

Margaret Cho has managed to pack a lot into her 44 years, and she's still going strong. Some may disapprove of her lifestyle and politics, but there's no denying that she is living her truth. I had the chance to speak with her back in June, just days before the airing of the 5th season opener of *Drop Dead Diva*, a Lifetime Original that had recently been resurrected.



THE MANY SIDES AND MANY TALENTS OF

Tobi Schwartz-Cassell: How did you get the news that *Diva* was cancelled? Were you surprised?
Margaret Cho: When they told us we were cancelled, they also told us we were probably going to come back. So it was never confirmed either way until we actually went back into production.

TSC: I understand the fans brought the show back from the dead.
MC: Yes, I think the fan support was essential in sealing the deal for us because they were all over social media. It just proves that fans really have a lot of power.

TSC: How did it feel to know you were going back for another season?
MC: It was great! I always knew the show had a lot of fan support, but that was really exciting.

TSC: I love your character and I'm wondering if in Season 5, there's anything new and exciting in store for "Teri."
MC: Well, we haven't even finished filming this season, so I'm not even sure what's going to happen. But there's always something going on with her, so we'll see. (She laughs)

TSC: So the cast really doesn't know what's going to happen past the show you're working?
MC: Right. They give us (the scripts) maybe a couple of weeks before we film and we're never really sure where (the storyline) goes. I think other actors probably have a little more knowledge and actually want to know, but I always like to keep it a mystery for myself. I like to approach it like

life. We don't really know what's going to happen to us too far in advance, so it's kind of cool.

TSC: How did you land the role of "Teri?"

MC: It was something Josh Berman approached me about. He's the creator of *Drop Dead Diva*. I met him at a Jay Brannan show in Los Angeles. Jay's this great singer/songwriter and I was working with him and we're friends also. Josh was talking about this show and he asked me to come and meet about it. I ended up getting the part and I was the first person cast in the ensemble. It's gained a lot of support over time, and it's really amazing.

TSC: Is *Diva* a fun set to work on?

MC: It is a fun set. We have a good time. We laugh a lot. The cast has become really close over the years we've worked together and it's really marvelous.

TSC: I interviewed Mayim Bialik

of *The Big Bang Theory* last year, and she told me that her buddies on the set are Melissa Rausch and Jim Parsons. Who are your buddies?

MC: Everybody's my buddy: April ("Stacy"), Kate ("Kim"), Brooke ("Jane"), Justin ("Grayson"), every single person. We all have a great love and affection for each other. This year is spectacular because Kate's having a baby. She's the first of us to have a baby and we're all really, really excited about the arrival of a new baby boy.

TSC: So Kate Levering is pregnant in real life?

MC: Yes! And in the show!

TSC: You've had some phenomenal guest stars.

MC: Yes! This year we have Sandra Bernhard, who is amazing. We also have Lee Ferguson, Rosie O'Donnell, who has been on our show, Kathy Griffin, who's a very good friend of mine,

Patty Duke, Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes; these are people I really truly love who are in my life and who I'm a fan of, too.

TSC: Josh has been quoted as saying, "I feel there's an exhaustion factor you hit watching murder investigations. This show is fun and these are characters you can really invest in. The show is life-affirming." He added that the reason why so many A-listers love to do your show is because it's not a dark show.

MC: Oh, I think that's true. I think he's absolutely right. There's a lot of light and a lot of warmth and a lot of heart on *Drop Dead Diva* and that's why it's such an appealing thing for fans and certainly why people love seeing it. We let go of a lot of cynicism and there's a lot of wonderful romance and I think that's what makes it so great.

TSC: *Diva* has featured LGBT issues throughout each season and the show has received multiple GLAAD Award nominations. It even won one for a storyline last year. Have you championed these storylines or was this something to which Josh Berman had already been committed?

MC: I think Josh had already committed to doing these stories. It's a queer sensibility that kind of put everything together and we all have a big say in queer politics and marriage equality. Josh and I are both members of Equality California and there are a lot of different kinds of work we do outside the show, so it makes sense that we do LGBT work inside the show, too.

