

ARTS

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Knitting serves as metaphor in play about suicide

'Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' opens tonight

BY MICHAEL ARMSTRONG
STAFF WRITER

The link between knitting, yarn and suicide among Asian-American women might seem a stretch, but in the wild and wacky world of Kristina Wong, it all makes sense. Knitting became both Wong's way to avoid writing about suicide and how she came to approach the subject.

The result, Wong's "Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," shows this weekend at Bunnell Street Arts Center, with shows at 7:30 p.m. today, Friday and Saturday. Admission is a suggested \$15, but under Bunnell's new policy, no one will be turned away for lack of finances. Clients of The Center and South Peninsula Haven House also can get in free for last-minute, space available seating.

Wong, a Los Angeles based performance artist, did workshops and performances last week in Anchorage at Out North Theatre. She's a third-generation Chinese American born and raised in San Francisco and has received numerous art and theater awards. Like previous Bunnell shows, including "Refugee Nation" and "La Nostalgia Re-mix," "Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" features simple sets and props with one or two actors. Wong also is an artist with TeAda Productions, the same company directed by Leilani Chan and Ova Saopeng, the actors who performed "Refugee Nation."

"Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" — the title is a play on the title of Ken Kesey's novel — has as its premise that a character, also named Kristina Wong, looks at

suicide and depression among Asian-American women, an ethnic group that has a high rate of mental illness. At first, Wong follows the traditional narrative arc of problem, attempts to solve problem and a precipitating crisis — except Wong never gets past the crisis.

"We always seem to be stuck at this crisis," Wong said in a phone interview last week from Anchorage. "The crisis is 'Why are these women killing themselves and how is Kristina Wong going to save them in the show?' I'm going to be a martyr and I'm going to get grant money. The show is a gradual unraveling — hence the yarn."

When Wong began writing her show, she knew she wanted to write about mental illness among Asian-American women.

She researched the subject and had grand ambitions.

And then she got stuck.

"I found myself knitting. It's so comforting. It can go on forever," Wong said. "I was stressed. I just knit and knit. It's like how writers smoke."

In some performance art, actors portray numerous characters through monologues — a conceit of "Refugee Nation" and "The Vagina Monologues." Wong didn't want to do that.

"I'm very cautious about trying to represent all stories," she said. "In the play as my Kristina Wong martyrish self, I try to tell everyone's stories."

Besides, in Asian-American culture, women don't talk about mental illness, Wong said.

