

Speaker 1:

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Sadiah Boonstra:

Hello. Thank you all for coming out. And you're all sitting very far away. Maybe you might want to move closer.

Benjamin Law:

[inaudible 00:00:23].

Sadiah Boonstra:

Yeah, just move a bit closer to us. My name is Sadiah Boonstra, I'm the curator of Asia TOPA public programmes. Thank you all for coming out. And I first would like to acknowledge the Yalukit Willam as a traditional custodians of the land on which we meet. And the Yalukit Willam are part of the Boonwurrung one of the five major language groups of the greater Kulin Nation. So we pay our respects to their land, our ancestors, and our elders past, present, and to the future. I want to thank you, Ben, and Michelle, and Deanna for coming out today. This is the first programme that we have at MPavilion for the Asia TOPA takeover. So I would also very much like to thank Melbourne Theatre Company and MPavilion for this wonderful partnership of today's programme and the month ahead.

Sadiah Boonstra:

Maybe a little bit about Asia TOPA. So Asia TOPA is Asia Pacific Tri-annual of Performing Arts and we settle into the MPavilion for the next month from Thursday to 20th of February. So today onwards to Sunday, the 15th of March. And each day you can meet a lot of talented and multidisciplinary guests from Asia TOPA's artists during the lunchtime from 12:30 to 1:30 PM. And as you know, all of our events are free, so please join for coming talks as well. Let me then just first briefly introduce Benjamin Law, celebrated TV writer. He's known for his hysterically funny and moving stage premiere and he employs his effortless self-deprecating wits to spark joy in the clutter and find truth in those chaotic moments that bring families closer together in his new play *Torched the Place*. So congrats Ben on the show and I'm very glad that you're here with Michelle and Deanna too. And the floor is yours.

Benjamin Law:

Thank you so much Sadiah. And thank you all for coming out here on a school day. If you are supposed to be at school, we are extra grateful that you are here. [crosstalk 00:02:39]. Hey. Well, we're glad that you're celebrating that here with us. So my name is Benjamin Law on the playwright of the play going on at the Melbourne Theatre Company at the moment called *Torch the Place*. And on behalf of the cast and the crew and everyone at MTC just like to say that it's a great honour that you're with us. And of course, here on Aboriginal land, the first nations Australians like those of the Kulin Nation, which is the land where we're gathered at the moment, have been telling stories and sharing stories for over 65,000 years, the oldest continuing human civilization on the planet. And we are very grateful that we can also share stories here on Aboriginal land.

Benjamin Law:

Also, some of the history of this continent as well, not 65,000 years old, but Asian-Australian stories have been told here for well over 200 years as well. The first taste of this continent globalisation history was actually through Asia. So well before wide arrival, there was a roaring global trade of sea cucumber in younger territory up in Arnhem land between Macassins in Indonesia and younger people. That was a roaring trade that was fueled by Chinese people. And so we're part of a much shorter but still quite old story telling tradition here as well. Torch the Place is part of Asia TOPA.

Benjamin Law:

We've got two of the great five cast members here. The three others couldn't make it. These are just our two favourite, I guess. And they are probably both familiar faces to a lot of you from the play if you've seen it. But also from the other work. I won't read out their entire bios. I'm going to do some select highlights and if I don't get the right highlights, I mean you can chastise me on social media, or in person, or physically with violence. So to my left, our first guest is just one of those incredible actors that you've all seen a lot on stage, but especially as part of and championing new Australian work. You've seen her in *An Ideal Husband*, *Banging Denmark*, *How to Rule the World*, *Top Girls*, *Power plays*, and she's done a lot of television as well.

Benjamin Law:

So get crack in top of the Lake China girl, *Utopia*, *Doctor's Daughter*, and obviously play school. And has been nominated and won a slew of awards. Was a recipient of the Mike Walsh Fellowship on an equity award for her work in *Utopia*. Please welcome Michelle Lim Davidson, everyone in the house. And to my right, our second guest has a long history with film, TV, and theatre work both here and abroad. Theatre work in Australia includes *little emperors* and that won her a nomination for The Green Room Awards in 2018. And if you've been to the cinemas lately, in the past two years, if you saw "*The Farewell*" which is made and directed by Lulu Wang and stars Awkwafina, you might recognise her as the mother of Awkwafina from "*The Farewell*," which was robbed at the Oscar's. Wrought should've been nominated. It's like a parasite one. That's okay, I guess. She was also nominated for the Golden Rooster Award for best supporting actress in China and has been nominated for a slew of awards both here and abroad. Please welcome Diana Lin, everyone.

Diana Lin:

Thank you.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah. Okay. So we've got each other until 1:30 and I want a lot of the conversation to be generated from you. So if you've got questions we have plenty of time at the end. You can ask anything. Most questions aren't inappropriate, just don't ask for sexual medical history and we should be okay. But I want to start with each of you. Maybe I'll start with Diana first. Simple question, I want to go back into your professional history. You look so worried.

Diana Lin:

You just said I'm very shy, so I'm not such a good speaker.

Benjamin Law:

Oh my God. Can you tell that she's a professional actor?

Diana Lin:

Unless you want to speak in Chinese. I don't want speak Chinese.

Benjamin Law:

You can tell she's a professional actor because she's like she not shy.

