloss, a feint to smooth over any awkwardness, which somehow only makes it funnier.

In "The Sensuous Woman," her loosey-goosey, burlesque-stuffed new variety show, the trademark smile surfaces in a novel setting. At the climax of a routine titled "Chairman MeeOw," which begins with a stirring Red Army flag dance and ends with Cho covered in little but twirling tassels and wriggling tattoos, she beams with an utterly disarming, how'm-I-doin' grin. Even when she's nearly naked, she's still approachable, lovable Margaret.

If only there were more of her in "The Sensuous Woman." Instead, this uneven anthology show, which at its best nearly flares into a flamingly fabulous circus of oddballs and beautiful freaks, mostly consists of solo acts, from strippers to standups. Cho makes an unfailingly gracious hostess, but when she's not around, the party's energy and focus flag a bit.

That's not quite the case with a pair of male gender-benders, Liam Sullivan and Ryan Heffington, who prove that there are infinitesimal shadings to men's feminine side.

Sullivan is that thoroughly 21st century phenomenon, the "viral video" star, who here faithfully enacts his popular "Shoes" clip: essentially an adenoidal rant on said topic by a platinum-blond mallrat named Kelly. It's a thin platter but you can't argue with the delivery.

And Heffington busts a move wearing little but Rick James curls, Frank Zappa facial hair, a tiny tiger-print bathing suit and knee-length boots. It's a hairy-fairy act that's electrifying and disturbing all at once.

Among the show's old-school strippers, who include Selene Luna and Princess Farhana, the zaftig Miss Dirty Martini not only cites but transcends the form, with an indescribable routine that features dollar bills in places they aren't usually kept and a healthy dose of anti-flag-waving snarl.

There's a gay faux-rapper called LISP played by Kurt Hall; like Diana Yanez, another supporting cast member, Hall fares better as a foil to Cho than on his own. And there's an affable if unremarkable transgender comic, Ian Harvie.

Wait, did I just put the words "unremarkable" and "transgender" next to each other? That's the good and bad thing about Cho: In a world so queer that even the guys with chest hair are effeminate, it's hard to stand out. Everyone may be beautiful, as "The Sensuous Woman" admirably posits, but not everyone has the indefinable stage presence that Cho brings to her jiggles as much as to her jokes.

THE SENSUOUS WOMAN. Directed by Randall Rapstine. Choreographed by Kitty McNamee. Through Nov. 3 at The Zipper Theatre, 336 W. 37th St., Manhattan. For tickets, call 866-811-4111. Seen Wednesday.

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