"I didn't really like the idea ethically of

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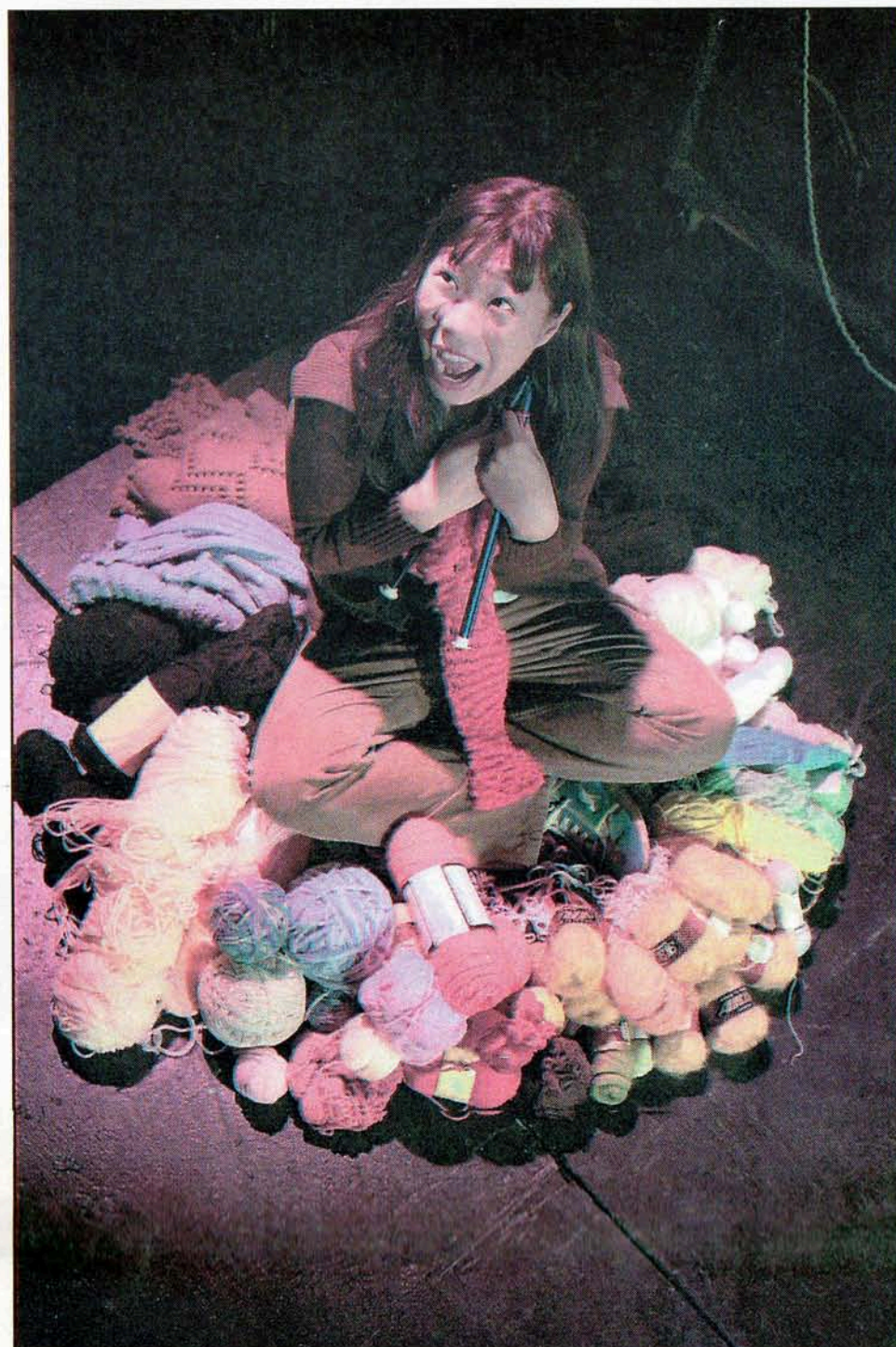


Photo by Antonia Kao

Kristina Wong knits during a scene from "Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

a show about depression and suicide, creating archetypes of people who are being depressed. I didn't want to name it," she said. "It would be these monologues about people saying 'I'm fine.' It would be a bunch of monologues about denial."

Those characters do have a voice in Wong's production, but in a loose way. As she worked on her show, she looked at her yarn collection.

"I opened up my suitcase and it was full of yarn, so who would that be?" Wong

said. "I put all these identities in these yarn balls, these pieces of unfinished knitting being different people. I thought, this is great. I liked that idea of keeping it blurry," she said. "I got it: I'll get people to donate unfinished knitting. I'll pull it off the needle. We'll hang it in the theater and we'll just see it unraveling."

Wong put out a call to knitting magazines and blogs for knitters to donate unfinished knitting projects.

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...Yarn used to tell story

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“The unfinished knitting collected represent incomplete intentions, women’s work, ‘spinning a yarn’ and loneliness,” Wong wrote knitters in asking for their work.

Sweater sleeves, scarves and tangled balls of yarn hang on a wall behind her stage. Some knitters also sent stories about the undone project.

“It’s women’s work — the lonely crazy woman, the spinster. Those are some of the things I’m doing with yarn in my show,” Wong said. “It was my way of getting a free set, but how on a marketing level do you get people engaged?”

Knitters also are welcome to bring their needles to “Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” Wong will hand out balls of yarn for them to knit with during the show — and to become part of the performance.

“They’re kind of like a silent chorus,” she said of the audience members knitting.

Although Wong did extensive research, “Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” doesn’t attempt to answer the question of why Asian-American women have a higher rate of mental illness.

“I get this ‘Why is it happening?’ in every show,” Wong said. “If people want a brochure answer, they should go to the brochure. They (psychologists) turn people into numbers. As artists we turn numbers back into people.”

While in Homer this week, Wong does workshops and talks with staff from The Center, Homer’s mental health clinic, and with a Focus on Learning psychology class at Homer High School.

For reviews, photographs, the story about Wong’s pink diesel named Harold that runs on vegetable oil and a blog about her trip to Alaska, visit www.kristinawong.com.

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