Diana Lin:

Oh yeah, you speak Chinese Mandarin?

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Diana Lin:

[Chinese 00:07:00]. Okay, let's have a private chat.

Benjamin Law:

Okay. So this is going to be a bilingual conversation throughout the entire day. Diana, simple question. Why acting for you and when did you start?

Diana Lin:

Oh, it's not too private. I started really young, but I was born in China. I remember sometime I forgot. So actually when I was little, I just asking myself, what do I really enjoy to do when I grow up? What profession I want to be? I said, "Mm-hmm (affirmative), I want to be actress." Okay, "If I can't be actress, what the second one now?" None.

Benjamin Law:

It was all or nothing?

Diana Lin:

Yeah. I was really little, that's all I want somehow.

Benjamin Law:

Can I ask you, what was your first memory of seeing something on stage or on screen where you like that right there is what I want to do when I grow?

Diana Lin:

Well, when I was little, you know what? I would want to watch a lot of theatre. You know this grandma in "The Farewell?"

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Diana Lin:

We are from [Sam 00:08:08] City. Actually I introduced her to Lulu. So I was little, she was one of the lead actress in the city already. So I always remember sometime in ... I'm from Northeast China, very cold, we finished watching the show come back home. That's normal public transport where the waiting like at 30 degrees below zero the weather. So that's what I've been seeing. So that's really strong memories.

Benjamin Law:

Forgive me, what was her name again? She plays Nai Nai in The Farewell?

Diana Lin:

Zhao Shuzhen.

Benjamin Law:

Yes. And she's considered acting stage royalty in China, isn't she?

Diana Lin:

Well, I don't know because I left China so long now.

Benjamin Law:

She could be anyone in need to you.

Diana Lin:

Yeah, but then now she doing more TVs. But the old days there wasn't TV available, so we watched really theatre and then there was in China revolution only. Well, I have half thousand of a movie to watch. And that's really just something remarkable in my mind and that's all I want to do, and which is when I was 14. With my age category, I was luckily auditioned successfully auditioned into China and Beijing Opera Company.

Benjamin Law:

How old were you then?

Diana Lin:

14.

Benjamin Law:

Wow. So your career starts as a teenager?

Diana Lin:

Yeah.

Benjamin Law:

And hasn't stopped since?

Diana Lin:

Yeah, I sought out.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Diana Lin:

So that's it. So I went to a boarding college because in Chinese opera you need to start very young because you have lots of a training of physical singing, dancing. Almost Chinese Kung Fu type of training every day, two hours in the morning, 6:00. And then I was there for five years.

Benjamin Law:

I really regret not writing "Torch the Place" as a Chinese opera now.

Diana Lin:

You should. I Miss out.

Benjamin Law:

If anyone wants to take up that adaptation, that the star of the play is ready to rumble. Michelle, I'm going to ask you the same question. So obviously different generations, different cultural environment. Why acting for you and what were your first memories of being inspired to want to work in this field?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Well, I'm the opposite of Diana. I had no intention of becoming an actor. Sometimes I still forget, which is a little bit of a problem considering I've been an actor for 10 years now.

Benjamin Law:

There is so many people who want to be actors listening to this right now who hate you.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Oh, sorry. No, I grew up in Newcastle and I was really shy. I started dance lessons when I was like five, and so I was dancing competitively. And so I was on stage a lot. But my parents, their favourite joke is Michelle didn't see the sunlight for the first 12 years of her life because I was just so introverted. And so they enrolled me in drama lessons to bring me out of my shell and the rest is history. They-

Benjamin Law:

That could've gone terribly wrong or fantastically right.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

It didn't go well for the first few years. I didn't really, I was always on the like, "Oh no, I'm going to have to get up and do this thing." But I was like, I guess I was good at it, but I was so like, it was just such an issue for me to have to get up in front of everyone. And I'm shy like mom, very shy. Diana is not shy. And then I really wanted to do musical theatre because I thought that combined all the skills that I had been working on throughout my childhood.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, triple threat now.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Yes. And then I heard of a place called Whopper and I thought, "Oh, well I'm going to study musical theatre there." No idea what it really was. I just thought, "Oh, I can go to university for performing arts." And so I got on the dial up internet, got everyone off the landline phone and would start applying. And I had absolutely no idea what was happening. And I was part of all these kinds of programmes. I'd stumbled my way into these kinds of seeing programmes in Sydney or just a whole bunch of different, I guess, artistic development programmes for high school age students. But I had no idea and neither did my parents, they just would drive me to Sydney and be like, "Okay, off you go." And I'd be singing at their entertainment centre when it was still around and they'd be like, "Okay, great. Have a good time, or dancing, or whatever."

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And so yeah, then I auditioned for Whopper and I thought, "Oh, I'm just going to audition for the acting course and for musical theatre. I don't know, I got through the rounds. And I didn't get in the first year I auditioned because I had absolutely no idea. No one had ever directed me, I'd never done a play. I was just having a great old time, but I was too young to go. And eventually, after I auditioned three times for Whopper and this is where my parents, I think is still sad about this, I auditioned for acting and for musical theatre. And I was fortunate to do the callbacks for both rounds and then acting called me and said, "You've been accepted into acting."

