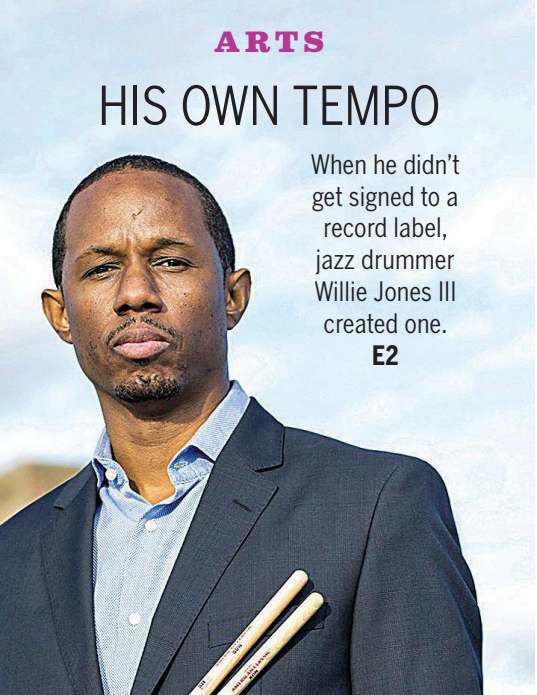


ARTS

HIS OWN TEMPO

When he didn't get signed to a record label, jazz drummer Willie Jones III created one.

E2

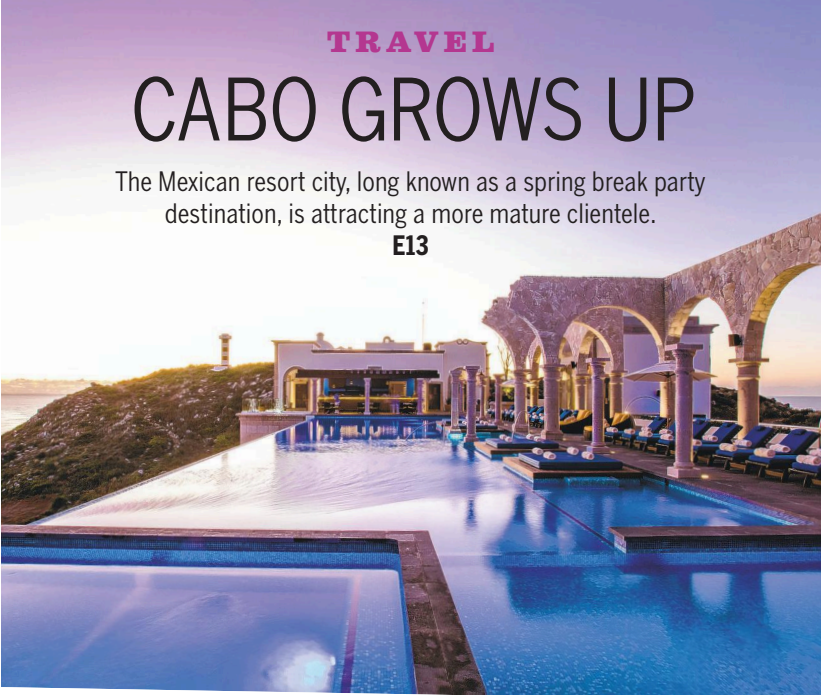


TRAVEL

CABO GROWS UP

The Mexican resort city, long known as a spring break party destination, is attracting a more mature clientele.

E13




ARTS

'SENSE OF FREEDOM'

Alexis Smith's art, on display at MCASD, has defied categorization for decades.

E3



SECTION E

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SUNDAY • SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

ARTS+CULTURE

SUN DAY

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LOVE



'Sweatshop Overlord,'
Kristina Wong's
solo play about
organizing volunteers
to make masks and
other medical
supplies during the
pandemic, was a
Pulitzer Prize finalist

LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE

BY PAM KRAGEN

In March 2020, performance artist and playwright Kristina Wong was midway through the second live show of a national tour when all of the students in the college auditorium where she was performing received a simultaneous text that the campus would shut down the next day due to COVID-19. ■ With the tour canceled and all theaters closed, Wong found herself quarantined in her apartment in Los Angeles' Koreatown with nothing to do but watch and read the news about the fast-growing pandemic. Then a friend tagged Wong on a social media post about how local hospitals were in need of face masks, and she found a way to become an essential worker. ■ “The curse of the artist is that when push comes to shove, no one wants to watch your play,” she said. “But I sewed my own set pieces and props and I’d sewn myself a big vagina costume. I never imagined these skills could help anyone.”

SEE WONG • E11

‘Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord’

When: Opens Tuesday and runs through Oct. 16. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Where: Potiker Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, UC San Diego Theater District, La Jolla **Tickets:** \$25 to \$80 **Phone:** (858) 550-1010 **Online:** lajollaplayhouse.org

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WONG

FROM E1

So that day, with a few scraps of fabric, some bad elastic and her Hello Kitty sewing machine, Wong sewed herself a face mask, and on March 20 she posted on Facebook that she was taking requests for more. That was the beginning of Wong's Auntie Sewing Squad (ASS for short), a nationwide network of nearly 800 volunteers who over the next 17 months would make and distribute nearly 400,000 masks as well as hundreds of thousands of other medical supplies to farmworkers, Indian reservations, immigrants at the border and more.

That was also the inspiration for Wong's latest solo play, "Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord," which premiered last fall in New York and was a finalist for the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It opens Tuesday at La Jolla Playhouse.

Wong, 44, recently spoke with The San Diego Union-Tribune about how she spent the pandemic, how the experience changed her life, and what it feels like to be the first Asian American woman finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Q. Congratulations on your Pulitzer honor. What did it feel like when you got the news?

A. I'm still amazed by it. To be in that company ... Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder and Kristina Wong? It's so unreal. Six years ago, my best friend Brian Feldman, who's also a performance artist, and I submitted our plays for the Pulitzer as a joke, because anyone can, and we could say we were "contenders." Just the idea of being so close to it was exciting. I got my press pass and prepared three speeches for if I won, lost or was a finalist, but I lost to a play called 'Hamilton.' I ended up reading all three speeches on a livestream. My acceptance speech was like, "Screw you, Lin-Manuel." When I revisited those speeches after becoming a real-life finalist, it

" 'Sweatshop Overlord' came from me, when I said to the friends in my group, 'I'm running a sweatshop,' and that became my nickname."

Performance artist **Kristina Wong**, at her home (above) and with her Hello Kitty sewing machine



JASON ARMOND LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTOS

was so strange. So much of my life is a joke."

Q. How did mask-making mushroom from just you into a Facebook group project?

A. Four days after I posted online that I could make masks for people, apparently all the people who had been avoiding seeing my theater shows were able to find me on the Internet and ask me for a mask. I kept saying yes. I overpromised the Internet, and I needed to find some people to come help me so we could fill the requests and I could quietly go away.

Q. How did you become a "sweatshop overlord"?

A. The moniker "Sweatshop Overlord" came from me, a few days into the process, when I said to the friends in my group, "I'm running a sweatshop," and that became my nickname. When summer schools got canceled during the pandemic, I made a joke to parents that instead of summer school your children can learn to work heavy machinery and make medical equipment.

I made child labor a joke, but it became a reality.

Q. How was the "Auntie Sewing Squad" born, and what's an "Auntie"?

A. When I was trying to figure out what to do, I looked on Facebook and found all these existing mask-making groups that were serious. I didn't want to imply any professionalism was needed. This was going to be a little thing. It wasn't until later someone told me about the ASS acronym. That was unintentional humor. An Auntie is a term of respect. I'm getting called an Auntie more and more. It's a nicer word for spinster, old maid or unmarried woman.

Q. What was it like meeting these women from all over the country and sharing this mission with them?

A. I now have a family, all over the country, and half of them I've never met before. With how scary it felt at times, we bonded the way soldiers bond. When you meet someone else who's willing to sacrifice so much in a moment for people they don't know,

they become family.

Q. How did your work running the Auntie Sewing Squad become a play?

A. It started as a free-form Zoom piece from my bedroom, about a month into the Sewing Squad, where I was developing it at that point. The screen would flash "Day 13" and I'd say where we were at. It was like I was witnessing a war. New York Theatre Workshop opened it off-Broadway last October. It ran for four weeks and was a New York Times Critic's Pick. This will be the West Coast premiere, and from here I go on to Portland Center Stage (in Oregon) and then to the Center Theatre Group in L.A.

Q. For your last performance art piece, "Kristina Wong for Public Office," you ran a campaign and wrote about the experi-

ence. Today, you're an elected representative of Wilshire Center Koreatown Sub-district 5 Neighborhood Council. How does being a politician compare to being an artist and sweatshop overlord?

A. I really have been frustrated with elected office. In the pandemic, we had to postpone meetings for a few months. Artists can just get things done faster. I'm very proud of how we came together. A lot of my background as an artist did show up. Most of the folks who were our Super Aunties were artists. We are an example of what it would look like if a bunch of artists ran FEMA. We're creative and resourceful. The question I ask in the play is: Am I more effective as a politician or an artist? I feel it's a combination of the two. Artists are necessary to shift the culture, which is the force that eventually shifts legislation. Artists should still run for office. It's a big pain and it's a lot of sifting through garbage, but it has its rewards.

Q. Did the Auntie Sewing Squad experience change how you see yourself?

A. I never saw myself as a leader. The joke in the show is I do solo performance because I don't drink the Kool-Aid, I serve it. I tend to prefer to work alone, so it was weird that I was in this situation where I was having to deal with all these personalities and manage all these emotions. It was a strange time, but I did what had to be done. I thought I'd be the one who panicked in the situation, but it was this moment of chaos where if you showed any inking you had any idea what to do, people would gravitate to you. I joke that I'm this self-absorbed performance artist, and it turned out I had empathy. A theme in a lot of my shows is that I'm this martyr named Kristina Wong who embarks on these crazy ideas to help people and get way deep in. This one was one of those, too, but I felt like I could not give up.

pam.kragen@suniontribune.com

Photo credit: The cast of En Garde Arts' FANDANGO photo by Maria Benavente

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