

# The Ugly American Uncensored

## Dan Kwong Brings His Multimedia Political And Social Commentary to the New LATC

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**T**he election's over, but the emotional rollercoaster of American politics didn't take its final plunge last Tuesday. At least not for Dan Kwong, whose show at the New Los Angeles Theatre Center this week promises to keep the thrill going.

It's *Great 2B American* is the solo performance artist's most political work, tackling everything from the Pledge of Allegiance to Abu Ghraib in an analysis of what it means to be an American - and specifically for Kwong, to be Chinese-Japanese-American - with fearlessness and wit.

Kwong will perform the series of 20 multimedia scenes, complete with props, videos and dancing, on Friday and Saturday, Nov. 14 and 15, at 8 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 16, at 3 p.m. at the Downtown Los Angeles theater complex.

Kwong, a native Angeleno and longtime resident artist of the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica, premiered *It's Great 2B American* at Highways Performance Space in July. He described it as "equal parts documentary travelogue, satirical dance review, irreverent history lesson, and personal storytelling."

The inspiration came from visits to Southeastern Asia and China for collaborative theater projects, starting in 2000. Leaving the country gave Kwong a different perspective on being an American of Asian ancestry.

"This performance tries to look at what that means both inside and outside the U.S. In other words, it's about being Asian American and about being American Asian," said Kwong, who has been performing solo shows since 1989. "When you leave your home country, many things become much more graphically evident in terms of the attitudes you have about yourself and 'the other.'"

Kwong realized that Americans carry an instant privilege by virtue of being a citizen of the most powerful nation in the world. He explores that discovery in "The Passport

Dance', proclaiming with the rhythm of spoken word poetry "We are the Barry Bonds of nations..."

"The Passport Dance' is the voice of the Ugly American Within, revealed in all its glory - unabashed, uncensored," Kwong said of his dance with an enormous version of the blue booklet.

This show incorporates more video and dance elements than his previous works, Kwong said, because he likes to stimulate as many senses as possible. Though he is used to working on his own, doing everything from the audio and video to costumes, he also experienced what it was like to work with a creative team this fall when his first play, *Be Like Water*, a story about a teenage girl and the ghost of Bruce Lee, went up at East West Players.

For *It's Great 2B American*, Kwong got some help from co-director Shishir Kurup, a longtime member of the Downtown-based Cornerstone Theater Company.

"What I find most powerful about Dan's work is nuance and how this new work of his is replete with it," Kurup said. "It is humorous, and it is informative. But most of all it comes from a deep place of self-examination."

In the scene "Classroom Patriots," Kwong comes onstage with a small American flag and recites the Pledge of Allegiance. Then he points out how children repeat those same words as "a series of syllables congealed into one long continuous phrase" every morning at school without knowing what they're saying.

He also plays patriotic songs on the autoharp like he did in elementary school. For the "Marine's Hymn," he sings "First to fight for right and freedom/And to keep our honor clean/We are proud to claim the title of United Sta--" then is interrupted by the imagined voice of his mother, to whom he responds: "How could they do that? You're an American."

Kwong's reference to the Japanese-American internment during World War II is a sobering moment in a humorous scene. He often uses sarcastic humor to soften hard-hitting material - of which there is plenty.



photo: Aaron Rapoport Photography

**Dan Kwong said his solo show *It's Great 2B American* is his most political work. It combines monologues, video, music and dance Nov. 14-16 at the New LATC.**

"Dance of the Big Stick" presents a "highly abridged list of U.S. military and covert foreign interventions" that goes on to surprising length.

"What's stunning," Kwong said, "is just how much America has stuck its nose in other people's business throughout history, whether well-intentioned or not. At the same time, [Americans have] this very stubborn obliviousness about other countries."

His punk-rock take on Abu Ghraib features a dancing masked prisoner and a video montage that ends with an image of George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice looking like actors in a movie poster with guns. In the wrong hands, a piece like that could be shocking, but Kwong brings a sensitivity to his work.

"I don't do things for shock value," he said. "If I do use a strong image or strong language, there's always something I'm trying to communicate through those choices."

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