TSC: Let's talk about you now. You had a rough childhood. You were bullied and wanted to escape that environment.



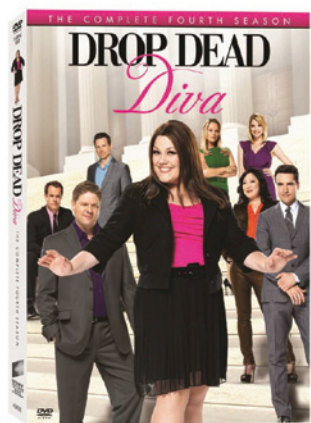
BY TOBI SCHWARTZ-CASSELL



(L to R)
Guest star Valerie Harper, Margaret Cho, Brooke Elliott, Carter MacIntyre and guest star Patty Duke in a Season 4 episode of Drop Dead Diva.

CAN'T GET ENOUGH Drop Dead Diva?

Sony Pictures Home Entertainment has taken care of that. With Seasons 1, 2 and 3 already available, they've recently released Season 4 and the guest stars are as great as the show itself. Joining Brooke Elliott and Margaret Cho are: Valerie Harper, Joan Rivers, Patty Duke, Nancy Grace, Star Jones, Serena Williams and John Ratzenberger. Want more info? Visit www.sonypictures.com.



MC: I think when you're a kid, it's really hard to grow up anyway and if you're queer on top of it, it's very difficult. When kids identify somebody who's different, they become fearful and tend to attack them. That can be a very painful experience. I wanted to get out of that and I wanted to be an adult. I wanted to be autonomous. I didn't want to be a child anymore, so I started doing comedy very early and fast forwarded into adulthood. And that's kind of what I did.

TSC: So we have Margaret as quirky, cool "Teri" on Diva and we have Margaret on stage with an in-your-face-personality. Who is the real Margaret Cho?

MC: I think I might be somewhere in between. I'm a pretty shy and retiring person. I am kind of quiet and more observant. I tend to watch and listen. So maybe that's what people might

TSC: So you knew about your sexuality when you were a child?

MC: I think really early on, but at the same time I wasn't sure because I am bisexual. I really wasn't exactly sure where I was, but I knew I was different.

TSC: I have never heard anyone famous come out as bisexual except for you. Was that a hard thing for you to do?

MC: Oh no. It's just a very true thing for me. It's something I don't think about very much. It just is.

TSC: Are you in a relationship now?

MC: (She laughs) I'm in a number of them! There's always a bit of tumultuousness in that area, but it's okay! Part of it is that I really am kind of living everywhere, so there's not really even one place where I reside. So that's a big factor in the way my relationships are.

TSC: Onstage, when you're doing standup, you are really a no-holds-barred performer. I've read that you play to an audience who considers itself outliers and you are their spokesperson. Is this true?

MC: I like that! I want to be an outsider voice and I hope my audience is satisfied with what I do.

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MC: I think I might be somewhere in between. I'm a pretty shy and retiring person. I am kind of quiet and more observant. I tend to watch and listen. So maybe that's what people might

not expect, that I'm pretty thoughtful. I hope I am, anyway.

TSC: I had the opportunity to watch the pilot of *All American Girl*, your 1994 ABC sitcom, and it occurred to me that you did for Asians in sitcoms what George Lopez did for Mexicans in sitcom.

MC: That's a great comparison! We were actually before him. We preceded George by a year. He was very influential. He is really bright. He's a great guy.

TSC: But I understand that it didn't end well. What happened?

MC: They wanted me to be thinner and I just couldn't do that. My body just wouldn't get thinner and that was really frustrating for the network and I was really having a hard time staying within what the network executives wanted me to be. I just couldn't do it. It was really hard.

TSC: I've read that you are in a constant struggle with your body image. Does being open about these issues help you deal with them?

MC: I think so. And also age helps, because I'm older now and I'm not as concerned about it. Now there are other things that I find more important. My happiness and my sanity are just much more valuable.