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And I was just thrilled and I just had this real gut feeling that that was the course for me. It was just I enjoyed working on the monologues, I enjoyed reading the plays. And even though I didn't know anything about acting, I just felt like that was the right thing for me. And so they were like, "You need to decide by Friday. Musical theatre are not going to tell you until Friday whether you've gotten in, so you're in a weird position. Think about what you'd like to do."

Benjamin Law:

This is your sliding doors moment?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

This is my sliding doors moment. And then I just faxed through my thank you to one acting. I was like, "Done," and my parents were like, "What?" I haven't danced or sung since then. I just gave it all up. It was just it felt finally I could had some ownership over the art that I was going to pursue. And then I did my very first play at Whopper. I played the Donalbain, I think-

Benjamin Law:

Okay.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

... in Scottish play.

Benjamin Law:

That strikes me as simultaneously a story of triumph, but one that ends with the line and I never sung or danced again.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

It makes me really anxious, the thought of it. I just don't do, it's not something I enjoy doing unless it's singing, reflection in your play, of course, on stage every night.

Benjamin Law:

Yes. There is a little bit of singing in my play. So this strikes me as interesting that you both have some similarities in your story in that you were both working and studying relatively young and then from there you come into the workforce. I mean, it's difficult for any actor to get roles generally speaking because having worked from the other side, having made TV shows, it's such a weird conspiracy of elements in terms of how someone gets cast. You could be the best actor but you might not look the right part or there's a strange dynamic between you and another actor. So there are all these weird things that go into casting. How have you found that process of finding work as an Asian and an Asian-Australian actor? Start with you, Diana.

Diana Lin:

I don't know. I think you have to be lucky.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Diana Lin:

Yeah. Sometimes. I mean, these days got more, old days wasn't a great amount of a job. But if there's opportunity I think is you just have to work hard for it and give you any opportunity to shine and people will remember you and you will get more job come along. That is what's happening.

Benjamin Law:

You've worked between China and Australia. What's it like going for roles between each of the countries? Because I imagine in China, obviously you're going against other Chinese actors, in Australia maybe, is there a smaller pool of Chinese actors of your generation and background? Does that make it easier? Does that make it harder?

Diana Lin:

Oh, China does a lot of work. But again, because I was graduated with the school, which is one of the best, the drama schools and in our generation that time, at each school, each class we got the 10,000 people to audition. You got eight girls lucky to got in. So when they finish school or whatever, people already know you and that script already offered to you. So that's a lot of work. And I think in the way we were lucky in a way where we got great training and the teacher, the old days, the school, everything, we did learn a lot of skills in the way. So I think we deserved the wig.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah. What about you, Michelle? You go to Whopper and that obviously gives you all of the trainings that you need to work as an actor, all the craft. Does any university degree prepare you for the reality of being a working actor? Was there anything that you wish you were told coming out of your degree that you know now?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I think drama school's changed a lot since I went 10 years ago. When I finished drama school ... at Whopper you do a showcase performance in Perth, Melbourne, and Sydney and I performed a piece that I had I wrote myself. And because I couldn't find a scene that was suitable for someone like me, and I think-

Benjamin Law:

Can I just ask you a little bit about that? So of the selections, what they were all like specifically, was it because I was specifically Caucasian or what was it about the scenes that weren't right for you that you had to have one of your own?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Well, I just knew that even though I grew up in Newcastle in a very working class family, necessarily wasn't going to translate if I did a scene like that for my showcase because it wasn't really representing. It was representing half of me as an individual, but I knew it wasn't going to represent how the industry would see me at that time. And so I found it really difficult. And also, any role that I stumbled across at that time, this was back in 2010, was this tiny little role that they didn't really say much. They just delivered some exposition and left. So I just couldn't find anything right for me. So I was like, "Well, I'll have to think of something."

Michelle Lim Davidson:

But the interesting thing is I was talking about this the other night when I graduated, I came out into the showcase foyer and you have to meet agents and people from the industry. And this would hopefully never happen now, but people who are colleagues of mine, people I know are still working in this industry were saying things to me, "I just want to let you know you're actually quite good, but you're never going to work in this country. Congratulations on graduating. That's great."

Benjamin Law:

Wow.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And I was like, there was a certain level of naivety that I had, which was really helpful to me. I just assumed it's not going to be a problem the way I look, just it's not going to be a problem for me. That's not something I'm going to spend any time or energy thinking about because I've got other things to worry about. And people would say things like, I had this ... Should I just quickly tell this ridiculous story?

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Michelle Lim Davidson:



So I met with this agent, potential agent, and they were like, "Okay, Michelle, so you're only here because we've lost our Asian? And we've actually noticed we consider our books be quite attractive and just you've passed." And I was like, "Oh, okay." And they were like, "Oh, I don't know how to tell you this, but you'll never work on television. You're definitely never to work in main stage theatre film, probably not." They were like, "It's very unfortunate, but every two years there's this Kung Fu television series that shoots in New Zealand. And you've just missed the auditions, but if you work really hard, you might get into that in two years time."

