

Nancy Ma finds “Home” through her one-woman show about growing up in New York’s Chinatown

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March 13, 2019 By: Victoria Moy



Location

Alhambra , CA United States

For much of the 20th Century, many immigrants from China were from Toisan, a city in Guangdong Province, known as Taishan in Mandarin.

Chinese American actress, writer and community organizer Nancy Ma has created a solo autobiographical show, “Home,” about her experience growing up in a Toisanese-American immigrant household in Chinatown, New York City. Her show has been presented at showcases including the One Festival and the Los Angeles Women’s Theatre Festival and on school campuses including Phillips Academy Andover. It has prompted audience members to share stories from their own upbringing with Ma.

Ma portrays a version of herself — and 15 other characters — to tell the story of growing up in a working class Chinatown apartment with her seamstress mother and restaurant worker father, seemingly unable to win their love and approval, even when she goes to a prestigious college and finds work at a law firm in San Francisco. She learns how to reconcile her faith in God, follow her own heart in becoming an actor and come to terms with her family and upbringing, in a way that may be familiar to many families, immigrant or otherwise.

A co-host of “Hustle in Color,” a podcast that features women of color in the entertainment industry, and a community organizer for Girls Who Code, Ma advocates for diversity and inclusion in entertainment, the STEM fields and in the alumni network at Williams College, which she graduated from in 2010. In this email interview, she talks about “Home” and how she finally embraced her Toisanese identity.

“Home” is now running at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown Los Angeles until March 24.

Who do you think most needs to see “Home,” or would most benefit from seeing “Home?”

I think the story and theme of “Home” resonates with all audiences. Who hasn’t questioned where they belong and where they come from? With that said, what’s special about “Home” is that it’s about a first-generation Asian American and Chinese immigrant family. I think groups that connect with these identities would feel especially seen.

You were born and raised in New York’s Chinatown, were taught to devote all your childhood energies being admitted at top schools. Based on your experience, is there anything you wish Chinatown parents and families or Chinese immigrant communities could be more aware of in regards to this kind of trajectory?

It makes sense for Chinese immigrant communities to want their children to “do better” than them and to find success and happiness in a land that they want to call their own. And even with the high demands and pressure I felt growing up, I am grateful for my family and my community. But the picture of success and happiness is much bigger than grades and accolades. The pressure to succeed can at times be overbearing. So to parents, I say, trust that your love and care for your children are enough, if not more important, and the rest will fall into place!

In the play, you reach many seemingly impossible achievements only to be confronted with certain unexpected disappointments, which leads to your questioning of God and your beliefs. Do you think this would be any different if you had a different kind of upbringing?

There was a specific pressure coming from a poor working class immigrant family which led to fortunate achievements and of course, unexpected disappointments. My family doesn’t believe in God and a youth group gave me the community I craved growing up, which eventually led to my faith. I think the questioning of purpose and spirituality is common to anyone growing up in America, and really the world.

There is a lot of Toisanese [a Chinese dialect spoken by people from Toisan] spoken in the play. What do you want people outside of the Chinese/Toisanese experience to know about it?

I am a proud Toisan person and I want people to experience the beauty of the language. Toisan immigrants created Chinatowns; let’s own the stage now!

What was the journey of this production?

I started writing bits and pieces about my family in 2014. I did a version of the show in 2017 and met my current director, Geoffrey Rivas in the summer of that year. We've worked together since and I owe the transformation of this story to him.

What have been the best moments or greatest challenges of touring this work?

My favorite moments are always when people come up to me after the show and start talking about their families and their homes. That's the beauty of theater — it pulls out a viewer's story. I performed a version of this show in front of my parents in 2017 and it was one of the hardest moments of my life. They're still not keen about me being an artist and that truly was one of my most vulnerable moments before them.

The show takes us from New York to New England to San Francisco, then Los Angeles. How do the Toisan or Chinese American communities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City compare to each other?

My heart and soul was born and bred in Toisan Chinatown New York City, so that's what I'm most familiar with. Everyone knew each other. We walked to the public library by ourselves. It was safe. In San Francisco and Los Angeles, I haven't lived in the Chinese American neighborhoods, but when I visit, it holds that same sense of community and rooted tradition.

You show us your experiences as an Asian American actress in L.A. What advice do you have for other Asian Americans thinking about pursuing acting?

If acting is the thing that makes you come alive and feel connected to the rest of humanity, keep going! It's hard, but it is worth it. Surround yourself with people who love you and pick you up when you're down. Fail a lot. Celebrate often. Always be grateful.

What do you think is most important for a person in their relationship to their family or home?

We can't change where we come from, so we can either reject it or embrace it. And when I say embrace, I mean hold it all with loose hands — the good, the hard, the messy, the painful, the joy, the people, the places. You are not defined by where you come from. But once you understand where you come from, you can always find a place of belonging, a sense of home.

Has your work as a community organizer contributed to the making or telling of this story?

The heart of community organizing is empowering and including those often forgotten, so in a way, yes. I hope my story gives a sense of power and hope for those who often or even at one time felt alone, forgotten or unseen.

Anything else?

It took me a long time to embrace who I am, but now I can 100 percent say that I am proud to be a first generation Chinese American girl. Thanks to my *Ma Ma, Ba Ba* [mother and father].

This interview has been edited and condensed.

*Victoria Moy is a New York-born, Los Angeles-based writer. She has a MFA from University of Southern California, where she studied playwriting, screenwriting and TV writing, and has a B.A. from Dartmouth College in Theater. She is also the author of the book *Fighting for the Dream*.*

“Home”

Written and Performed by Nancy Ma

Directed by Geoffrey Rivas

Presented by The Latino Theater Company

Performance times: Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 4p.m., through March 24

Venue: The Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring Street, Los Angeles CA 90013

General Admission \$24-\$60, 866-811-4111; thelatc.org; For group sales, 213-489-0994

Parking:\$5 with box office validation, Joe’s Parking structure, 530 S. Spring St. (immediately south of the theater)

Metered parking available on streets surrounding the theater.

Take the Metro: nearest stop is Pershing Square (two blocks west of The LATC).

View the animated poster for “Home” below:



<https://youtu.be/t7L6Ze7mKyE>

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