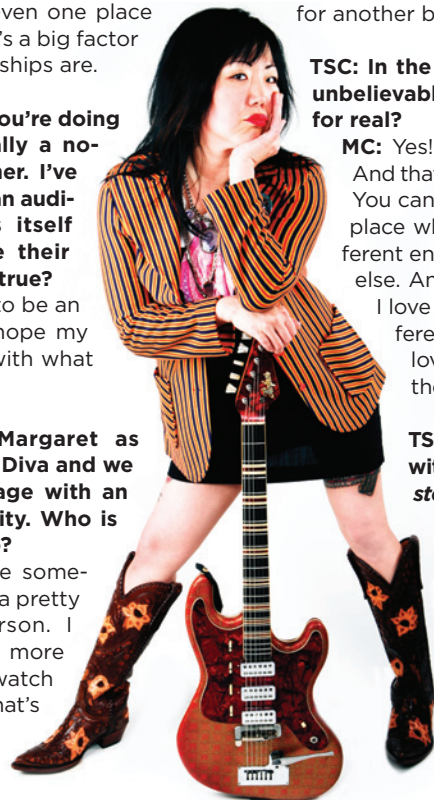
TSC: Your book, *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight* is small but packed with opinion, insight and lots of information. What happened in your life at the time to make you write that book?

MC: I think it was that time period. It was a political time. We were still in the Bush Administration and it was like, 'what are we going to do about the Iraq War?' Certainly times have changed, so maybe it's time for another book.

TSC: In the book, you describe this unbelievable dog monastery. Is that for real?

MC: Yes! It's real! It's totally real! And that's what's so extraordinary. You can actually feel that this is a place where the dogs have a different energy than dogs anywhere else. And dogs are beautiful and I love them, but they are so different at this place, so I really love to go there. I really love the spirit of it.

TSC: You now have a podcast with Jim Short called *Monsters of Talk*. I heard the segment on which you interviewed *Drop Dead Diva's* April Bowlby ("Stacy"). She's a major animal lover as are all of us at *Girlfriendz*. You were talking with her about the loss of Rafe. We all send our condolences.



MC: Oh, thank you. That was really the most difficult thing in my life, having to deal with the death of my best friend and my 'child.' It's a combination of a lot of things we feel for our pets, so it was really great to be able to talk to April about it and really get down into grief and get down into these things we feel for our animals. I can't stress enough what a big deal it is in people's lives to let go of their pets. So it was a very hard thing, but I loved doing that with April.

TSC: Do you have any other pets?

MC: I have two dogs that are in my home in Los Angeles and are being cared for by my husband and I get to come in and visit. My life has changed so much that I don't really have the luxury of having my big dog around. It's such a gypsy lifestyle.

TSC: Wait a minute. Husband? I assumed you were divorced. I guess that was a bad assumption.

MC: Oh, no, we're still married. We have an open marriage. We always have and it really works for us. We've been together since the 90s and we're doing really well. I know that a lot of people in monogamous relationships haven't had the same luck we have, but we're really happy together. We don't see each other as much as we'd like to.

TSC: Is there a cause or non-profit that is close to your heart?

MC: The Ali Forney Center. It's a New York-based homeless shelter and resource for LGBT youth, because a lot of young people end up being kicked out of their homes after coming out.

TSC: In terms of your craft, you've practically done it all. You've been doing TV for 20+ years, you do standup all over the world, you've done feature films, *Dancing with the Stars*, written books, been nominated for Grammys, won awards for your advocacy and now you're even doing podcasting. What else would you like to achieve?

MC: I want to do more music. I love this genre of comedy-music. I'm getting to be a pretty good musician and a better singer and that's encouraging to me. My last Grammy nomination was for my comedy-music record and that was really cool.

TSC: What do you like to watch on TV?

MC: I watch a lot of different stuff. I want to watch *The Sopranos* from beginning to end. I'm looking forward to the show, *Orange Is the New Black* which is the new women's prison TV show. I love the Food Network and the Cooking Channel. I'm just kind of everywhere on TV.

TSC: One of our readers asked me to ask you what's your favorite kind of ice cream?

MC: I like something with chocolate in it, but not all chocolate. Heath® Bar Crunch. That's what I usually get. **g**