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HAPPY HOUR

Atsuko Okatsuka's American Dream



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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HAPPY HOUR

In which we spend 60 minutes with your faves, doing what makes them happiest.

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If you were on TikTok during peak COVID, there's a good chance you saw Atsuko Okatsuka dropping it low, usually with her grandmother or husband, Ryan, dancing along. But she

wasn't just hopping on to the trend of online choreography; the comedian grew up taking dance classes, and, as she reveals in her new Hulu special, *Father*, she was a cheerleader in high school. She has always wanted to give people a sense of happiness and safety — feelings that didn't come easily to her growing up. But as unusual as Okatsuka's story may be, it's also a very American one, and when she first started talking about it online, the overwhelmingly positive response made her feel less alone. "During the pandemic, I was just being me, like, *This is what I do with my family*," she says. "I told the audience my feelings about things, but I'm just naturally funny."

Five years after exploding online, Okatsuka is still based in Los Angeles. Today, though, she's on the East Coast to promote *Father* and plans to do some standard New York activities: seeing Cole Escola's *Oh, Mary!* at the Lyceum Theatre, grabbing drinks at her hotel's bar with a group of friends and fellow comedians, and having a celebratory meal at one of Times Square's most magnificent upscale-casual chain establishments, Red Lobster. As a child, Okatsuka had no reason to expect she'd one day be talking about the release of her second stand-up special here ahead of a national tour. The comic was born in Taiwan to a Taiwanese mother and Japanese father and spent her early childhood in Chiba, Japan. Her mother suffered from schizophrenia, and her parents separated not long after her birth. At 8 years old, Okatsuka's grandmother told her that she, her mother, and her grandmother would be going on a trip to Los Angeles to visit family. Instead, they moved in with those relatives and never returned. "Nobody in my family is in the performance world," she explains. "My biggest dream as a kid was to work at an ice-cream parlor."

In *Father*, she recounts the experience of recording her poignant 2023 episode of "This American Life," in which she visited her dad and talked to both him and her grandmother about being, as she refers to it, kidnapped by her grandma. "I was never supposed to be eating Red Lobster. I was never supposed to even know what these cheddar biscuits were — these beautiful creations," she jokes today. When it's time to decide on which of Red Lobster's hits to order, she asks for lemonade, cheddar biscuits, hush puppies, coleslaw, and a Maine-lobster tail. Fifteen minutes later, she's in joyful disbelief at the spread arriving in front of her: "Oh my God, a whole-ass tail. Look at us. Look at us. Who are we — Ursula?"

A classic American creation such as Red Lobster might be absurd or ironic to some, but Okatsuka doesn't turn up her nose at it. "Find the love in the absurdities, you know? It's easy for people to be like, *Pooh-pooh, that's a chain restaurant*," she says. "But it's beautiful. There are three floors in this crazy restaurant!"

Growing up undocumented in Los Angeles, Okatsuka wasn't a particularly rambunctious or talkative child. She didn't always have the language to speak to people, so she learned to express herself physically from a young age. Her early relationship to physicality, alongside influences like Lucille Ball and Charlie Chaplin, helped inform her stand-up; onstage, she owns all the space around her and is constantly moving. She was bitten by the performance bug on her high-school cheerleading squad and again during her first gig at 17, when she auditioned to scoop desserts at Cold Stone Creamery, where employees are forced to sing for tips. "They test your energy, and I did a dance and cheers from cheerleading," she recalls.

After discovering theater in high school (she had a chorus-girl role in *Cabaret*) — and a short detour to study psychology at UC Riverside — she eventually landed at the California Institute

of the Arts, where she studied film and signed up for a stand-up class she found on Craigslist at the suggestion of an ex-partner. Between gigs teaching at the local community college, walking dogs, and working as a dance instructor, Okatsuka met her now-husband, Ryan, who is as much her creative collaborator as romantic partner and features prominently in her comedy. Whether it's a tour or a week of press appearances like this one, the two of them stick together. "I have a hard time making friends because I'm always with Ryan, and that made me think about our codependency," she says between bites of buttery lobster. "I own it, because I talk about the things I love instead of the things I hate. I really find the funny in the things I love. It's usually the absurd things and tragic things."

Father was shot at L.A.'s historic El Capitan Theatre, which was long ago converted into a movie theater, making Okatsuka the first woman to ever perform on its stage. The day we meet, anti-ICE protests in her home city are being violently suppressed by the federal government; a friend sent her a video of one of the bus-station posters advertising *Father* being damaged by rubber bullets. It may be Okatsuka's job to turn tragedy into comedy onstage, but when I ask her about today's ICE raids, she proudly applauds her city for standing up for immigrants. "It's so full circle; L.A. is the home that took me in when I didn't have papers," she says. "It became my favorite place. It's my home."

Things are slowly picking up here at the restaurant: There's a gentleman enjoying a solo beer at the bar, beleaguered tourists are filing up the stairs, and *Love Island*-style pop music is blaring. "I'm realizing maybe I like Red Lobster because it's the idea of the perfect family," Okatsuka says. There's a lot she's still processing, but she has embraced the imperfections of her own family. She has crossed oceans and language barriers to reconnect with her dad while taking the best possible care of her mother and grandmother as they age, and she is earnest about wanting to honor them no matter what. No parent or child is perfect, but to face pain and keep loving them anyway? That's a lesson even the most irony-poisoned of us should pack up and take home in our to-go box.

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