

Mental illness examined through humor

Award-winning artist, prankster tackles weighty topic through comedic one-woman show

By Katie Emerick
Homer Tribune

There's a recurring theme throughout writer/filmmaker/actor Kristina Wong's solo performance piece, "Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest": Fiction, fiction, fiction. Coming to the Bunnell Street Arts Center, the full-length piece, from a third generation Chinese-American explores the delicate subject matter of mental illness among Asian-American women in the United States.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Asian-American women, ages 15-24, have the highest suicide rate of women in any race or ethnic group. Wong said it was after discovering this statistic that she decided to create a project based around the issue.

"I very naively went into it," she explained, "and it completely ended up backfiring on me. I thought, 'I'm going to research other people, move away from self-indulgence and fix this problem.'"

Instead of answers, Wong found more questions. It's an occupational hazard, perhaps, with inquisitiveness being in the nature of an artist. What she did discover, was that where mental illness settles, so does silence.

"Why is this happening?" Wong asked. "There's a certain lack of honesty. It comes down to the inability to express a truth. It comes down to this fiction."

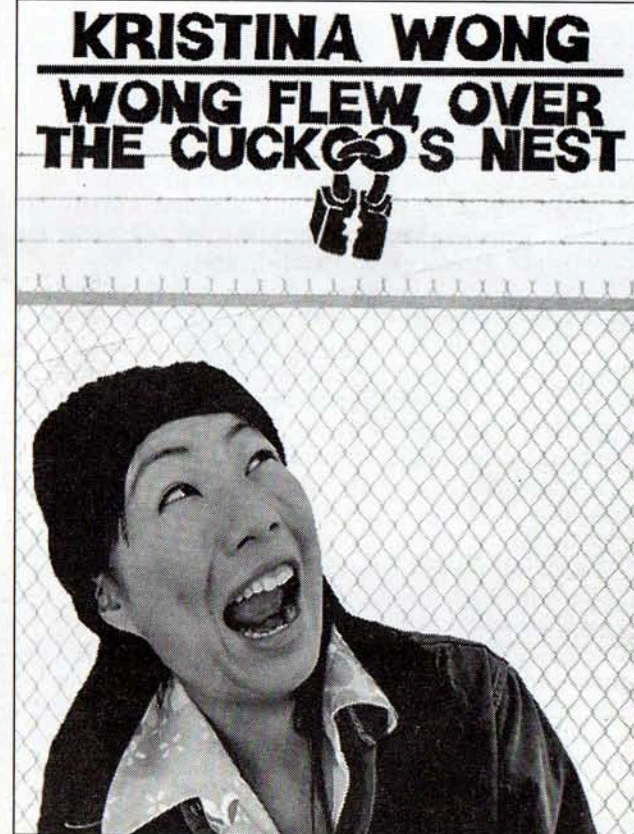
The fiction Wong portrays in Cuckoo's Nest comes in the form of her character, also named Kristina Wong. However, the performer is quick to explain that the performance is not autobiographical. Using the same satirical wit and provocative humor, trademarks of her past projects, Wong isn't one to hold back on stage. She addresses the silence of mental illness through the denial of her character.

"In the show," Wong said, "I try to save everyone from depression. I'm eager to please, an overachiever and fail spectacularly to make everyone happy. Maybe part of why people get so depressed is in thinking there is a way life is supposed to be, but the reality is very different. People ask, 'are you OK?' That, 'I'm fine,' is the fiction."

Wong, who was born and raised in San Francisco, said one of the most challenging aspects of creating her performance piece was looking at her own life — despite much of the content being based on research of others.

"When I first started the show, it was very hard," she said. "I had to confront a lot of my own family history that isn't talked about. That was very scary ... the women in my family never talk in depth of anguish. I grew up thinking I'm the only one going crazy."

Mental illness — still seen as a taboo subject on too many fronts — is a particular challenge in Asian-American communities, where the pressures to keep up appearances and achievement levels are especially strong. Wong jokes about taking an Attention-Deficit-Disorder test and thinking with questions such as, "Do you take on a lot of



Photos provided

Kristina Wong

projects?" The test was more about whether or not one was Chinese, rather than in need of pills.

The Creative Capitol Foundation, a non-profit organization supporting individual artists including

Wong, describes a particular scene in which Wong's character humorously tackles the issue of therapy in which she "tries to land a seat on the therapist's couch by confessing to an ever-expanding list of problems. The confession soon deteriorates into an audition monologue, raw and intimate details are adapted for dramatic effect, whatever it takes 'to land the part' in a free therapy session: childhood molestation, then the assault during college, a brush with razors, the stint as a concubine, and to top it all off, Wong screams, 'I'm Chinese!'"

For the uninsured hoping to receive therapy these days, according to Wong, the process runs more like an acting call than a path to recovery.

"You need to drop buzz words," she stated simply, "and not necessarily the truth."

Throughout the 80-minute show, which took two years to create and another two years to

perfect, Wong is sensitive to the seriousness of men-

I had to confront a lot of my own family history that isn't talked about. That was very scary ... the women in my family never talk in depth of anguish. I grew up thinking I'm the only one going crazy

— Kristina Wong
actor

tal illness while making such a dark topic palatable for audiences because of her humor. "For my own sanity I prefer doing a funny show," she explained. "It's an important part of healing, to make something so awful that you can laugh at it. That's not saying it's flippant or insincere, but we need to find space to laugh."

A purpose of the piece, Wong said, is to challenge the way people diagnose and distance themselves from the mentally ill. It is also about using art as a way to explore personal boundaries and break down pre-conceptions.

"Art is about those moments of possibilities ... asking more questions rather than providing simple answers. It's subversive. It is about social change and also pausing and reflecting," she said. "It's a very necessary thing, being able to think about our lives and how we want to make it better for ourselves and other people."

For more information on Kristina Wong's work, visit her website at www.kristinawong.com. Wong will perform three shows at the Bunnell Street Arts Center on January 29, 30 and 31.

Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

When: January 29, 30, 31; 7:30 p.m.

Where: Bunnell Street Arts Center

Tickets: \$15 suggested donation; staff, clients, volunteers of The Center and Haven House may attend show for no charge with advance reservations

More info: 235-2662