

Speaker 1:

This is a Wheeler Centre podcast.

Beverly Wang:

Hi and welcome to the Wheeler Centre podcast. My name is Beverly Wang. And, it's a kind of a special edition because in lieu of a live show at the Wheeler Centre, we're recording this conversation, and we're recording it on the land of the traditional owners of this land, the Wathaurong people of the Kulin nation. And, as always we pay our respects to their elders past, present, and future, and any First Nations people who are listening.

Beverly Wang:

And, it's a special theatrical episode I guess. We have Benjamin Law, playwright, journalist, radio co-host of mine on Stop Everything, another podcast. His debut play is called Torch the Place, with the Melbourne Theatre Company. It's playing to nearly sold out shows in this debut run and a big congratulations. Welcome Benjamin.

Benjamin Law:

Thanks Beverly. It's good to be here.

Beverly Wang:

It's nice to see you again. And, from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, we have Nguyen Duc Duy. He's the translator who has worked very closely with the director of Saigon, which is part of the Asia TOPA programme. The director Caroline Guiela Nguyen, unfortunately couldn't travel from France to Melbourne for the show, but we'll be hearing from her shortly. And, helping us today with this recording is Helene Embling who will be interpreting for Duy. Welcome everybody.

Benjamin Law:

Thanks Beverly [crosstalk 00:00:01:28].

Nguyen Duc Duy:

Hello.

Beverly Wang:

Hello. Shall we kick off with a message from Caroline who can't be here today?

Caroline Guiela Nguyen:

[foreign language 00:01:35].

Helene Embling:

Hello. I'm sorry I couldn't be here. I would have loved to be in Australia, but it's a mighty journey from France. So, I will be very interesting to see what's happening, what happened with the show in Australia. I trust that in Australia, and I know there are lots of Vietnamese expatriate, Vietnamese that... Viet queues as we call them in France, and also lot of Vietnamese restaurants.

Helene Embling:

My cast has sent me pictures of many Vietnamese restaurant in Melbourne. The show is a narrative about the community of the Vietnamese in overseas. And, I was very happy to have Duy as a translator because he allowed me to connect with other stories. Unfortunately, I do not speak Vietnamese fluently because my mother did not teach to me, and that was actually one of the problematics. One of the questions raised in the shows is isolation from a culture in order to allow for integration into a new society.

Helene Embling:

I will be... The show is... Has been going on since 2015. We have been working on it since 2015. It has been shown since 2017 and the stories have evolving... Have evolved. I hope you get a lot out of this show. Once again, I'm sorry I can't be there, and I wish you an excellent performance.

Beverly Wang:

Thank you so much Helene. Duy I'll start with you. As Helene mentioned, Caroline doesn't speak any Vietnamese, so your role as a researcher and an interpreter was particularly important in putting the show together. Can you just start by talking us through the brief that Caroline presented you with and how you went about executing that?

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:03:37].

Helene Embling:

So, what Caroline... Even though she speaks quite a few words of Vietnamese which is unusual, because usually your customer... So, Customers of Duy were more totally foreign to English. So, it was a good thing that she spoke those words. But she has so much to say, which is the reasons why she really needed an interpret. So, she approached French Institute, that Institut Français, that redirected her to Lille, where Duy was still studying at the time, and then he had the opportunity to become the interpreter.

Helene Embling:

So in the first instance, the French Institute contacted the university and there were two people. So, the senior person was Tuan Tu. And first, Tuan Tu took the job of the translation, but Duy was accompanying her. So, eventually Tu took part of the... Became part of the show and was on stage, and Duy stayed in the shadow to keep his role as a translator.

Beverly Wang:

Also, was there ever any conversation about you appearing in the play as a cast member?

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:04:51]

Helene Embling:

That would have been the intention as everyone had something to contribute. And, the intention was to have everybody on stage. Duy actually contributed some songs that... From Vietnam. But ultimately for practicality, somebody had to be there to stay away and do the translations. So actually, if you look at the whole show with 11 performers, it can be considered as a 12 performer because he's actually on the side watching the show, and generating all the title, subtitles, over subtitles during the show.

