

The Boston Globe

PULSE
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One woman, 14 characters

In Christina Chan's one-woman show, "Behind Closed Doors," documentary becomes theater, as Chan takes on the challenge of transforming herself into 14 characters, including teen-agers, old ladies, even a senator and a right-wing male columnist.

"What I have done is ask people about their views on the immigration issue," said Chan. "I recorded them, transcribed them, and will be performing them verbatim on stage."

Chan is an astute observer of detail. During the interviews, she watched how each subject moved, sat, and held their body, committing to memory their physical mannerisms. She is a quick student. By the end of her interview with The Boston Globe, she was able to accurately mimic her interviewer.

"It is a real challenge for me doing men," she said. "I'm familiar with what a female does, but how does a man hold himself, and how do they gesture?"

The questions she asked her subjects focused mostly on the two welfare reform bills that President Clinton signed last year, bills that prevent legal immigrants from receiving Social Security, food stamps and Medicaid unless they pass a citizenship test. While the bills affect a number of minorities, she decided to focus mostly on the Asian-American community, a group she knows well. In addition, she spoke with a retired US senator and newspaper columnist, both of whom wish to keep their identities secret.

"Each person is interesting in their own way," said Chan, who came to the United States from Hong Kong in 1962. She studied acting at Trinity Rep Conservatory in Rhode Island, doing her first one-woman show in 1992, a piece called "Unbinding Our Lives," which explored the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 on Chinese women.



Christina Chan's show, "Behind Closed Doors," focuses on the immigration issue.

"At the time, I loved Broadway, and had looked there for roles that might be available to me," she said. "But what was playing was "Shogun" and "Miss Saigon," stories about the woman pining away for her man and then killing herself! I didn't want to have to die after every show I did!"

Chan subsequently found inspiration in the innovative work of performance artist Anna Deavere Smith, who had done a documentary/theater piece on the Los Angeles riots.

"I got a lot of information out of what she did," said Chan. "But most importantly, I learned that it is still theater, and it should always be entertaining."

Chan's "Behind Closed Doors" will be at the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center, 41 Second St., Cambridge, Thursday through Sunday. Tickets are \$12, \$10 for students and seniors. For information, call 677-1400.

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