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Margaret Cho's The Sensuous Woman

(The Zipper Factory; 240 seats; \$55 top) A WestBeth Entertainment presentation of a variety revue in one act written and performed by various artists. Directed by Randall Rapstine. Choreography, Kitty McNamee.

With: Margaret Cho, Princess Farhana, Kurt Hall, Ian Harvie, Ryan Huffington, Selene Luna, Diana Yanez, Miss Dirty Martini

By [MARILYN STASIO](#)

With "S-E-X" spelled out in 3-foot-high lights at the side of the stage of the fabulously funky Zipper Factory, there's no need to wonder what "The Sensuous Woman" is about. Giddy, gaudy and quite gay, this raunchy variety show sparkles whenever headliner Margaret Cho is front and center, alternating her standup gab with outre versions of classic striptease routines. (Yes, she does twirl her tassels.) Aside from the irresistible Cho, show's appeal hangs on audience tastes for the individual burlesque strippers, standup comics and sketch comedians -- some quite peculiar -- on tap.

Famed since age 16 for her painfully funny stage confessions about growing up with a terrible body image, Cho eventually obliges her fan base (nailed down by "I'm the One That I Want" and subsequent touring shows) with one childhood flashback of being told by her father that she'd better be clever -- because she sure wasn't pretty.

The comedian issues fair warning at the top of the show that she is up to "something wildly different" here. Her mission is twofold: to celebrate and flaunt her own sexy body, which she has come to appreciate; and to expunge negative body imagery from the homosexual community at large, because "we are all so beautiful in so many ways."

True to her purpose, Cho shares the stage with eight other performers, among them specialty burlesque strippers Selene Luna and Miss Dirty Martini, the transgendered comic Ian Harvie and belly dancer Princess Farhana. Mixing it up with sketch comedians Diana Yanez and Kurt Hall, of the Gay Mafia Comedy Troupe, the whole motley crew is a sight to behold in the opening fan dance lighted in kitsch-Vegas style by Josh Monroe and choreographed by Kitty McNamee with her eyes closed.

But the rainbow beauty Cho is pushing for with this burlesque-themed variety show, slickly staged by helmer Randall Rapstine, doesn't hold up once the performers break out their individual routines. Although eye-catching at first glance, the proud strutting of the dwarf stripper Selene Luna and the tableaux vivants executed by Rubenesque burlesque queen Miss Dirty Martini lose impact in encores. As does drag perf Liam Sullivan's deliciously nasty techno-beat sendup of a fashion-coveting teenage "betch" named Kelly.

Truth to tell, even the witty and carefully composed burlesque routines performed by Cho tend to pale for all their repetitive dirty talk. There are priceless moments, to be sure, like the "Chairman MeeOw" number in which Cho strips down to her tattoos and fiercely waves the red Communist flag in deadpan parody of the hypocrisy of sexually repressive governments.

But taken in context, there's more satiric bite in those comedy sketches built on verbal wit, like the "Mo and Angela" routine that has Cho teamed with Yanez as two lesbians working on their anger management issues. Or the snappy comedy of "Lisp and Havana," two street rappers (played by Yanez and Hall) with lotsa lip.

While Cho is incapable of being anything but endearing as she shows off her curvy contours and gorgeous body art, the one-note sexual theme actually inhibits her satiric skills. Hearing all the raw details about what the performer actually does with her variety of lovers may shock and thrill them on the road. But one preview aud at the Zipper seemed more appreciative of her familiar but forever piercing impression of her mother. Or her wicked observation (inspired by the troubles of Republican Representative Larry Craig) that this is shaping up to be "The Year of the Sorry Old Queen Without a Piano Bar to Go To."

Set, Steven Capone; lighting, Josh Monroe; production stage manager, Jessie Boemper. Opened Oct. 6, 2007. Reviewed Oct. 5. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

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