Beverly Wang:

That's fascinating. So, during the show it's not a static translation, the subtitles. You are... Talk us through what actually happens during the shows Duy.

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:05:44].

Helene Embling:

Okay. So, that is the difference with movies, with film, and cinema, is that in the process of the film, you can... You do the video first and you can adopt the subtitles. No problem. In terms of theatre and this show in particular... Actually we compare the show to a human being because it's never every day is the same. Some days are better, some days are not as good. In any instance, he has to follow and reflect the evolution of the show every day as it goes. So, Duy has two categories of subtitles. The ones that are guaranteed to be there, and the ones that might be there. So, he has his two lists. And when he hears the performer, as soon as he starts, he has to prompt what is going to be said, and send it then so that it's instant. So, he has a special software for this purpose.

Beverly Wang:

I might just go to Ben at this point. You're listening to what Duy is saying about the dynamism, and the evolution of the production *Night After Night*. When it comes to *Torch the Place*, how has the show evolved from the writing process, through to rehearsals, and even on stage, *Night After Night*. Where has it changed?

Benjamin Law:

Maybe the real question is where hasn't it changed. Because from the first draught onwards, all the actors are completely involved. Then later on we've got all of the designers, and everything's really up for grabs. And, the show that I've written is about the condition of compulsive hoarding. We're talking about big messes, and really it's about how to make this mess come on stage and come to life. And with the actual story itself from... Theatre is so dynamic. I come from... I came from TV screenwriting just before I came into theatre. And, with TV screenwriting things are locked, and then they're reshaped, and they're locked again then they're reshaped.

Benjamin Law:

With theatre, it's so fluid. Someone can just have a throwaway joke that day and it's like, let's throw that in the performance tonight. That's genius. And, it's not written in the script of course, but let's try that tonight. Let's try that tonight. Obviously the previews... Such a great opportunity for us to just experiment a little, little, little bit, not enough to throw the actors the performance off, but hopefully by performing night we've got exactly the text we want. But even then, there's plenty of stuff that you can

still throw in for spice and just for variation. So, that's been quite hilarious and joyous about doing this for the first time when it comes to me anyway.

Beverly Wang:

When you're writing Tortured by yourself in your cave, [crosstalk 00:08:40] writing it all by yourself, and then you birth it, you bring it to the cast and the directors, and they're making adjustments or suggesting things. What changes between just seeing the words and then hearing it performed? What did the actors... What's the feedback? The most important feedback you've gotten from actors about how you take the written word from the page to the stage.

Benjamin Law:

Well, one of the things that I feel like when people are reading my draught out for the first time is... I don't have this experience as much nowadays because you and I are radio broadcasters. We have to listen to our voice all the time. But before we were broadcasters, I'm sure we had the experience everyone has, which is you're listening to your own voice and you're cringing. And, that's the same sensation I have had with actors reading out my scripts at just a draught level [inaudible 00:09:29] please stop this is excruciating. Because you've read it in your own head, you've maybe read it out yourself during the writing process. But then to have it all on show, this play with all of its faults, and we all agree and understand that it will have thoughts because it's not finished. That's the whole point.

Benjamin Law:

But that searing kind of almost physical embarrassment is when you make a mark on the page. That's... Either you know what the solution is or you know that something has to be fixed because something's wrong, because the rhythm's off, the plot point doesn't make sense. Something is just bad, and yeah that... If you're willing to, that searing discomfort is actually a part of the process and the actors have... Actively feeding into that, Michelle Lim Davidson, Fi Choi. There are developments right from the start and actors have an incredible ability to inhabit their character, and know what your character will and won't do that writers are not aware of at all.

Beverly Wang:

So do you think that Torch the Place is... At what point do you feel like, yeah, it's done or do you not feel like that yet?