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And I was like, "Oh, okay." And she was like, "So do you have a belt?" And I was like, "A belt?" And I was just having so naive and I was like, "Sorry?" And she was like, "Okay, well first thing you're going to have to get a belt, taekwondo, karate, I don't care what it is. It is a belt." And they were like, "How's your generic Asian accent?" And I was like, "Oh, I guess I could come up with one." They were like, "Yes, that'll do. So you need to maintain the way you look now. And if you do everything we say in two years, you might be in the Kung Fu thing that films in New Zealand."

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And I remember just being like, "Oh." And they were like, "So anything you want to tell us?" And I was like, "Oh, I just got offered a main stage theatre company job, and a job on network television, and blah, blah blah. So I guess this is not going to work out." But that's the kind of things people were saying to me.

Benjamin Law:

Are people saying those kinds of things now?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

No, they wouldn't dare say that to me.

Benjamin Law:

Not to you but-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Not me, but it does worry me that I was just thinking it's part of my personality that I was able to be like, "This is not going to be a problem to me and I'm not investing my time and energy into it. And I'm going to do everything I can to promote change and make sure this doesn't happen to other people." That's where I focused my ... Do you know what I mean? Like my energy [crosstalk 00:22:41].

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, your focus. I mean, energy is a finite resource you have to be very selective about where you put it, right?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

It is true. But I feel like I'm in a position where I can help promote change and I can make things better. And it's certainly, I don't want younger actors like me and should be like, that's just the tip of the iceberg. I've had some awful things said to me or terribly racist things said to me and then have to get

up and perform or something like that. Or people being like, just 18 months ago I was doing a play and I guess it's traditionally a white person's play. And this lady came up to me in the foyer and just said, "Oh, I just want to let you know you were very good but there were no Asians back in that day." And I was like, "Oh, what do you mean?" She's like, "You weren't around, but it's so good that this theatre company is taking a risk and putting you up there." And I was like, "Well, maybe I was the best actor for the role." Like you've really got to bolster yourself up.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah. Like give yourself constant or remind yourself why you're doing it and why you're there as well. But that's a really tough, brutal, and demoralising set of feedback to get that I think would be easy to really derail most people.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I suspect a lot of people that don't look like me have never been to a call of 30 Asian girls that range from 21 to 30 to do a prostitute workshop. I just don't think that happened to some of my other friends that work in the industry. And for us we were like, "Here we are again. Nice to see you. Oh, let's go."

Benjamin Law:

I mean it makes me curious, Diana, hearing all that, what have your experiences for better or for worse been like within the Australian context? Have you had similar comments or not?

Diana Lin:

Not really because I don't understand much, maybe no. Okay. The thing is the things are changing. I left this industry, I came, I was quite lucky, I was early '90s. I was living in Sydney that time. I don't know if any of you know Tony Ayres. Yeah, okay. He was just graduated from school. He wrote a story about his mom and that was the lucky play, the two part of a TV series and we got the best, the TV series at that time called AFI. And I got best actress nomination. Was quite easy and one day a few updates and six months later, and my agent called, "Okay, there's a TV series, a TV commercial channel, seven of you just go in there, "Hey," and this will be \$1,000 and they're good to run for one year. Then that's all shit. Who do you think I am?"

Diana Lin:

So just really that time was nothing, not much there for Asian, for Aboriginal people, for colour, the people for any different background. But now these days are different. And the people like ... I just worked in America and all the agents dying for have anyone that we call it diversity actors. And we lately film and shows the American in the word being successful and there's a lot of work, are wrong for people with different backgrounds. I don't know how many of you the parents as a migrant to Australia. Any of you are?

Benjamin Law:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Diana Lin:

Yeah, one only. I mean many new migrants, the kids are growing up and so many talented people like him and there's some great projects there, and they are dying to get some great diversity actors, which

is really quite promising. So that's why I come back 20 years had a big break from acting and I'm back. And since then I haven't stopped. And it just, you got such great project coming, Oscar winning this is Korean film and all of Farewell, we got the quiet American, we'll go maybe, how many dozen? I even don't feel anything important anymore. Just so many awards.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, yeah.

Diana Lin:

And I think. Doesn't matter what story, Chinese, Indian, or European, as long as human story you were told the right all the while, people want to know. And that Australia is a multicultural country. So I see them as America and I think we deserve a lot of a more different story to be told. So I'm looking forward to see a more great project like this touch the place. Like a first one when I'm ready to scrape, I was crying, I was heartbroken and also I wanted to do it. And my agent said, "You sure so long, and the theater's not great amount of money as I have to do it." I mean with all tickets sold out and yesterday I got some people post to me as I was seen twice. I booked the last show for third time, really love the show and I don't know who that person is. I'm just guessing is the Asia? No, it's not.

Benjamin Law:

That was my mother.

Diana Lin:

So let's all working hard to forward, to make our country, make our art, make our ... What else?

Benjamin Law:

Our stories and craft.

Diana Lin:

Yeah, great, And let's make all great Australian in the future.

Benjamin Law:

I mean, obviously with Torch the Place, we are all so grateful that you chose our project to work on. Given the conversations that we've just had, do you have a set of criteria about which roles you will and won't take here in Australia? What's the checklist for you when you're considering things, Michelle?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Oh, well I've got different checklists for different projects. Ultimately, acting is my job and I need to pay my rent and buy groceries. But I mean I think it's probably, I'm at a stage in my career where I get to choose a little more about the things I would like to work on. I won't do things that I feel I'm being exploited in any way or anything that could potentially make me really uncomfortable anymore. I won't do that kind of work. But in theatre, I really love doing new work. I love doing classics as well, but I love doing new work.

