

television

# Getting raves for her rants

Chinese-Jamaican poet Staceyann Chin brings her outraged eloquence from Broadway to HBO's *Def Poetry*  
By Michael Giltz

In midtown Manhattan, HBO is taping the third season of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, a seven-episode series set to premiere April 4 at 12:30 A.M. Eastern time. The hip-hop audience, mostly African-American and Latino, is loving the droll humor of rapper-actor host Mos Def. They're ready for just about anything.

But they're taken aback by the forthright queerness of 30-year-old Staceyann Chin. No sweat: Chin strides onstage with authority, woos them with sexy words about loving another woman, and then demands respect with her passionate poem "Passing."

"I do not wish to pass," cries Chin, her arms defiantly held high. "I do not wish to pass / As semiwhite / Or almost straight / Or nearly normal / Holding down corporate jobs / Stroking narrow-minded dicks / So I can be invited to family dinners / So I can disown my brothers and sisters / Who cannot pass."

Chin wins them over, of course—just as she does on Broadway in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, which opened at the Longacre Theatre on November 14, 2002, and has become one of the unlikeliest hits of the season. She's equally fierce in the many low- and no-profile performances and workshops she did before Broadway and continues to do now. With poems that combine hilarious one-liners ("I told her I liked the



Chin's poetry sizzles onstage and on TV.

way she made that pink push-up bra look intellectual") with a refusal to conform ("I want to be the dyke that fucks men"), Chin is out to confront more than just the straight world.

"Even within the queer community, we have ideas of what constitutes queer, and it is not always of color, and it is not always bisexual or transgender," says Chin. "Or it isn't always a

femme who wears stick-on nails, or she can't leave the house with makeup. Even within myself I challenge myself daily. Transgender people—the idea challenges me."

She was born in Jamaica to a Chinese father who never acknowledged her and a Jamaican mother who soon abandoned Chin and her siblings. Raised by her maternal grandmother

until she was 9 and then bounced around the homes of relatives and boarding schools, Chin remembers attending strict Catholic schools where "we were a sea of white uniforms and white skirts and blue ties and brown shoes and brown socks."

It wasn't a pro-gay atmosphere, to say the least. "I grew up in a world where queerness is not just taboo but a horrific taboo," says Chin. "I just never considered it. Then I happened into college and happened onto a woman and happened into bed and happened into an orgasm. When people ask me 'How did you come to be queer?' I say I didn't know that I was queer and I didn't know that I wasn't. Think of being queer as Paris. I always knew I would visit Paris, but I never considered moving there. Until I went there and I said, 'My God! Paris is kind of cool.' I promptly applied for citizenship papers."

Realizing she was too "loudmouthed" to keep safely quiet about her sexuality, Chin moved to the United States in the summer of 1997. She followed a woman into the Nuyorican Café—a center for the poetry contests known as "slams." Entranced, Chin went onstage to read a journal entry. That led to more readings and to Chin's being urged to create a one-woman show.

Even her kinked, teased-up hair is a showstopper, adding a good foot to the tiny Chin's 5-foot 3-inch stature. Off-stage, people can't help but stare—and not always kindly. That's where groupies and the sexual charge from performance come in handy.

"So much of the real world feeds me the energy that who I am—the parts of who I am—are not beautiful," says Chin. "So it's very flattering, very assuring. It assures me that I'm jiggy when my fans are lusting after me."

Chin's most immediate challenge is how to transmute her energy into actual change. "[Broadway] is the art world, where we reach a lot of people and create ideas. But ideas don't change laws. What changes laws is the marches and the talks and the galvanizing of people.... When you go standing shoulder to shoulder with people who are doing the same work and not getting half the accolades for it, then you realize how lucky you are and how important it is for you to keep speaking out." ■