

# Senior dance troupe keeps cabaret alive in Chinatown; its director hit the world stage as a teen, after a surprise call from a famous landlord

## Description

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Cynthia Yeeâ??s mother got her started in ballet at the age of 10, getting advice on a teacher from their landlady. Yee practiced every day in her apartment buildingâ??s spacious lobby, dreaming of dancing on the world stage.



Dorothy Toy and her dancing partner Paul Wing.

Seven years later, the landlady, Dorothy Toy, called back. Toy was no ordinary landlord. She was a dancing diva frequently tagged as Asiaâ??s Ginger Rogers, and she needed to fill a spot in her dance troupe. â??We had little contact over the years,â?• Yee said. â??She only suspected that I might have the talent.â?•



Cynthia Yee is on the left on the top row in this photo of the Toy troupe. She is third from the right in the photos below. (Photos courtesy of Cynthia Yee)

Everything changed for Yee that year â?? 1963. She passed up college and became a part of nightclubs across the U.S., Europe, Puerto Rico, and Canada.



Even today, at 77, those days remain her most joyful memories**.**

â??We opened for headliners like Red Skelton and Patti LaBelle. These seven years were the best in my life,â?• she said. â??I felt so privileged.â?•

Just as she had dreamed, she became a dancer on the world stage â?? for a time. â??I would have continued,â?• she said, â??but this type of cabaret entertainment seemed to just fizzle out.â?• Her last tour was in 1970 in Vancouver, British Columbia. She met her husband there. They later settled in San Francisco and started a family â?? one daughter and now two grandsons who frequently meet up at her home in the Outer Richmond district.




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Miss Chinatown 1967. (Photo courtesy of Cynthia Yee)



Yee today. (Photo by Myra Krieger)

Even at 77, after her brief stardom and being crowned Miss Chinatown of 1967, she never quite removed her dancing shoes or her passion for the cabaret â?? as entertainment, its history, and foothold in Chinatown.

## The cabaret tradition

She kept on dancing, even while operating â??Cynthia Yee Jade Exchange,â?• a retail outlet on Grant Avenue that has since closed â?? and more recently, historical walking tours that kick off on Waverly Place.

In 2008, she and friends in a senior center dance class started their own performing troupe. Mostly retired teachers age 66 to 86, they all had a taste for bling, feathers and satin. They called themselves â??The Grant Avenue Follies,â?• creating routines that involved lots of headdresses, fans and dazzling jewels.

> Members of the Grant Avenue Follies, above, do a quick rehearsal before a recent show at the Veteransâ?? Memorial Theater. Below, Cynthia Yee helps Louise OwLing put on a necklace during a costume change. (Video and photos by Colin Campbell)




They put on free, cabaret-style shows in retirement homes, senior centers like Chinatownâ??s On Lok, and veteransâ?? hospitals â?? sometimes raising funds for Chinatown charities. That work garnered Yee the Jefferson Award for public service.

â??We love to entertain other seniors who canâ??t get out anymore.â?• Yee said.

Today, Yee is director of the Grant Avenue Follies, and the dance troupe is now an integral part of the Clarion Performing Arts Center, where visitors will find the â??Showgirl Magic Museum.â?•

Over the years, the group has grown to 12 dancers. Their latest event, on March 24, was a benefit for veterans at the Veterans Memorial Theater

In 2015, they performed in Las Vegas at the Burlesque Hall of Fame, and their YouTube videos have audiences in the thousands. Their videos champion older women, often with a subtle sense of humor. â??Santa Babyâ?• applauds their sexiness.

## Glamorous grandmas




â??Glammas Wrapâ?• celebrates the joys of an empty nest:

â??Now no kids to care for; we pretty up each day,

Come together each day as a troupe.

Glammas, weâ??re the glammas.

Smooth your face. Give it lots of love.

Stretch & Lift. Stretch & Lift.

Put on lipstick, very red.

Make those lips pop, like a lollipop.â?•

â??Gai Mou Sou Rapâ?• is a warning to the arrogant young, referring to a feather duster once used to discipline children:

â??Beware of our gai mou sou â?¦ whack, whack, whack

You bully me, Iâ??ll bully you back.

It comes down hard and makes your bottom pink,

and you start to think, whatâ??s wrong, whatâ??s right, and what really stinks.â?•

## Finally, a home




Yee putting on makeup next to Emily Chin before their performance at the Veteransâ?? Memorial Theater. Below, Yee fixes her bangs next to Clara Hsu. (Photos by Colin Campbell)




By 2018, Yee was searching for a place to choreograph and rehearse dance. At the same time, Clara Hsu, the director of the Clarion Performing Arts Center, was reading â??Forbidden City USAâ?• which included a brief narrative on the first Grant Avenue Follies. Hsu asked Yee, â??Do you know where I can find these ladies?â?•

She did indeed. Many productions have since come to fruition under their collaboration. Yee comes up with a theme, and Hsu, a poet, writes the script. The popular play â??Murder at the Forbidden City,â?• a whodunit set in Chinatownâ??s cabaret/nightclub era, is in its fifth season.

Another Clarion production, where Yee exerts her talent as emcee and comedian, is the Firecracker Variety Reviews, featuring young dancers in the art of burlesque and drag in Chinatownâ??s golden years.

## Jade and Chinatown alleys

The productions and performances are all volunteer. For several decades, Yee helped support her family with a jewelry business, an idea that came from a Tupperware house party she attended. Instead of plastic containers, she sold Jade and pearls. In 1973, she opened a small shop on Grant Avenue, the Cynthia Yee Jade Exchange. She moved to the San Francisco Jewelry Center in the â??90s, only to close in 2000. There was too much crime, she said.



Pat Chin, one of the founding Grant Ave Follies dancers, dressed for the Veteransâ?? Memorial show. (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

The idea for her next business popped up on walking tours during a New Orleans vacation: She would lead excursions through the hidden alleyways of Chinatown with their air of magic and mystery.

â??I was born and raised in one of these alleys,â?• Yee said, â??My mother founded a Taoist temple, and I learned at an early age the superstitions and traditions of Chinese culture.â?•

Business took a hit during the pandemic but is coming back now that the COVID scare has subsided. Yee promotes it through social media, word of mouth, and relationship-building with hotel concierges. Sheâ??s also on YouTube, which she said helps a lot.

Yeeâ??s sense of civic duty comes in part from her mother, who looked out for others in her community. â??She was the most generous human being, helping others with their applications and documents so that they could stay in the U.S.,â?• said Yee. â??She was born in Vallejo, California, so she could do this.â?•

## So many dreams

Her father owned and operated a grocery store and later ran a Mahjong parlor until he retired. Her brother owned a restaurant, which is fortuitous because Yee hates to cook.  She also spends time with her half-brother, reminiscing and laughing.

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Cynthia Yee in between sets at the Grant Avenue Follies show on March 24 at the Veteransâ?? Memorial Theater. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

She envisions herself always dancing and producing shows and wants to do more comedy.

Last year, she was asked by the managers at â??The Battery,â?• a posh social club catering to Bay Area tech elites, to be a â??Creative Artist in Residence, and share her knowledge for the production of Chinese New Year shows. â??So far, it has been a lot of fun,â?• she said.

As if she isnâ??t busy enough, she is also taking lessons in tap dancing, hula, singing and magic. And thereâ??s the Guzheng, the Chinese zither, which has a 2,500-year history and is the most popular musical instrument in ancient and medieval times. She is taking lessons from a master teacher, Lui Wai Shan.

â??There is always time to pursue your dreams,â?• said Yee, who has never been short of them.

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