C’mon and Celebrate

Party girl Margaret Cho goes willingly into scary territory

December 1, 1995 By Bruce Bibby

I had my own party once with the man who unofficially inspired Randal Kleiser’s poignant AIDS arrivederci feature film, *It’s My Party*. His name was Harry Stein. We also had mutual pals and would see each other infrequently. One of those friendly unions was gabbing in the steam room of Gloria Swanson’s old mansion in the Hollywood Hills. Harry was a taker (as well as an inspired giver), the kind of guy I like.

Margaret Cho is the kind of woman Harry would have liked. She’s out there, babe, all the way. Don’t be fooled by the prissy baby-blue sweater set she’s wearing on the film stages of *It’s My Party*, to be released in February. In some God-forsaken warehouse in South Los Angeles, Party’s ensemble cast—including Olivia Newton-John, Eric Roberts, Gregory Harrison and many others—has gathered to film a good-bye party for the Stein character, Nick (played by Roberts), who has chosen to kill himself rather than confront his fear of dying gruesomely. Cho has been cast as Nick’s quirky best friend, Charlene, and it’s the *All American Girl* star’s first big feature-film role. Something tells me she can handle it.

Bruce Bibby: Your character brings a lot of levity to this film. Is humor what you have to have to get through the devastation?

Margaret Cho: I think so, at least in my life, especially with AIDS. I need to have a humorous bent or I just can’t take it.

BB: What is this movie about?

MC: What we’re trying to convey is taking death on your own terms as opposed to succumbing to death on its terms. And the power of owning your own life and the excitement of having only a few days left to live.

BB: Do you realize you’re the first person I’ve spoken to on this film who has used the word AIDS?

MC: People are afraid of it.

BB: It’s the disease that dare not speak its name.

MC: People would rather talk about something like flesh-eating bacteria or the woman with smelly blood.

BB: Let’s talk about Olivia Newton-John instead.

MC: I saw *Grease* 42 times. And I love Olivia. I’m always springing lines from Grease on her.

BB: How does she take it?

MC: she’s an ace! She says she can’t believe I remember this stuff. But, you know, I was obsessed with Olivia Newton-John and I know everything there is to know about *Grease*.

BB: And Gregory?

MC: He doesn’t know this yet, but I have to tell him something. It’s so scary. He was my very first masturbatory fixation. I used to have *Teen Beat* and stuff all over my wall.

BB: How did you land *Party*?

MC: I think I got the job because I was a fag hag and the part was a fag hag. Randal asked me if I knew what a fag hag was, and said, “Oh, please! I had dinner last night at Numbers!”

BB: What are you proud of in this movie?

MC: When I read the script, I thought this could be perceived as being depressing. But to me, the story is filled with so much hope and love and joy. It’s a celebration of life, unlike *Philadelphia*, which dwelled so much on the sadness of it all. This movie is not a tragedy—it’s a victory.

BB: But Nick dies.

MC: Yes, but he dies of his own hand, his own volition.

BB: Is that more noble?

MC: I think so.

BB: Why? Not all agree.

MC: You’re saying you will not be taken. You will go willingly as opposed to being wrenched out.

BB: I can’t imagine acting a part like this.

MC: For me, the emotional center of the film was when we're all taking photographs with Nick and he takes me up and dips me, and we have our picture taken. He picks me back up and we're just holding each other, and I find that I can't let go. I'm messing up the blocking and we have to shoot over again because I just can't let go of him. I felt the warmth of his body was like life. I just wanted to keep the life inside him, you know? It was the weirdest thing. I just kind of lost it for a while.

BB: Did you know this film had difficulty getting made?

MC: No. But I do know that a lot of us who are in it wouldn't be if we didn't care about telling this story.

BB: What did Olivia Newton-John wear to the premiere of *Grease*?

MC: Pink hot-pants and a pink tube-top and curly hair. It was pretty much the same outfit she wore at the end of Grease, but it was pink instead of black.

BB: And in your case, baby blue instead of black.

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