

BIG CITY

Get a Laugh? She Also Wants to Make a Match



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Helen Hong, a television producer and stand-up comedian, uses her act at the club Comix for rapid matchmaking.

By SUSAN DOMINUS
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New York may have eight million people, but no one ever said it would be easy to date them.

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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

These days, there seem to be as many dating services as there are lonely singles. There are uncounted species of online advertising services and matchmaking services and singles classes and singles nights, many conveniently demarcated according to race or fetish. The nearly decade-old phenomenon of speed dating, in which singles chat each other up for a prescribed number of minutes — or seconds — before switching partners, seemed tailor-made for New York: it's highly efficient and makes a virtue of the volume that can make the whole endeavor so dispiriting.

Helen Hong, a television producer and stand-up comedian of indeterminate age — “I could tell you 27, but I'd be lying” — had given a fair share of those services a shot and gotten pretty much nowhere. So she decided that the business, saturated though it might be, could benefit from yet more innovation. Here's what she came up with: speed matchmaking.

Actually, it's more refined than that: it's speed matchmaking of singles in the audience of a comedy show. Actually, it's even more refined than that: it's speed matchmaking of singles in the audience of a comedy show that has been packed with Asian-Americans.

Ms. Hong often does the matchmaking, and she brooks no demurrals once she, or one of the four other comedians with whom she performs, has made an instamatch. “Just drink and have a good time,” she ordered a young woman who looked as if she might bolt after Ms. Hong walked her over to the table of a young man Thursday night. “You're not going to die if you do a shot together.”

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The management of Comix, a comedy club near 14th Street and Ninth Avenue that's more Tanqueray than Sam Adams, invited Ms. Hong to host a show a few months back in hopes of attracting an Asian audience, a plan she initially deemed futile. "An Asian comedian wouldn't be a draw, unless they thought they might meet a mate there," she said Thursday night, a few hours before she changed into a hot red number and hit the stage.



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Raised on the East Coast, Ms. Hong spent enough time in South Korea to be familiar with a phenomenon called "booking," in which men at a nightclub heavily tip a waiter to physically drag a young woman they've noticed over to their table. "It's barbaric," Ms. Hong said. "And of course the women have to look like they're really protesting or else they look like a slut." But she understood the basic motivation: "In most East Asian cultures, you can't meet someone new unless you're introduced by a third party."

Ms. Hong decided that instead of doing her usual act, she would be that third party at Comix. Thursday's event was the fourth night of what she calls K-Date Comix. About 100 young people, mostly Asian, heavy on chic women, turned up — not that any of them were desperate. "I'm just here to support Helen," said Eric Bang, the founder of the Young Asian Society, using a phrase leaned on several times that night.

Ms. Hong started some mildly ribald stand-up — "Is there a Ho in the house?" — before breaking into matchmaking mode. The only slightly abbreviated version: "Who here has a birthday today? Oh, you're cuuute! You look like a little Asian doll! What do you like? Broad shoulders?" A scan of the room, a pair of broad shoulders found, a young woman brought to his table.

"You try to find people who look like they would be together," Ms. Hong said.

The undertaking has been successful enough — at least one couple says she helped them find love — that Ms. Hong is planning to expand it to a racially mixed crowd starting Aug. 12, at an event called Laugh Match, also at Comix (and soon to come, nights for gay audiences, Jewish audiences and so on). Ms. Hong has had a ball at the matchmaking events, although she occasionally gets annoyed with how shy the young women are — especially if they're Asian.

"I won't stand for that — I hate that geisha hand-covering-mouth thing," she said. "Why don't you do some math and crash your car while you're at it."

In glasses and a short, tight dress, Ms. Hong has perfected the sexy librarian look, carrying a certain authority that makes her a natural for the job. "Austin, this is Lily," she said, introducing two young people Thursday night. Lily hovered uncomfortably. "Lily, sit down," Ms. Hong said impatiently. Lily sat. Whether she found love was now out of Ms. Hong's hands; she had made them laugh, she had made a match, and she considered her job well done.

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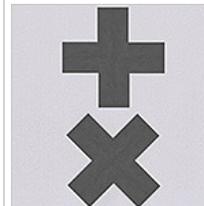
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