Benjamin Law:

Well, there are several points where I thought it was done, like when we needed to send a play off to printers. It's like, "Okay, that's done." That is not the play that's been performed on stage. Sorry anyone who's going to reproduce it at a school or something. But that's one milestone. And then by the time you finish the... What you think is the text for opening night, that's another milestone, but you've got director... My director Dean Brian... He'll be like, "Hey, so there's something not quite buzzing about this script so can we punch up the joke?" And, that will keep happening over. It never ends Beverly. It's never over for a playwright.

Beverly Wang:

How about you Duy? Saigon has been on for a few years now, and the text or the script... Am I correct? The process was that you gathered the stories in Vietnam and France. There was a book that was

written, and then the cast kind of took it on themselves to improvise the script. Would love to hear a bit of the process of how the actors worked off of the text that was presented to them and along the same lines, how they helped the script evolve.

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:11:48].

Helene Embling:

So in the first place, the story is well there but the show is beyond the stories. The stories have been taken into the imagination, in the tune, the imaginary of all the performers. So, there is this evolution into imagination. So, Caroline has some ideas, and they... She's proposing these ideas to the cast. The cast then goes away and prepare improvisations about these ideas, present them, refine them, and then eventually this improvisation will be kept or set aside. Okay. So, Caroline of course is... She's decision-maker. But the writing of the show has been a collective process.

Helene Embling:

And eventually, once the scenes have been identified and the show has been built, then she started to actually write the subtitles then, at that stage. So, the dawn of 2016, 2017 which is just before the show came out, there was lots of add ups and suggestions that kept coming from the actor. So, both Caroline and Duy are to look at all this work and process it, and eventually watching the work with actors, keep making the writing decisions even at that time.

Beverly Wang:

So, it sounds like the cast... Choosing the right cast is very, very important in this case because they are writing alongside you being really quite big forces in the creative process. And, the cast of Saigon is so specific. You need people who can speak French and Vietnamese, different ages, people who can speak French, only Vietnamese only. Can you talk a little bit about the process of looking for those people and the challenges?

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:13:44].

Helene Embling:

So, for Duy wasn't in the French auditions which [foreign language 00:13:51] that is the Vietnamese people in France, but he was in Vietnam. And, he has a very interesting anecdote on that... In that regard. That, first they went to a private school where people were quite financially well off, fluent. And, they were good pretty precise, pretty actors. But Caroline noticed that when they were... When one of them was auditioning, the other ones weren't looking, they were just playing on their phone. They weren't with what's happening. So, that was... For her that was not a good positive points.

Helene Embling:

So, they ended up going to the public University of Cinema in Ho Chi Minh City, and that's where she found the actors that actually had the collective attitude and the spirits that she was looking for, which is a major part of the casting. So, it's not to put one school against other, but in the private university there was a very good teaching, and the students were up to interesting standard but in the public

school, this which was Institute of Film, Cinema and Theatre in Ho Chi Minh City, there was a spirit that Caroline noticed, and that was responding to what she was definitely looking for, even though the student didn't have the same means.

Beverly Wang:

Interesting. Let's talk about trauma and family now Benjamin Law.

Benjamin Law:

Oh, why would we [crosstalk 00:15:30] talk about that with me?

Beverly Wang:

And that's a topic you've really mind a lot in your work.

Benjamin Law:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beverly Wang:

The Family Law book, Family Law TV shows, Torch the Place.

Benjamin Law:

I'm the Gina Rinehart of trauma in the Chinese Australian family.

Beverly Wang:

Working that trauma dollar.

Benjamin Law:

Yeah.

Beverly Wang:

What... I can't... I just... I've never actually asked you this, but what has it... What made you... What have you had to kind of scrutinise within your family or face within your family as you sort through all of these experiences and make art out of this trauma? What have you had to confront?