Benjamin Law:

And I've noticed that about you because I see you're with say, Nikia Louise, play a lot of Australian playwrights and younger Australian playwrights, like you're always part of the core cast in so many of those plays. And as I have learned new Australian theatre is one hard to get off the ground and two faces its own sets of challenges because often the actors and the playwright and the director and everyone around us where we're actually still workshoping some key elements of a story together. It's not you're handed a text and now let's go make it into a play. There's more work involved in that. And then of course, with new Australian work we might still be adjusting stuff right up until previews, which of course, is a really big challenge for an actor. So with all that in mind, why new Australian work? Do the pros outweigh the cons?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Yes. And I tell myself that during the third preview of a production week every time. Like, no, it just is my passion. For me it's the most exciting thing. You get to help bring a playwright story alive. And for me, rehearsals are always my favourite part of the process, I act to rehearse and some people add to perform. And I love performing the play every night too, but that's artistically the most satisfying to me. I also think it's an opportunity where you can bring a whole lot of new skills, or writing skills, or directing skills, all of those things. You can bring all of that energy to the room and you have some idea of what it takes to get a production up for a main stage so you can keep that momentum going forward.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I always find with new work, every single person contributes our ASMs sourced thousands of props for the show because it's about hoarding and they just got anything they thought were possible and half of that stuff's in the show and it's just from stuff that they contributed that an actor was like, "Hang on, where's that Mickey mouse hat?" I've seen it, find it and now it's a great part of the show. So that's the thing new work can do. And everyone feels great ownership of the work and it's just so excited you go through this pregnancy with a new work and then you're just so excited to get it up.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And I remember on opening night, our director, Dean Bryant said just do this show for Ben. Just it's for Ben. This is like, think about how great Benny is, how generous he's been, this is his first play. Forget everything else, stay connected and do this show for Ben. And at the end of it, we were like, when we look to Ben, a round of applause was like, "Dad, we've done it for Ben." It's so like, you don't necessarily get that. I don't feel that for Shakespeare. I'm not like, "Yes, William," but feel so personally invested in the work and it's the work that I'm most interested in doing.

Benjamin Law:

I've been so moved and grateful for how all in the whole cast and especially the two of you have been at feeding in ideas, the playwrights always get to claim authorship. But so much of the character's development and the texture of the play is because the actors have been actively present and feeding in. Diana, what about you? What are the yes and nos that you think about when deciding on which roles to take?

Diana Lin:

Well, one of the roles I decided not to, which I've been rejected. At the first it's a film, I don't know what I forgot the name.

Benjamin Law:

Oh that's a [inaudible 00:33:32] you should have called it out.

Diana Lin:

Australian film, something to do with the gold mining. And then they pass on my agents that okay. And that was they won't do an audition, but only two lines. I said, okay, let's be Chinese. Very diplomatic. Sorry, I'm so busy. I don't have the time. One, two weeks later they really want you, they all made the offer. Then I read the script, didn't have a serious rate. Basically, my understanding there will be, we have to have well, Australian, we have to have all the colour people in it. So let's add some Chinese and the Chinese woman as a golden manner. There's some kind of leadership and so I just didn't go for it.

Diana Lin:

So any story, I even do some short films, student film. The reason I do it because they are telling the real story, they are telling all life and even there's not much more I think I need to support them. So anyone come up who want to tell the real story of my life, something I can relate and then I will do it. So that's what it is now to just another Asian woman, which I did. I haven't been playing post to, but that'd be in playing. You could play the Madam though.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I did. I played the madam.

Diana Lin:

We'll see each other on set one day.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

That time I did. It's not purely for that because I was the opposite playing with a brand Brown. And then they said, "Oh, you're great. That's a place. Don't offer me any more role like that." But Ben, we've been talking a lot, but how do you feel about your play. And you're talking about people contributing to your work and stuff, how did you go? Is it a first time playwright? The process-

Benjamin Law:

It's funny because this is the site where we had our first public play reading which is slightly triggering because I came just from several TV projects into play writing. And with television, you're just in this enclosed room with your producers and the show runner and you're just like, "Okay, okay, okay, let's refine, let's refine, let's refine." And then of course, as you two have probably experienced as actors, the actors just get the script and then it's like the sacred text, and then it's shot, and you're all the last people to see your work. And then it's done. And as the writer, you're like, you hand it over and you'll never really engaged with again because of the director takes it over. So it's much more of a factory line.

Benjamin Law:

And with playwriting, it's so dynamic and we're all engaged in the first moment. And the play is being read when it's not even like foetal, it's not even an embryonic, it's a zygote and it's extremely exposing and you're like, "Oh, it's not ready, let's all look at it." Don't look at it, don't look at me is a good thing, but it's also incredibly handy." Because I write across so many fields and I feel that process, how you

have to expose yourself so early on and also be receptive to like, one of the things I've really loved is actors have this super power that they don't get to engage with in screen much-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Of course, yes.

