



STATE EDUCATE 2022

# SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE STUDY GUIDE

State Theatre Company South Australia presents

## **SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE**

By Michelle Law

### **SYNOPSIS**

The show opens in a Chinese restaurant with Pearl, who has just finalised her divorce but still bears the responsibilities associated with her ex-husband's business dealings, performing karaoke.

Her daughters Zoe and Mei, are at their own crossroads. Zoe, the eldest, has had to move back to Nambour after the loss of her apartment in Brisbane. She is trying to negotiate dating, sex, a possible pregnancy and life as an artist. Mei is in her last year of high school, dealing with mean girls – including image-obsessed Lana – and peer pressure, while struggling to reconcile her Chinese background with her upbringing in Australia.

The question of culture clash and cross-cultural identity development is interrogated early, as Mei is introduced in the midst of a purge of her “Asian” possessions. Her best friend, Katie, tries to reason with her, but to no avail. Mei's Asianness makes her different and she just wants to fit in. Her peers only see her as a stereotype and she has had enough.

Zoe engages in an online dating experience that highlights the cultural and gender assumptions of the Australian male, and is revealing about the issues faced by young women of differing cultural identity.

As the play progresses we find that Pearl has been protecting her children from a difficult situation which ultimately brings them closer than ever.

The three female Asian characters discuss sexuality openly on stage – complete with views about abortion and promiscuity. A subject that is taboo in many Asian families, many of which still subscribe to the strict, conservative ideal of no sex before marriage. The inclusion of such social commentary is both welcome and significant in realising Michelle Law's genuinely warm and affectionate relationships.

DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE: 4 NOV — 19 NOV 2022

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: 10 NOV 2022

#### **RUNNING TIME**

Approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes (with 20 min interval).

#### **SHOW WARNINGS**

Contains coarse language, mature adult themes including sexual conversation, abortion storyline, sexual activity (short and implied, with no nudity).

Ages 15 +

Please contact me for more detail on content if required.

Resource created by Fiona Lukac for State Educate. ©

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# CREATIVE TEAM & CAST



Playwright  
**Michelle Law**



Director  
**Nescha Jelk**



Set/Costume Designer  
**Ailsa Paterson**



Lighting Designer  
**Chris Petridis**



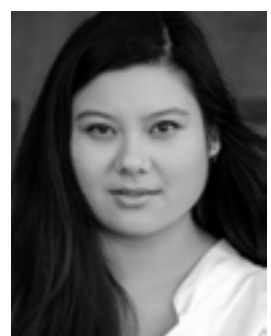
Composer & Sound Designer  
**Andrew Howard**



Assistant Director  
**Valerie Berry**



Performer  
**Fiona Choi**



Performer  
**Juanita Navas-Nguyen**



Performer  
**Elvy-Lee Quici**



Performer  
**Allan Lyra Chang**



Performer  
**Kristen O'Dwyer**



Performer  
**Kathryn Adams**



Stage Manager  
**Isabella Strada**



Assistant Stage Manager  
**Carmen Palmer**





ELVY-LEE QUICI, JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN AND FIONA CHOI - PHOTO: JESS ZENG



MICHELLE LAW:

## WRITER'S NOTE FROM MICHELLE LAW

When I wrote *Single Asian Female*, I never anticipated that it would have this kind of longevity. I genuinely believed that it would have one season, and I would only ever write one play, because the Wongs were not the types of people I had seen on Australian stages before.

But I can see now that I'm short-changing the work. And I say that I'm short-changing the work, and not myself, because this work has proven to be bigger than myself. It no longer solely belongs to me; it belongs to audiences — to the families sharing knowing giggles amongst themselves in Brisbane and Melbourne; to the Asian-Australian student who saw the show alone after school, lugging her backpack around the foyer in Sydney; and to the countless people who contacted me saying that seeing themselves on stage changed the way they viewed their lives and what theatre had the potential to be.

*Single Asian Female* is dedicated to them, as well as the real people who inspired the Wong family—all of them generous, assertive, hilarious women of colour who hold the world on their shoulders. It's also a nod to those creatives who choose to tell stories in which minority characters are sidelined, ridiculed, despised and undeveloped.

Your work can be better, and, more often than not, it can be made by someone else who is aching for the opportunity to tell their own story. Yes, there's anger in this play (although you'd be surprised by how the rage within it is often lost on the wilfully ignorant), but there's boundless joy, too. Karaoke, even.



My ongoing and deep thanks to Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP) and Australian Plays Transform, without whom this work wouldn't exist. Thank you to State Theatre Company South Australia and particularly Mitchell Butel, who has worked so hard for this play to be brought to South Australian audiences in such uncertain times. I'm so excited that theatre is finally back! And last but not least, thank you to Nescha Jelk for your vision, and for assembling such a powerhouse group of cast and creatives. What an unbelievable joy and privilege to see *Single Asian Female* brought back to life with a fresh set of faces and voices, so many of whom I've long admired. And thank you to you for choosing to see a new Australian story. I'm looking forward to sharing a table with you at the Golden Phoenix.

- Michelle Law



# **AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE LAW**

**Can you talk more about the journey of writing this play from the initial idea to the process itself?**

I've always loved theatre but never dreamed that I might write a play myself. The opportunity presented itself to take part in some workshops run by CAAP (Contemporary Asian Australian Performance) where playwrights from Asian Australian backgrounds might develop an idea for a play. That led to subsequent workshop programs where I was given industry mentors who helped me understand the process of playwriting as well as how to hone my voice for theatre. The initial idea for the play was sparked by a blog I used to keep called Single Asian Female, which was almost diary entries of what it was like being single, Asian and a woman in modern Australia. When it came to drawing on those stories and feelings for stage, I really wanted to create a show that explored characters and a world that I had never seen in Australian theatre before.

**You have spoken about keeping a blog of the same name, how hard was it to keep your personal story separate? Or is that all part of your writing?**

I think quite early into the writing process it becomes imperative for you to keep your personal stories separate from your fictionalised work because more often than not, reality does not work in a narrative structure and sometimes, fact can be stranger than fiction! There may be interesting parts of your life that you want to include in fiction, but when those things don't serve the overall story you are trying to tell, that's when you need to "kill your darlings".

**How natural/effective is it for you to use comedy to address the serious issues of cultural identity, gender and belonging?**

Yes, no matter what genre I'm writing in I always see the light in things. I think that's life, right? No truly dark time of our life is without humour, and no truly funny time in our life isn't tinged with some kind of pathos. When it comes to speaking about serious issues, too, I find comedy is a useful tool for bringing audiences on side. It's much easier for a hard issue to be felt and understood when you can make someone laugh.



## **What changes in representation have you witnessed since you first wrote *Single Asian Female*?**

I've definitely seen an explosion in Asian representation, in particular, within the last five to seven years. We're starting to see a proliferation of different stories from writers from different Asian backgrounds and I think a large part of that is due to conscious efforts by organisations like CAAP to develop and then platform the voices of Asian artists.

## **Now that you've written a few plays, how do you think your writing voice has evolved?**

I think the stories I want to tell have changed depending on the life stage I'm at, but I think if you know yourself, your writing voice remains the same in essence. Yes, you're constantly learning and being influenced by other writers and texts, but your voice will generally be grounded in who you are as a person and your unique perspective on the world.

## **What would you say to young writers from different cultural backgrounds to encourage them to find their voice across different art forms?**

I would encourage you to find your people, by which I mean those creatives who have the same values and goals as you, and to support and prop each other up. And to seek out as much theatre as you can! The good and the bad stuff, so you can establish a barometer for the kind of work you do – or do not – want to make, the voice you want to have, and the stories you want to tell.



# DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM NESCHA JELK

Directing *Single Asian Female* after the play's immense success interstate has been an exciting and humbling experience. When collaborating on any show with a team of people, the bonds formed over the course of rehearsals creates a 'show family' and *Single Asian Female* has been no exception to this rule. It's hard not to with this big hearted play - the love between the characters is infectious and permeates into the room.

During rehearsals, authenticity has been a big focus for the *Single Asian Female* cast and creative team. We've felt an immense responsibility to accurately portray these characters' experiences; experiences which are shared by countless other first and second generation Australians. To the audiences whose stories are being told within this play, on behalf of the entire *Single Asian Female* team, we hope that we've honoured your stories with unflinching honesty and joy.

I want to deeply thank Michelle Law for her generosity and warmth throughout rehearsals, Associate Director Valerie Berry for her invaluable insight and support, the creatives and production team for their tireless work on recreating the Golden Phoenix restaurant and Wong family home with loving detail, and the brilliantly talented cast who have made every day of rehearsals an absolute delight.



NESCHA JELK: PHOTO JESS ZENG

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NESCHA JELK

### What drew you to this play?

So the first thing that really drew me to this play was that I heard so much about it, what an amazing connection so many people had to this work, that it was just one of those rare gems, a once every number of years kinds of work. The work is such a beautiful balance of addressing some really big issues that are really relevant to Australian culture, Australian society and thinking about how we're treating people that are living in Australia, that have other cultural backgrounds and heritage. But then also other big issues like looking at abuse, family issues but then offset with this beautiful joy and celebration of family and women and culture. And fun. So I was really drawn to that combination. And I'm a fan of Michelle's writing and feel very, very lucky to be directing this one.

### What is the style of the play?

For the most part, the style of performance of this work is naturalism. Particularly the world of the mother, Pearl and her two daughters, Mei and Zoe. But there are these sort of heightened pops of quite big characters. For example, in the dating scene, there's these four dates that are larger than life or maybe not larger than life. Maybe it's quite an accurate portrayal of some people out there! Then there are moments where time jumps and some playing of conventions. So there's some stylistic choices in there. But for the most part, it's quite a naturalistic work. The details, the interactions between the characters and all of the subtext and action work in there is very much using naturalism as a baseground work.

## How would you describe your role as director?

So as a director, my job is really to be the glue that holds all the little bits together, all the people together to make the work come to life. My job is to come in with a vision for the work and how I think the work could work. And then I work with all of the creatives in the months leading up to the work. Meeting with a designer, the lighting designer and sound designer, and talking about the needs of the text, what it needs, and then what we might do with that, what our take on it might be. For example, in the script, the set course, has a lot of big detail around props, making food and folding napkins, lots of different rooms and levels. I know that in the original production, it was quite detailed in terms of all the prep work. And then in the Auckland production, they went for a minimalistic set design. We decided to go for a more detailed world.

So you need to sound that out, what are the challenges, or the things that we might see that we might have to take a little bit more time to figure out in the room.

Once we're in the room, it's really my job as a director to acknowledge that I've got lots of amazing creatives and actors, who have really great thinking and also lived experience of things and ideas and thoughts. I get to come in with my initial ideas, but then I hear everyone's thinking together in the room. I then facilitate that collaborative process where we can put our best ideas together. And use those ideas to form how we shape the work, how we we craft the scenes and how the characters engage with one another.

It's kind of like I'm the middle point that takes all those different prongs, areas of production and the actors and facilitating. So yeah, really the biggest part of being a director is facilitating that collaboration.





Script Excerpt

PEARL: (To Zoe.) Hungry?

ZOE: No.

Pearl plonks a container of food before Zoe.

PEARL: You lost weight.

ZOE: I've been stressed. Money's tight.

PEARL: But musicians can earn a lot of money! Like that saxophone man ...

ZOE: What saxophone man?

PEARL: The bald man who plays at Carols by Candlelight.

ZOE: You mean James Morrison? Firstly, he plays the trumpet. They're two different instruments.

PEARL: Whatever.

ZOE: Unless you're Andre Rieu you're not going to get far playing violin unless you're part of an orchestra.

PEARL: So why don't you be part of an orchestra.

ZOE: I've been trying. It feels like I've been auditioning forever.

PEARL: But it's your dream, right? What does Mummy always say? If you work hard, treat people right —

ZOE: It's not just about hard work! It's about who you know and who your parents know and whether or not you've got a dick. And if you're not white, you can just f\*\*\* off. Sorry, I know – language. Other people only have to do half as much to get twice as far. And I have to work my arse off to even be seen.

PEARL: Yeah, those people have so much prejudice.

ZOE: Privilege. But yeah, they also have prejudice too.

PEARL: Mummy understands. Other dickhead idiots are in charge of your life. But you have to fight! You can't wait for other people to change things for you.

ZOE: Ugh. I'm tired of fighting. And I'm gassy.  
Zoe farts and Pearl waves it away.

PEARL: The silver lining is that you get to spend quality time with Mummy and Mei.

ZOE: On the Sunshine Coast! God – it hasn't changed much, has it?

PEARL: You don't feel like this is your home anymore. You made a life for yourself somewhere else.

ZOE: Exactly. (Pause.) What did you end up making for them?

PEARL: Spring rolls. Fried rice. Sweet and sour pork. Whatever makes the gwei lo (white people) happy. Oh, Zozo. You should have seen the organiser's reaction when I said I will cook for the food van. Because normally it's all pastries and biscuits — boring white people food! Not yummy, hot, Chinese takeaway. And all types of people come to enjoy Mummy's cooking. Old ladies who just want to talk because they're so lonely after their children left them at a nursing home to die. Or families living below the poverty line. Can you imagine? People who are so poor that they can't afford to feed their children. So moral of the story is, at the end of the day, you are a very lucky girl.

ZOE: Mm hm.

PEARL: It's good to help others who aren't as lucky as you. It makes you feel peaceful inside, so makes your skin look very healthy.

## What next?

*Our “What next?” sections include questions and activities based on previous pages. These can be used for individual reflection or as class exercises.*

Think about your own cultural identity and whether you push away from it or pull towards it. Choose three words to define your identity? Create a short scene with other characters where these words are present. Read or perform this scene with others. Can others identify your words?

What are the themes that you picked up? Explain how Michelle has used comedy to present these themes in the play. Why might comedy be a useful tool? What choices do you think Nescha has made to highlight the comedy?



## CAST Q&A

These responses have been taken from video interviews with the cast which can be found here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYSpV\\_6pKVY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYSpV_6pKVY&feature=youtu.be)

### How would you describe your character?

Fiona: Pearl is brash, uncensored, bossy and bold, inappropriate and very embarrassing, but in the centre of it all she absolutely loves her children.

Elvy-Lee: Mei is every Asian Australian female. Growing up in Australia you question who you are and fitting in; that goes for all ethnicities. So there is a very personal relationship that I have with my younger self and with Pearl I certainly feel that I have that dynamic connection with her. Additionally with my sibling, I can feel that connection to that relationship and it is really special.

Juanita: Zoe is 29, she is going through the online dating scene, along with frantically auditioning to get into an orchestra with her violin. She is feeling stressed and anxious about that situation, although she is the glue between Pearl and Mei, she holds the family together a little. She sits in the inbetween ground of having gone through high school and understanding her Asianness and how that intersects with her Australianness. She is a bit older now and so understands Pearls embarrassing quirks and as much as it is a bit suffocating for her she understands and secretly loves it.

## **What do you think of Michelle's writing? Do the characters feel like real people to you?**

The writing is so clever, it feels totally like real life, there are a lot of real and intimate moments that I was able to connect with immediately. What she does really well is use humour. She invites you in to laugh with her at all the embarrassing 'mum-ism's or Asian-ism's' which draw you in and bring humour to the piece then she sneakily brings you in and punches you in the guts with something that is real and incredibly moving.

## **What is it like working with other Asian actors on stage?**

There is a great shorthand in the room, just a common shared language, reference points that we all pick up on and can relate to.

It is really refreshing, there is a real ease in the room. I know there will be an immediate understanding between us.

It is an amazing and genuinely comfortable feeling. It feels like we are family already!!

## **Describe *Single Asian Female* in one fun sentence?**

It is a loveletter to mums and daughters!

Ridiculously chaotic in the best way possible.

It is laugh out loud hilarious and then it punches you in the guts!

Script Excerpt,

MEI: Most of the girls are wearing ones like this.

PEARL: A white dress! Are you going to a funeral? Look at this: so low cut! People are going to say that I didn't raise you right. That I let you become influenced by Aussie culture. What happened to my baby daughter? (Pause.) Your dad took you to buy this funeral dress. Ha! He says he's so poor, he can't afford child support, but he can afford to spoil you with this shits!

MEI: This isn't about Dad. It's about a f\*g dress.

PEARL: Ai ya! Don't swear at your mother.

MEI: I wasn't swearing at you. If you actually understood English you'd know that.

Pearl pinches Mei's ear and tugs down hard.



MEI: Ow!

PEARL: Say that again.

MEI: OW!

ZOE: Mum! That's enough!

PEARL: You're so ashamed, eh? You're ashamed of your mummy, your sister, your family, the food we eat, the way we live, the language we speak. Why are you ashamed, huh? You should be angry. Angry at the people who make you feel ashamed. White people think they're so worldly, that they know best, but then they abuse people and tell us to go back to where we come from. Hello? My children are born in Australia. Where else can they go? It's just take, take, take everything they want from other cultures and then kick us all out. You're so desperate to be the Aussie girl. But what does Aussie culture have? Nothing but shame for what they do to other people who don't look like them. Dickhead people can hate you, call you names, make you feel scared. Those things only hurt you when you start to think it's true. It's brainwashing. You should be proud to be Chinese! You're my daughter!

MEI: Go away!

PEARL: Mei, are you OK? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pinch so hard.



JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN, FIONA CHOI AND ELVY-LEE QUICI PHOTO: JESS ZENG









SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE TEAM: PHOTO JESS ZENG

## CHARACTERS/ROLES

### **Pearl (50's)**

A Chinese migrant who moved from Hong Kong to Australia 30 years ago. She's an overprotective and proudly traditional Chinese mother, however she's quite progressive in other ways - she's a feminist, foul-mouthed and runs her own business. She recently divorced her abusive husband, a decision that drove a wedge between her and her daughters. Pearl is desperate to preserve her relationships with her westernised children: when it comes to them she's grappling with generational as well as cultural barriers.

### **Zoe (29)**

An A-type musician experiencing a quarter-life crisis. Zoe is desperate to secure a job in an orchestra so that she can gain independence from her smothering mother (Pearl) who is pressuring her to settle down and be a good role model for her younger sister (Mei). She has chronic anxiety and is prone to panic attacks. Zoe is the golden child who extinguishes fires within the family and has always been Pearl's right hand woman. She has an awkward relationship with Mei and struggles to connect with her.

### **Mei (17)**

A self-hating Asian who's desperate to fit in with her Anglo peers. She's embarrassed by her Chinese family, especially her mother Pearl. Mei lashes out to conceal her vulnerability; deep down, she is more like the dutiful and loving

Asian daughter stereotype that she's trying so hard to reject. Reading is her passion and she uses it as a way to escape drama at home. She resents Zoe and Pearl's closeness and misses her father. Mei feels like she doesn't quite belong anywhere, both at home and at school.

### **Paul (30's)**

Zoe's love interest and Pearl's lawyer. Paul was a refugee; he and his family sought asylum in Australia when he was a child. He works immigration cases at Legal Aid, fighting for those people he recognised needed help when he was growing up. He's self-deprecating and awkward in a very charming way. And he's caring enough to handle Zoe's anxiety.

### **Katie (17)**

Mei's best friend. Katie is a bit of a social outcast, but she doesn't let it get to her; she's proud of who she is and her nerdy love of cosplay and manga. Katie loves Asian culture and Mei's family, and is earnest in a way that makes her unintentionally funny. She recognises that Mei is going through an identity crisis but doesn't want to interfere.

### **Lana (17)**

Mei's frenemy. Lana bullies Mei and Katie in both overt and underhanded ways to distract herself from her fractured home life; she wants to regain some semblance of control. Lana takes joy in belittling Mei because her own father is engaged to a young Asian woman of whom Lana is jealous.





## Script Excerpt

ZOE: You know, I was thinking. There's a good chance you'll make it into the conservatory if you nail the piece we've been working on. I think you're close. I got in on the same audition piece and if you mention to them that I'm your sister, not in an obvious way, they'll probably —

MEI: I quit the ensemble.

ZOE: What?

MEI: A couple of weeks ago now. It isn't fun anymore.

ZOE: Mei! You should have said something.

MEI: You and Mum would have gotten angry. You had to make the trip here every weekend —

ZOE: I wouldn't have gotten angry. I only pushed you so hard because you had talent and I thought you enjoyed it.

MEI: Are you mad?

ZOE: No, I'm not mad. But you would have saved us both a lot of trouble if you'd said something earlier. And petrol! It's expensive driving back and forth between here and Brisbane.

MEI: Mum doesn't know so don't say anything because she's already crazy enough about controlling everything as it is.

ZOE: She's going to find out eventually.

MEI: Yeah, but can you just not say anything right now.

ZOE: I'm telling you, Mei, she's going to find out somehow.

MEI: You always do this. When are you going? I'm sleeping in the laundry until then.

ZOE: Mei, that's silly.

MEI: There isn't enough space up here for both of us.

ZOE: Don't be such a child.

MEI: I need my pillow.

ZOE: If you're going to act like this, I'll go. I'll take the air mattress downstairs.

Mei goes to exit and Zoe follows her. They run into Pearl at the door. Pearl holds bags of groceries and wears a wide-brimmed cap.

PEARL: (To Mei.) What are you doing?

ZOE: (To Pearl.) What are you wearing?

MEI: I'm not sharing a room with Zoe.

ZOE: Mum, I need somewhere to put my bags.

PEARL: There's enough space in your room.

MEI: It's my room!

PEARL: It's both of your rooms, lah. Both of my babies. Mei, put down those sheets – they're dragging on the floor, collecting all the dust. So dirty.

ZOE: This isn't going to work, Mum.

MEI: Did you pick up my parcel? It's my formal shoes.

PEARL: Oh, no. I've been at the university all day returning textbooks.

ZOE: You don't have to say, "At the university." Just say "At uni." No one calls it university.

PEARL: Excuse me, Little Miss Snobby. I speak three languages. How many can you speak? Just one.

MEI: Didn't you buy those books yesterday? Are they damaged?

PEARL: I decided I'm too busy for university right now. Running the restaurant is a big job for one person. I have to focus on the renovations now.

ZOE: What renovations?

## What next?

Think of the relationship between the characters, particularly between the family. Based on the descriptions above describe some key qualities of each character. Once you have seen the play revisit your qualities and compare your original assumptions.

Note any differences, what additional qualities would you add now?

Write these down noting how these will help your character interact with others in the play.



SET DESIGN - PHOTO: JESS ZENG

## DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH AILSA PATERSON  
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

In the weeks preceding the start of rehearsal the Designer presents what is known as a Final Design Presentation. This is a scale model of the set, set within the correct venue, presented to the production department and the company. This is to enable the workshop team to ensure that the build of the set is achievable and will easily be able to fit each of the venues that it tours to. It also provides the education and marketing teams with information regarding the design and the costumes. The process leading to this point involves many conversations with the Director and the Designer as they mine the text and also create the visual world presented in the themes. It needs to represent the storyline of the writer as the Director sees it.

**Where did you draw inspiration from for the set of *Single Asian Female*?**

The set design for *Single Asian Female* is influenced by the vibrant colour and layering of pattern and hues in the worlds of David LaChapelle and Wes Anderson. We were interested in creating very detailed, colour-blocked worlds sitting alongside each other and linked by a bright Chinese red steel framework.





CHRIS PETRIDIS AND AILSA PATERSON - PHOTO: JESS ZENG

The script has quite a filmic quality in the way it tracks characters from one zone of the set to another. We are exposing the artifice of the theatre through the stylised framework and incomplete facets of these rooms. Each is defined by a back wall and a floor, but the sides are open and there are voids in the framework above each zone so each can float as an individual world. The red framework is a visual representation of the thematic undercurrent of the piece – the shared cultural heritage that defines and informs the life of this family and is both a source of strength and a source of tension and conflict. The main setting for the piece is the Golden Phoenix restaurant, a family-owned business in the Sunshine Coast. The family lives above the restaurant and it also functions as their living area. We visited Chinese restaurants and looked at references of many suburban restaurants for inspiration. The play confronts stereotypes about Asian and Chinese people – the use of vibrant Chinese red is an example of embracing the stereotype in order to question its origins and meanings.

### **What style have you chosen?**

The set falls into the magical realism style. There are highly detailed elements of naturalism, but the overall design stylisation, including the steel framework, the lack of side walls, the void surrounding each zone and the juxtaposition of zones counters that naturalism and allows for a heightened form of expression. This is supported in the script by the more stylised scenes, such as the testimonials and the airport scene.

## How did you come up with costume choices?

The costume designs demonstrate the influence of surf culture on fashion in the coastal regions of Australia. The designs for the younger characters are very much based on current fashion trends. There is a certain naivety and modesty to the looks for Mei. The designs for Katie were a lot of fun. She is obsessed with Asian culture, and we decided to base her fashion style on pastel kawaii looks. There is a contrast in confidence and modesty between Mei and Lana. It was also important to demonstrate the generational differences between Pearl and her daughters, and the age gap between Zoe and Mei. Pearl's costumes are very practical – she is an efficient, hard-working woman who is always cooking or cleaning. Many of her costume looks are based on the clothing style of the mothers of my Chinese friends. The cross-dressing scene, in which Zoe dates various males, was a lot of fun – the actors need to transform from character to character in a matter of minutes, without leaving the stage, so we rely on key accessories to signal the characters.





COSTUMES DESIGN PHOTO: JESS ZENG

# LIGHTING DESIGN

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS PETRIDIS

**What kind of lighting do you look at for a detailed set like this? Does it make it easier or harder to light a full set??**

In terms of how to light a set like this you also need to look at the narrative of the story and how we wish to present the work. In this instance we have gone for a fully realised Wes Anderson style set design.

I've taken a 'heightened realism' approach to this show. We are trying to keep the world as vivid and rich and possible. So we will have a rich patina and lustre to it, unlike in an actual Chinese restaurant which might be quite dimly lit.

**What conversations do you have with the director to decide the lighting style for the show?**

In conceiving the design you need to work with the Director (in this show it is Nescha Jelk) and the Designer (Ailsa Paterson) before coming into the room.

For a show like this we have decided on a realistic approach. This helps support the actors in their roles and their storytelling. In this instance that is the Chinese restaurant with some living spaces.

**How does the lighting tell the emotional story?**

This is where I really like to lean into most with my lighting style. I really like to focus on the emotion.

**For full responses see the below interview with Chris Petridis:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKXu4efOlVA>







## What next?

Think of the design process and the set, costume and lighting for this play. Taking into consideration the information above, create a palette for your own design.

How would you create a set to support the story of the play? Discuss the realism in the set and the components that inhabit the stage. How might this present challenges for the team?

How could your lighting help support the story telling of Zoe throughout the play?

For lighting, think of the differing locations through the play and how you might differentiate between time and space for each scene.



JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN AND ELVY-LEE QUICI IN REHEARSAL: PHOTO JESS ZENG

## THEMES & CONCEPTS

IN *SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE* BY MICHELLE LAW

### Cultural Identity

Michelle Law writes about the experience of finding your own cultural identity. Each of the characters is struggling to make peace with who they are and how that fits into the world in which they live, and want to make for themselves. They are all trying to navigate their personal identity. Who they are and what they stand for. Pearl accepts her Asian cultural identity and is proud to be a strong woman and mother who is able to manage on her own, however she is very aware of the place that Asian Australians have taken in the cultural landscape of the country. As second generation migrants Zoe and Mei have differing experiences to those that Pearl had as a younger recent arrival.

#### Script excerpt

Pearl: Many people assume that all Chinese people love to cook, that it runs in their blood, that it's their passion in life. So stupid. When we leave our home countries we open restaurants because what else can we do? We are second-class citizens. Third class citizens. When my father was a young man he migrated from China to Malaysia and opened a restaurant in Ipoh. "If you start a business, make it a restaurant," he used to say. "Why? Because we all share hunger in common." Even if you are the dirt under a shoe and people call you, "Ching chong" and do the slit eye thing they will still smile, eat your food, yummy yummy, get fat, hopefully have a heart attack sooner than later.

## Teenage identity

Throughout the play Mei, 17, is constantly grappling with her own identity and how to fit in with her peers. She is seeking the validation of schoolgirl friends, Lana in particular is clearly dismissive of her Asian culture and identity. Mei is trying desperately to ensure she does not represent herself as 'different' to any of the other 'caucasian' girls. We see that the desire to 'belong' is strong. Mei wishes to belong, in her family, at school, and in society. Her wishes to dress the same, speak the same, eat the same and participate in activities that sit within a 'normal' teenage world clash with her mother's idea of how to grow up and be a decent, 'good' young girl. She wants to drink and dress as a 'normal' teenage girl might. We see the archetypal character of the 'mean girl', Lana, who takes the opportunity to belittle the restaurant, turn her nose up at the food Mei eats and the cultural norms that exist in Mei's house. It is only through the strength of the character of Katie that we can see a young teenage girl truly comfortable in her own identity, and embracing of difference.

## Representations of Women

We see two generations of women in the play and how they perceive the expectations put upon them in their roles, as mother and dutiful daughter. Pearl has spent her life as the mother and wife, in a relationship that we discover has not been kind to her. Michelle shows us that despite these hardships Pearl is a strong woman, she values her family and her young daughters. While she still holds onto a more traditional view of how a young girl should 'behave' she is also setting an example of a woman navigating difficult circumstances with power. Despite having anxiety about achieving all she wants, Zoe is very clear on her own power and capabilities as a young woman and strives to challenge the stereotypes that exist about how a woman should behave. This includes asserting her right to embrace her sexuality and be in charge of decision making here. She is striving hard to be an empowered independent woman who is able to support herself. Mei and her friends are still young and trying to determine who they are and where they fit in life. We see that Mei struggles to reconcile the separation of her father and mother and is rebelling against her mother, however she slowly comes to realise that the role her mother plays in shaping her is much greater than she understands.

## Racism

The play was written in a time where Pauline Hanson was attracting attention for wearing a burka in parliament, in an anti-Muslim statement. She is well known for her stance on anti-immigration, particularly for claiming in her 1996 maiden speech in parliament that she believed 'Australia was in danger of being swamped by Asians'.

It is this background along with a condemning history of Asians being racially discriminated against since white colonisation that sits behind the play that Michelle has written. Michelle would have been in school during the times in which Pauline Hanson was espousing racist policies to the Australian public, and gathering support. To understand racism and what that means we have to look at the history of migration in Australia. The predominant cultural and structures in Australia are those from a 'white, English' culture. Religion, parliament, the legal



system, our language, education systems, cuisine and social norms.

Anything that sits outside of these values is 'othered'.

This othering occurs when we do not open ourselves up to difference. Michelle has provided us with a number of explicit moment of racism that we can identify.

### Script excerpt

MAN #1: I've been online for two years now and I'd almost given up. But your bio: "Single, Asian female." That really intrigued me. I've spent some time living abroad in Asia myself and —

ZOE: Oh, it's supposed to be a joke.

MAN #1: Pardon me?

ZOE: It's a silly reference to a film. I never know what to say in those bios.

MAN #1: Well, there you go. Beautiful and smart.

ZOE: Ha-ha. Thank you.

MAN #1: So what's a girl like you still doing on the market? In my experience, it all comes down to childhood issues. Tiger mothers and stuff, right? Most guys don't get it. They haven't travelled. Not much of a drinker, are you? Neither was my ex. She always got so red in the face. That's common among Asians, isn't it?

Whilst this is a clear example of blatant racism, and stereotypes there are signs of inherent racism throughout the play. We hear Mei talk about it in her opening scene, we hear it in Lana whenever she talks to Mei, and Pearl has lived it her whole life.

We don't often see stories from this direct Asian perspective on stage, and this is an opportunity for those that don't see themselves represented to finally say 'oh, yes, I know this situation'.

## Female relationships

The play has a number of different relationship dynamics, from mother-daughter to siblings, to friends, to school friends that aren't really friends. We can see the different dynamics and power play happening between these relationships. Mei is trying to distance herself from her mother, to further separate herself from the cultural identity that she believes affects her social standing. She is also trying to assert herself as an independent young woman who is able to make choices and decisions on her own. Within this she trusts her friend Katie, yet still pushes her away to try to gain some power with Lana. Zoe and Mei also have a relationship that seems flawed but as the play progresses we understand that the strength of siblings does overcome other obstacles. As the older sister Zoe is able to remember what Mei is going through and even though she has her own struggles with Pearl, she does understand that Pearl does everything she can for her daughters. Their well being is her sole focus.

We see the female characters go through a number of emotional twists before they seem able to be fully aware of the strength of their connection. Or the falseness of it in the case of Lana.





KRISTEN O'DWYER AND KATHRYN ADAMS: PHOTO JESS ZENG



FIONA CHOI AND JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN: PHOTO JESS ZENG

Michelle Law gives us this particular story of the Wong family with a window in to growing up Asian in Australian. For those who are not Asian, or migrants, this might seem like a ‘universal’ experience however it is important to note that whilst there may be similarities the experience is going to be different for everyone. The struggle that occurs trying to fit in, to find her own niche but still acknowledge her cultural heritage seems to sit within Zoe better than it does with Mei. Pearl on the other hand is proud of her Asian culture and has the maturity to recognise that she can do both, be Asian and be Australian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/feb/16/single-asian-female-review-no-topic-is-taboo-in-michelle-laws-impressive-debut>





## What next?

What do you know about Australia's migration policies? Why might a Chinese family migrate to Australia? What language can you think of to describe the experience of Chinese Australian immigrants?

Come up with positive, neutral and negative examples. Write down at least two examples of times when this theme or topic was presented in the play. How do the themes cross over into the many relationships that exist within the play?

The play explores the personal relationships between the Wong family women. How does this exploration draw attention to broader social concerns?

Have students create a list of values they believe Australians hold dear and try to uphold.

What examples can be drawn from *Single Asian Female*? Are there any characters that do or do not embody these 'Australian values'? Similarly, what values do Chinese people celebrate and aspire to?



## SCRIPT EXCERPT

That evening in the restaurant. Pearl's done a good job of packing up: most of the restaurant has been sorted into donate, sell and keep boxes. The restaurant is empty besides Mei, Katie and Lana's booth. It's obvious that their table was set for many more people – sets of untouched cutlery remain. Katie picks at a plate of fortune cookies on the table.

MEI: It's really crazy that they all got gastro on the same night. I knew those sandwiches at the tuckshop looked dodgy.

LANA: (Texting and laughing.) What?

MEI: I was saying I hope Nikki and Reese are feeling OK.

KATIE: And Yolanda and Jess.

LANA: Yeah, they're fine.

MEI: It's normally crazy busy. We're just closed because we're renovating. So you guys are special guests.

LANA: It's such a cute place.

MEI: Yeah, it's pretty retro. I told my mum we should keep it like this.

LANA: Really?

MEI: I mean ... we should obviously change some things.

Katie cracks open a fortune cookie and reads.

KATIE: (Sagely.) "Happiness is an inside job."

MEI: Ooh, that's a good one.

Mei cracks open a cookie and reads.

MEI: "Good news of a long-awaited event will soon arrive."

KATIE: Oh, your after formal party!

Mei and Katie wait to hear Lana's fortune. Lana doesn't move. Mei cracks open a cookie for Lana and reads her fortune for her.

MEI: "Your present plans are going to succeed." Nice!

LANA: (Bitterly.) Well that's total bullshit.

A long beat.



KATIE: So. Are you going anywhere for Christmas holidays, Lana?

LANA: My brother wants to go to New Zealand to visit our mum.

KATIE: Oh! That sounds like so much fun.

LANA: Sure.

KATIE: I love hanging with my mum. Last week she had the day off work so she called school and told them I was sick and we just stayed home and watched Miyazaki films the whole day.

LANA: What's Miyazaki?

KATIE: You haven't seen any Miyazaki! (Lana shakes her head.) Studio Ghibli? Totoro? Spirited Away? (Lana shakes her head again.) OK. Wow. Well, strap yourself in because your world is about to change —

MEI: Lana, have you tried deep fried ice cream?

LANA: No. Sounds weird. And I'm such a fat wreck, I need to lose about eight kilos before the formal.

KATIE: You are not fat, Lana!

LANA: You're lucky you're basically anorexic, Mei. Asians can eat anything and still look like stick insects.

KATIE: (Appalled.) Whoa. That's really offensive to two separate groups of people.

MEI: No it's fine. I know a lot of fat Asian people too. Anyway. You should try it!



KATHRYN ADAMS, JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN AND KRISTEN O'DWYER IN REHEARSAL: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.



ALLAN LYRA CHUNG AND JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN IN REHEARSAL: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

# INTERESTING READING

<https://www.broadsheet.com.au/adelaide/entertainment/article/why-michelle-laws-single-asian-female-pertinent-ever>

<https://omny.fm/shows/belvoir/single-asian-female-backstage>

<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/chinese-culture>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-14/pauline-hanson-maid-en-speech-asian-immigration/7645578>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-4vlecC1Lo>



KATHRYN ADAMS AND JUANITA NAVAS-NGUYEN IN REHEARSAL: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

SCRIPT EXCERPT:

MEI: She called me a gook.

KATIE: Oh.

MEI: And a fob.

KATIE: What's a fob?

MEI: Someone who's "fresh off the boat". (Shoving a soft toy into the garbage bag.) This has got to go.

KATIE: Mei, you're getting rid of Rilakkuma? I got him for your birthday.

MEI: Sorry. It's just part of the purge. Look at all the Asian stuff in this room! Lana was right: I didn't even realise how much of a fob I was.

KATIE: You're not a fob! You were born in Nambour. That's the most Aussie you can get. Kevin Rudd was born there and look what happened to him!

MEI: He learnt how to speak Mandarin?

KATIE: No, that's a bad example.

MEI: I didn't realise until today that there are no other Asians at school.

KATIE: What about Christopher?

MEI: I mean Asians that I'm not related to in some way. And no one ever pays Christopher out because he's basically white anyway. Remember on his first day he couldn't even talk properly because he'd lived in Hong Kong his whole life. "Hurro, Hurro". He just followed me around every day and sat next to me in class because he needed me to translate everything the teacher said. Now he ignores me and just hangs out with the rugby crew.

KATIE: What makes you a fob and Christopher not, though? I don't see the difference between him and you.

MEI: Racist much.

KATIE: I didn't mean it that way!

MEI: Well ... I eat Chinese food for lunch every day. No one else at school does that. Everything I own smells like mothballs. I play the violin. I'm so shortsighted I'm basically blind. And my nose can't even hold my glasses up properly. My name literally means 'rice' in Cantonese!

KATIE: I'd love to eat Chinese food for lunch every day.

MEI: I don't know why you're so obsessed with Asian culture, Katie. You should



be happy you're white. (Pulling clothes from the wardrobe and tossing them on the bed.) Blouse for Chinese school. String ensemble trousers. Jelly shoes. Dorae-mon facemask. Hello Kitty pajamas. Puffy vest. I just want to start over.

KATIE: Hey, these shoes are really cute. Such a great colour! You should wear them to the formal. And so comfortable! (Removing the shoes.) Oh, sorry! No shoes inside. I always forget.

MEI: Can you imagine what I've stepped in wearing those shoes? I wore them in Hong Kong at the Lady's Markets and in squat toilets. There could even be poo on them! Sorry, I'm overreacting. It's fine.

# FURTHER ACTIVITIES

## WRITTEN RESPONSE

What intertextual references are you able to identify in the production of *Single Asian Female*. How does the playwright present these?

Prepare a written review of the production, noting the writing, directing and design elements. What do you think the audience took away from the performance?

For guidelines on how to write a review, see our review writing resource linked in the dropdown menu for *Single Asian Female* at [statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program](http://statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program)

## DISCUSSION & WRITTEN ACTIVITY

As a class, discuss the different themes presented in the play. One theme presented is that of family. Do you have siblings? How does your relationship impact your identity? How do you view your relationship with your parents/ caregivers compared to with siblings?

Prepare an interaction that might highlight these relationships in a short scene, either a monologue or with more than one role. Present this scene to the class.

## ACTIVITY

What were the moments in the play that made you laugh? Discuss the naturalistic design of the set and how the acting contributed to those moments.

Recreate the scenes without the set and analyse whether this works and if not how could you make it work? What cultural references could you make to design a set? Discuss the difference between cultural appropriation and recognising and appreciating another culture.

What choices could you make to ensure that the element of different spaces and time periods is incorporated into your set? Noting you need a number of different spaces in which action occurs.



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