Benjamin Law:

Well, I think for the Family Law, the stuff that I was dealing with for both the book and the TV show, which was my parents' divorce, and growing up gay, and Asian in a very white part of Queensland, which was the last State to decriminalise homosexuality, that was far behind me. By the time I was writing the Family Law I was in my late twenties. My parents divorced when I was 12 years old. I'd worked through that stuff and so had my family, and that was quite not easy, but it was easier for me to make a zippy black comedy out of it.

Benjamin Law:

With something like Torch The Place, it was slightly different because even though... Both my parents and my family generally have had experiences with hoarding, I think mum more to do with sentiment,

dad more to do with laziness. It was a much more kind of involved research process, like a lot of reading that was done about the psychological research that had been done into compulsive hoarding, looking at friend's experiences, harvesting different stories, and then from there, really creating proper fictional characters because the Family Law, even though those characters aren't exactly who they are, they share my parents' names, and all my siblings names. They are inspired directly by my family whereas Torch the Place and the play, we've got three siblings coming back for what's supposed to be the mother's 60th birthday. She thinks that it's going to be some sort of surprise birthday, but it turns out to be an intervention for her hoarding.

Benjamin Law:

And so, that's a very kind of classic play conceit in a way. And so, I needed to figure out what I was trying to say, and in a way it became as much as a storytelling exercise or kind of an intellectual exercise as well. And, drawing on those skills that I learned from TV writing, okay, where are the characters, pinning them all up on onto a board until it kind of becomes like a crime scene shot, and trying to figure out what happens in a very structured way.

Benjamin Law:

So, it wasn't really necessarily an act of catharsis as such, but almost this consolidation of all the skills that I'd brought beforehand through screenwriting. But also as much as I'm drawing on some of my family trauma you might say, also just drawing on a big body of research about trauma, which is not what I was doing on Family Law. I wasn't looking at, well what are we trying to say about the impact of divorce on Chinese Australian families? But this time with the play it was really about the actual condition. What is it, where does it come from, what am I trying to say with these characters, and how can I build drama, horror, and hopefully comedy out of it?

Beverly Wang:

What is the right mix you think of trauma and comedy, otherwise known as traumedy. How do you [crosstalk 00:18:50]... What's the ratio that works?

Benjamin Law:

I don't know. It's a feeling thing rather than a pie chart thing. For me, the stuff that I've been drawn to both onstage and onscreen over the last decade, have been all those shows that aren't quite definable. Dramedy is such a... Oh, that's just a gross word. It's a weird portmanteau. But the combination of drama and comedy, I think is what life actually is closest to. Things that will go hilariously wrong at a funeral, when weddings and birthday parties go horribly wrong. That's kind of my sweet spot with things that I want to see, with stories in which I'm interested. That's... Those are the kinds of stories I want to tell too.

Benjamin Law:

And, I think even with comedy... I'm all for a comedy where I just go and it's silly, and I just laugh. That's fine, but I don't really feel that invested. I'll forget about it in a week. I won't remember what I even saw. But if there's a comedy that also promises to rip my heart out in the process, that's what I really, really want to see. Those are the kinds of stories that I think really impact me and probably audiences the most. That's what I was trying to bring to the stage.

Beverly Wang:

How about in Saigon, Duy? What was the conversation around how much trauma to talk about, and how to balance that out with other moods I guess? Because this colonial story of France in Vietnam is hugely traumatic. We see so many traumatic stories and a lot of conflict in anguish onstage. What were the conversations around how to get the mix right for Saigon?

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:20:34].

Helene Embling:

I would [Inaudible 00:20:38] specify that we are talking about trauma, which is traumatism. And, the answer is about drama but it's very interesting. So in... Where drama is concerned, there wasn't a conversation as such. The play... Because the play was not considered as actors playing. The play was considered like if there was... There is a first wall between the acting and the audience. And, the actors are actually living a situation rather than acting it.

Helene Embling:

So, there is no decision making about dramatic level of the work. So, in terms... In the level of trauma, one scene that was particularly interesting because they did workshops originally with the actors, is that one thing that Duy remembers really well of the things that Caroline was saying, is she was telling that when you have anxiety, the legs do not necessarily do anxiety. So what it was, was the attitude. The approach was that the actors actually were not acting the anxieties. They were not showing the trauma. They were living it.

Beverly Wang:

Oh, living it.

Helene Embling:

Yes. There's not a sort of acting theatre. It's a sort of live theatre. So for like example if you can say, "They are not showing a lady in pain because of her son died. They just showing a Vietnamese lady in the process of following the death of her son."

Beverly Wang:

I guess maybe to wrap up some final thoughts from both of you, Duy, what do you hope that viewers of Saigon will take away with them in terms of an understanding of a history that they may not have thought about, or thinking about a community that is not often seen on stage or screen? What are you hoping theatre goers will take away from them after they watch Saigon?

Nguyen Duc Duy:

[foreign language 00:00:22:48].

Helene Embling:

So, there wasn't a deliberate intention about the impact of the show. What is... What they are hoping and they are thinking, is that those stories actually are a universal. The story of a mother who lost her son whether she's Vietnamese, or French, or Australian can be similar. So, the aim of the show is really

for people to find their connections, and to take what's there, how it resonates, just the show, the stories, how they resonate with everyone self. Each individual.

Helene Embling:

So, it can be assumed that every Australian, or every French, or most of them have seen... Have been to a restaurant, a Vietnamese restaurant. That they have met Vietnamese people, that they have seen a Vietnamese lady cooking. Nevertheless, beyond this knowledge, you cannot assume either that they will be able to understand or feel what this person has exactly lived. So, on one hand the story has... Have a certain level of privacy, of personality, but at the same time the universe to all people who have been displaced, who have refugees, or who have been in exile.

Beverly Wang:

How about you Ben? What do you hope that audiences at Torch the Place will take away with them?

Benjamin Law:

That they'd be emotionally traumatised. No. One of the things that I really wanted to do with the play was to look at the condition of compulsive hoarding properly and with humanity. It's a condition that we... Is so represented extensively in popular culture, reality TV shows, Oprah Specials, even mild cases in Marie Kondo's show, sensational newspaper reports about the hoarder down the road, blah, blah, blah.

Benjamin Law:

I think some of those shows do it quite well, but a lot of them take this... What is a real mental disorder and illness, and really turn it kind of into a form of entertainment. And as I say this, of course I acknowledge that a play as a form of entertainment as well. But what we really wanted to do was to really capture the complexities of something properly, and also the people who are affected by it beyond the actual person who might be hoarding themselves.

Benjamin Law:

You wouldn't make a reality TV show about chronic anxiety and depression, but for some reason hoarding because the physical manifestation of it is so obvious, and so visible, and so shameful, a lot of people look at that and think, well that's the horror. And, when you look at the research, what it shows is that that condition always doesn't come from a place of deprivation, or privation, or from a sense that you don't have anything when you were growing up, it always comes from a place of trauma. And unless we actually honour that, we're not actually going to have a proper understanding of what this condition is, and what it does to the people who love people who live with this disorder as well.

Benjamin Law:

So, I want to invest in a sense of humanity. And given that it's such a common condition relatively... Statistically it's been estimated that over a million Australians have some form of compulsive hoarding disorder. I want people to kind of feel sane as well, that it's nothing to be ashamed of to have this, but to also start a conversation about what it actually is, and where you can progress from there.

Beverly Wang:

This transcript was exported on May 12, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Well, thank you so much for talking to us on the Wheeler Centre podcast. Benjamin law thank you. Nguyen Duc Duy, thank you very much from the Saigon production, and Helene Embling for your interpretation.

Benjamin Law:

Thank you Beverly[crosstalk 00:26:45].

Helene Embling:

Thank you very much Beverly [crosstalk 00:26:46].

Nguyen Duc Duy:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Thanks for listening to the Wheeler Centre podcast. Don't forget to visit www.wheelercentre.com for the best in books, writing, and ideas from Melbourne, Australia, and the world.