Benjamin Law:

... which you have to inhabit the role. And if something jars for you in the writing, like with screen, I doubt you have that many opportunities to really assert like actually we should change that, but at least we'd like this process. It's like, "Oh, there's something, there's a claim there." Or I think their interaction would be different because of X, Y, Z because you've had to possess his character. It's been so great. It's really been instructive. But I want to finish off with two quick questions before we throw it over to the crowd. One, Michelle, you posted something really lovely on Instagram recently and you pointed out that this play is actually the first time that you've played with and acted with 100% Asian Australian cast. Behind the scenes, how has that being different to other works that you've been involved in?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Well, I just feel like I'm with my team, I'm with my people and I don't stand out in any particular way. I'm not there to hold down the POC position. I don't have,-

Benjamin Law:

You're not the Asian?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I'm not the Asian, I'm not the diversity consultant, I am just another actor in the room trying to do the best work I can and contribute the best of my ideas thing. It sounds lame, but you do feel a sense of equality. And there's no kind of, "Oh, I don't know if I can say this because there was maybe people are going to take it the wrong way. Everyone's just so open.

Diana Lin:

How [crosstalk 00:38:37].

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I did. I said, "Look, I'm Chinese, we're very racist."

Diana Lin:

No, mommy.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

I'm not white. Everyone's racist. This is too serious. I'm a Chinese allowed to say that but you [inaudible 00:38:50].

Benjamin Law:

Okay. So you can see how she inhabits her role for anyone who's seen her, seen the play. Two more questions. One, what Australian work or what other Australian playwrights, what have you seen on stage lately that's really exciting you about Australian theatre right now? And you don't have to just say MTC stuff, but I'm sure they'd appreciate it if you.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

And Torch the Place.

Benjamin Law:

Besides our play.

Diana Lin:

Michelle probably she's so ... Oh, I mean I've worked with her and she's a dear friend of mine, but of course Nikia Louie springs to mind. I am always so excited to hear what she's working on next. And her ideas. And she's such a wonderful, generous person, similar to Ben. They've got a very open energy and they're just really great writers to work with. And I can't wait to see her next play.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, yeah. Okay. And finally, before we throw it to the audience, for anyone who has seen the play or is about to see the play, what about the play or what about the staging of the play behind the scenes stuff might surprise people about it? Any trivia gossip, factoids about the play that the audience wouldn't know just by watching it?

Diana Lin:

It's the most technical play. We have two ASMs out the back who are just running the whole time.

Benjamin Law:

Sorry, sorry.

Diana Lin:

When we have a big, I don't want to have too many spoilers, but there's a part where we move a lot of sets. Those trucks are genuinely hundreds of kilos that we move and they fit within, like there's 30 centimetre clearances, that kind of thing. So backstage when we finished the show and bound, we try to get back to the dressing room, you can't go back. It's all real stuff.

Benjamin Law:

It's a potential fire hazard just like it is in the play.

Diana Lin:

Just like it is in a play.

Benjamin Law:

Just like it is in play. It wasn't until I saw the set being constructed and then on opening night it was my first time probably backstage and I just felt such a bastard because you just write the play and it's like,

"Yeah, and then this will happen." And then this way and it's like, "Oh my God, what have I done to these people?"

Diana Lin:

There was a few times we were like, "Ben, this would be a great montage on television, but we're going to make it happen in the theatre."

Benjamin Law:

Because when Dean the director, Dean Bryant told me, this is the most technically challenging place I've ever worked on, I'm like, "Dude, I don't like high budget musicals and shit. You've worked on like big Oscar World main stage plays with so many moving parts." And then I saw it, I'm like, "Oh yeah, sorry about that. Diana, any bits of gossip or trivia that an audience might be surprised about if they've seen the play?"

Diana Lin:

About my strong Chinese accent, English speaking mother, that's something new. You don't see it in Australia stage, which is, I was really grateful for Ben and I talked to the director that you do have guts, you can employ me because I hardly can speak English probably and you'll let me speak. Play the migrant on the big stage and which is playing 95, 98% fully in English. So that's just something really different. I don't think you have seen them in any Australian theatre yet. Diana had to also learn Cantonese. That's your third languages as well. So it's very impressive.

Benjamin Law:

Impressive, yeah.

Diana Lin:

Great challenge, but a grid show plays coming.

Benjamin Law:

Another way in which I'm a bastard. I'd love to hear from you. Thank you so much for taking the time to be here again today. So any questions, we've got a mic there. And don't be shy because obviously we are not and there are no dumb questions. We're an open book. Yeah. Are you are shy? Yeah. Joe?

Joe:

Torch the Place is a play about an Australian Chinese family. But what's been the reaction of other migrants, or migrant families, or people from migrant heritage about the play, or that they've gotten from the play?

Diana Lin:

That's a great question. So I went up to the foyer the other night and three older ladies who announced themselves as we're three old lady Jews. Not that was not ... that's how they're self-titled. There's three older Jewish ladies were like, we get a fantastic show. This is a migrant story, we're migrants, we get it. And I was like, "Oh. So it was just so nice." And they were like, "People write stories about us all the time. It's your turn, it's your turn." And I was like, "Oh no, it's not like that." And they were like, "No, we were so excited to see your story and we get it." And they were like six stars. Best thing was seen at



Melbourne Theatre Company in ages because we get it. And I was like, "That's really moving." And another person that I met who was like, "My mother is Greek," and I get it to migrant story. Yeah, there's been a great diverse range of reactions, not just from Asian from Chinese people.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah. And it's been so heartening. It reminds me of when a crew of us made this two part documentary for the ABC about Chinese Australian history called Watson, the Dragon and that screened last year. It's still an ABC. I view if you want to catch up. But we thought that were so specifically about Chinese Australian history and so many ... one of the biggest responses was from the broader migrant Australian community because like, oh my gosh, we have roots in this country. The documentary made us realise those family reunions, we should be digging in harder about what's the broader political and social history. And with this play, one of the things that I really wanted to show is that compulsive hoarding is a disorder and mental illness that's really sensationalised. It's not like we have reality TV shows about anxiety and depression, but we'd seem to have them for hoarding for some reason.

Benjamin Law:

And one of the things that we've all wanted to do is humanise this condition that's been so discussed and so talked about but so rarely humanised. And one of the things that you discover in the literature around it, is that it often comes from trauma that as I say in the programme notes, these are broken people, these are people with broken hearts. And one of the demographics that's really susceptible to trauma are migrant and refugee families obviously. So it's not that migrant and refugee families are more likely to be hoarders, but it's that they're more susceptible to trauma because of their family history. By definition, you've had to leave things behind. You've had to leave behind family, you've had to leave behind belongings, you've had to leave behind culture, community, the food that you love, that's a traumatic experience enough.

Benjamin Law:

And so therefore, it's a community that's more susceptible. So it's really, really gorgeous that these people feel seen in a way that doesn't expose them because I think those are two different things. Thank you. It's great question. Thank you. Any other questions from the audience at all? Yes, right at the back. Oh yes, there's a mic coming for you.

Speaker 7:

Hi. So my question is more so about what you said about being more optimistic in the day and age. How did you keep being optimistic despite being told, "No," very much? Was it, you looked at idols or did you just genuinely believe? What's the trick of being optimistic? Is the question.

Diana Lin:

There are days where I haven't been optimistic. There are days where I felt really just genuinely sad or someone has made a comment about something that's really hurt my feelings. I think people forget that even though you're an actor and you're on stage or screen, you're still a person and no part of my job isn't just to accept your emotional abuse online or in print or whatever. I think the thing that's kept me going is I've always just ... It's kind of my own inbuilt resilience. It's probably just from some of my life experience as well as that. I was so determined, nothing was going to stop me. And when I got there, wherever there was or is in different parts of my life, I just knew that I was not going to repeat what had happened in the past. I was not going to repeat actions that had happened to me.

Diana Lin:

And so I felt like and I still feel like I can help move things forward. And that's what keeps me going, even on my down days, knowing that actually I have a voice and it's worth something and I will continue to use it. And I guess as well, I've got a good support team, a personal support team around me. But yeah, I understand it's a tricky balance.

Benjamin Law:

Can I build on what you said because I mean, I've been thinking about this a lot about remedies to despair, and in 2020, there's a lot to despair about and when it comes to the arts in general, this is a federal government that says that the arts aren't important. Like they have literally dismantled arts as a priority and erased it from the national agenda, which I find so appalling given that. I mean even if you just want to be called hearted and talk about economics, you look at the value and contribution your money. Like if you just want to look at money, like how much money the arts makes and contributes to the economy is monumental. And so when it comes to despair, I think that sometimes the only remedy is to just keep working, which I know sounds like such a stoic migrant background things are just like, the only remedy to despair is work.

Diana Lin:

And Money.

Benjamin Law:

I know, I tally. They go hand in hand but also when you believe in the work as well and you're doing work with other people. So whatever work you're doing by default, and this just happens by default in the yards, you have to work collaboratively. Like that takes you all along. It becomes about something beyond you. And with this work as well. I'm sure there are days for the actors where it's really hard, performing is just hard generally, and there are days as a writer where I'm like, "Oh," like you just want to boil your head. But the thing is to get the responses that you do from the work, you might have a patchy day or whatever something goes wrong. And then you just get like a comment in the foyer, someone waving at you, someone sending you a DM, someone telling you the story of their life, and how this matters. And then you're like, "Oh yeah, that's why we do it." But that only comes from doing the work, right? Thank you for your question. It's a good one. Yeah. Any other questions? We've got a bit of time. Yeah, we've got one there. Hello, the mic is coming to you.

Speaker 8:

Ben. Thank you for writing. Are you allowed to tell us what you're working on next?

Benjamin Law:

I just came from a meeting that was top secret and I can't tell anyone about it. Truly, I just want some waivers, so there's that. Maybe there-

Speaker 8:

That good one.

Benjamin Law:

This is the first time I've worked with stage, I've loved theatre for such a long time. And before I was a friend of Michelle, I was such a fan because I just love seeing her on stage and I love new Australian work and I was like, "I want to be part of that." It was like some sad musical number. I want to be a part of those peoples like Arielle and the little mermaid. And so I feel like really invested in the form. And there are two other projects that I've started just developing they're both still zygote stage, and they're very, very different projects to Torch the Place, and I want to make them. So there's that-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Ancient story? One Diana is trying to get cost to self?

Diana Lin:

No, no my last theatre. That's it.

Benjamin Law:

The one on surface is that-

Diana Lin:

Much well.

Benjamin Law:

... but it actually is in some other ways. I know that's been incredibly ... I'm being very evasive-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

50-50.

Benjamin Law:

... because I had to talk about these things. Then I'm one small part of a writing team that's working on a Revisionist Western Gold Rush Mystery Thriller. And that of course, will have a cast of Chinese, and Aboriginal, and white actors because of what the Gold Rush is. It was such an incredibly-

Speaker 8:

[inaudible 00:52:35] as well.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, the Irish were there and so that was such an incredibly tense time in racial kind of in racial dynamics in Australian history that we want to dramatise. And it's been one of the most challenging TV shows that I've ever worked on. But we're working on that too. So that's called New Gold Mountain. That will be on SBS either at the end of this year or start of next. And what else? Last thing, I'm working on other stuff. You can listen every week to stop everything on Radio National, which I cohost on Beverley Wang the first time two Asians have been on ABC together. It's allowed now. So that's only-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Is doing 100 things at once?

Benjamin Law:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'm sure I'm working on other things. It's not coming to mind at the moment.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

That is the busiest man I know.

Benjamin Law:

Well, actually this is part of Asia TOPA and so after this I'm catching the [Villains Geelong 00:53:29] because I'm part of a show called Double Delicious, which will be at Abbotsford Convent. After Geelong, we add sell-out run at Sydney Festival and it's five Asian-Australian storytellers. Dancers shifts may ... actors who tell a personal story that's actually performs, and it revolves around food. And at the end you actually get to taste the dish. You actually get the dish that's served out by professional white staff. So It's dinner theatre for 2020. But Michelle and I were talking about it. Someone we both know called Heather Jeong is a Korean chef and she tells this gorgeous, incredible story about her family history that involves both the Korean and the Vietnam Wars. And how all of that story can be told through one dish called Budae Jjigae, which is Korean army stew. And you hear all about it. And after you hear, is incredibly moving story, you get to have the dish.

Benjamin Law:

So you've got all these people crying into the epithet, which is really, really lovely and cute. So come see that at Abbotsford Convent, if you've got the time. I actually want to ask the both of you the same question, if that's okay. So like Michelle and Diana, do you have an idea of what 2020 is beyond Torch the Place? Actually, that's really hard for actors to answer, isn't it? Because I imagine why you have to be like, "I can't tell you that I'm already signed up to this?" So this information is embargoed or, yeah.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Well, the one thing I'm going to film on a Farm for Playschool straight after we've added an extra show for Torch the Place and I'll be flying out at 6:00 AM the next morning to get to the farm.

Benjamin Law:

Thank you and sorry.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

No, it's going to be great. And the other play that I'm definitely doing is a play at Sydney Theatre Company called Rules for Living. I think it comes from the national and it's the first time it will be seen in Australia. So it'll be exciting.

Benjamin Law:

Fantastic, and you're acting alongside the great Heather-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Heather Mitchell.

Benjamin Law:

... Mitchell?

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Yes.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Thank you for coming.

Benjamin Law:

That's going to be very special. What about you Diana? What's on the horizon?

Diana Lin:

I always have some field project in China, but now probably going to wait until this coronavirus and I miss the Couple American TV show because this play-

Benjamin Law:

Oh, what Diana?

Diana Lin:

Anyway, everything for good reason doesn't matter [crosstalk 00:56:12] another one good one coming.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Diana could [crosstalk 00:56:13] to the Golden Globes because she had to come to [crosstalk 00:56:15]-

Benjamin Law:

Oh my gosh, let me just to connect to [crosstalk 00:56:18].

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Yes. And we were like, "Would you rather be here with us, Diana? I wasn't [inaudible 00:56:22], that's bad. But then they teasing me everyday. Oh, you shouldn't be here. If I mean, I won't be there ready.

Benjamin Law:

[inaudible 00:56:29] are real family. Oh my gosh. With all the harassment included.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

[inaudible 00:56:33] I'm very happy with this show. I'm very ... I mean as I don't know. We always say, "None of real artist doesn't love to work in the theatre." So the real, real being real something like actor as TV and as movie, everyone can do it. But theatre is something really to show if you have ability to be able to be great actress. So and all the process you really enjoyed, really love it.

Benjamin Law:

Well, we-

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Nothing else connected.

Benjamin Law:

... have two great actors in Torch the Place, I can confirm. Well, we've got five, we've got two here.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Two here.

Benjamin Law:

The rest are great. But we're very, very grateful for both your time and your performances. Torch the Place is playing until ... Well, it's through March, the 23rd of March. We as of 48 hours ago, I have put one extra performance up there. So see Michelle Lim Davidson's flight before she flies out at 6:00 AM for the proper closing night performance. So there are still good seats for that. And I think there are some limited seats throughout the season for all the other shows, but they're very limited. So if you want good seats, there's still that one extra performance that you can still book into. Go see events at Asia TOPA and thank you so much for coming out to this one.

Michelle Lim Davidson:

Thank you Ben.

Diana Lin:

Thank you.

Benjamin Law:

Thank you Diana.

Diana Lin:

Thank you everyone.

Benjamin Law:

Thank you Michelle. Thank you for coming. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

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