



**BELVOIR ST
THEATRE**

MISS PEONY

牡丹小姐

1 JULY - 29 JULY 2023

LEARNING RESOURCES



Belvoir presents

MISS PEONY

By **Michelle Law**

Directed by **Courtney Stewart**

This production of *Miss Peony* opens at Belvoir St Theatre on Wednesday 12 July 2023.

Set & Costume Designer **Jonathan Hindmarsh**

Assistant Set & Costume Designer **Keerthi Subramanyam**

Lighting Designer **Trent Suidgeest**

Composer **Dr Nicholas Ng**

Sound Designer **Julian Starr**

Associate Sound Designer **Zac Saric**

Choreographer **Kristina Chan**

Singing Teacher **Sheena Crouch**

Vocal Coach **Laura Farrell**

Vocal Coach **Amy Hume**

Additional Dramaturg **Polly Rowe**

Production Dramaturg **Carissa Licciardello**

Assistant Director **Nicole Pingon**

Translator (2023) **Samantha Kwan**

Subtitling & Mandarin Translator (2021) **Dr Jing Han**

Cantonese Translator (2021) **Sylvia Xu**

Community Engagement Coordinator **Ailsa Liu**

Community Engagement Coordinator **Jessica Kejun Xu**

Stage Manager **Gayda De Mesa**

Assistant Stage Manager **Ayah Tayeh**

Assistant Stage Manager **Wun Zee**

With

Gabrielle Chan Adeline/Por Por

Jing-Xuan Chan Marcy

Michelle Law Rehearsal-Lily

Deborah Faye Lee Marcy (alternate)

Mabel Li Sabrina

Jeffery Liu Zhen Hua (alternate)

Stephanie Jack Lily

Shirong Wu Joy

Charles Wu Zhen Hua

Supported by **Nelson Meers Foundation**

In Association with **Arts Centre Melbourne, QPAC** and **AsiaTOPA**

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which Belvoir St Theatre is built. We also pay respect to the Elders past, present and emerging, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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ABOUT BELVOIR

ONE BUILDING. SIX HUNDRED PEOPLE. THOUSANDS OF STORIES

When the Nimrod Theatre building in Belvoir Street, Surry Hills, was threatened with redevelopment in 1984, more than 600 people – ardent theatre lovers together with arts, entertainment and media professionals – formed a syndicate to buy the building and save this unique performance space in inner city Sydney.

Thirty years later, under Artistic Director Eamon Flack and Executive Director Aaron Beach, Belvoir engages Australia's most prominent and promising playwrights, directors, actors and designers to realise an annual season of work that is dynamic, challenging and visionary. As well as performing at home, Belvoir regularly takes to the road, touring both nationally and internationally.

BELVOIR EDUCATION

Our Education Program provides students and teachers with insights into the work of Belvoir and first hand experiences of the theatre-making process.

Belvoir Education offers student workshops, teacher professional development workshops, work experience, VET placements, archival viewings and a wealth of online resources designed to support work in the drama classroom. Our arts access programs assist schools in Regional NSW and Western Sydney to access the company's work.

Explore our education pages at belvoir.com.au/education



Charles Wu, Michelle Law (2021)

CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM



Michelle Law
Writer



Courtney Stewart
Director



Gabrielle Chan
Adeline



Jing-Xuan Chan
Marcy



Kristina Chan
Choreographer



Sheena Crouch
Singing Teacher



Gayda De Mesa
Stage Manager



Laura Farrell
Vocal Coach



Dr Jing Han
Subtitling & