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The Doctor Is In



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Behind the scenes of Ken Jeong's new ABC show 'Dr. Ken'

By Connie K. Ho, Contributor



From zany Spanish teacher Ben Chang in the NBC TV show “Community” to the no-holds gangster Leslie Chow in Warner Bros. Pictures’ “Hangover” films, actor-comedian Ken Jeong has played the most extreme characters. He continues to bring his maniac energy to the new ABC show “Dr. Ken,” a program he created, wrote

and co-executive produces. It’s a comedic take on a physician’s life in a medical office, someone who is married with two children, taking it all in stride as a second-generation Asian American.

The story focuses on Ken Park (Jeong), a doctor who is well-intentioned but sometimes a little too blunt with his patients. At home, his therapist wife, Allison (Suzy Nakamura), keeps him in check as he goes through the trials of raising his quirky mime-loving 9-year-old son, Dave (Albert Tsai), and his 16-year-old daughter, Molly (Krista Marie Yu). In the pilot episode, Ken gets in trouble when he decides to install a tracker on his daughter’s cell phone. While the show is inspired by Jeong’s real life as a physician, Jeong describes his character as dramatized for comedic effect.

“It’s an amplified version of me — it starts from a place of truth and then it gets fictional,” Jeong said.

Like Jeong, Nakamura has a background in comedy. Growing up in Chicago, she started doing improv as a kid and performed in sketch comedy shows. She recently headlined the Comedy Comedy Festival in Los Angeles, a program highlighting comedy in the Asian American community.

“For me, it’s the perfect training for anybody who wants to be an actor, writer or director because when you’re improvising, you’re doing all three at once,” said Nakamura, whose past experiences include performances with the acclaimed comedy troupe the Second City. “You’re directing yourself, you’re making up the words and you’re acting.”

According to Nakamura, the process of creating “Dr. Ken” is very collaborative with the cast, crew and live audience.

“The writers and directors are so fantastic. You start with saying the words they wrote, and it helps inform the scene, it helps inform the character, it helps inform the bigger picture of what



ABC’s new comedy “Dr. Ken” features among its cast (from left) Kate Simses, Tisha Campbell-Martin, Jonathan Slavin and Ken Jeong. The series focuses on a second-generation Asian American doctor and his balance with work and family.

Photo: Courtesy of ABC

the relationships are like,” said Nakamura, who has also appeared in TV shows such as “Go On” and “Modern Family.” “Everything really does come to life when there is someone there to see it and respond to immediately — it’s not like shooting a movie where you work in this black hole and then they edit it and you have a premiere and you have a response a year later.”

Nakamura notes how the performers will take their cues from the live audience during taping at the Sony lot in Culver City; the writers sometimes insert in new jokes or rewrite lines based on the audience's reaction to certain scenes.

The show's two young actors have also been able to soak in the experience of filming in front of a live audience. Tsai, who has had TV roles in "Trophy Wife" and "Fresh Off the Boat," has been able to flex his physical comedy skills and worked with a choreographer to develop his miming routine. Working with veteran performers Jeong and Nakamura, Yu has been able to pick up tricks and tips to inform her own performance.



ABC's new comedy "Dr. Ken" features among its cast (from left) Kate Simses, Tisha Campbell-Martin, Jonathan Slavin and

Ken Jeong. The series focuses on a second-generation Asian American doctor and his balance with work and family.

"Every day is a little bit different," said Yu. "We're all working really hard to create good material and a good show, so I think we're all pouring our hearts into it, whether we're

called into set or not. If I'm not physically filming, I'll be at home reading the script, watching multicamera on TV, just trying to take advantage of every possible angle so I can bring my best foot forward."

While the show highlights the relationships between Ken and his kids, the show also touches on mixed marriages.

"I think it's important to note that Ken's character on the show is based off of him — he's Korean American. Ken's wife in real life is Vietnamese, and I'm Japanese American, and so they decided to make my character Japanese American — a lot

of people who aren't part of mixed families or Asian families might not know that that's a version of a mixed marriage," said Nakamura. "I know that I have a lot of marriages in my own family that are Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and it's not necessarily a culture clash, but it's definitely a melding of cultures."

Along with the dynamics of the core family members, viewers can look forward to a guest appearance by standup comedian Margaret Cho. Cho plays Ken's sister, who is a celebrity doctor á la Dr. Oz. Jeong sees Cho as the jumping off point for many of the Asian American shows now on television.

"She was the OG, she's 'All-American Girl,' she started it all for us. For me, if it wasn't for 'All-American Girl,' 'Fresh Off the Boat' and 'Sullivan and Son,' those three shows really made it possible for 'Dr. Ken' to be on the air. To have Margaret Cho on the show has even more historical significance for me, and it's been very gratifying on that level," Jeong said. "When I was doing standup comedy, she was one of the first big names I was an opening act for, so it kind of goes full circle on so many levels."

Jeong believes that the show, which premieres on Oct. 2, can make a big impact.

"To me, I think this show normalizes the Asian American experience because this is about a second-generation Asian American family. None of the main characters, me, my wife, my kids, have accents. We're not relying on any tropes or stereotypes to tell a story," Jeong said. "That's the main thing on the show — from writers to performers — we just don't want any dialogue to feel out of place. It's going to be real, it's going to be cultural and we're going to move the needle with this show."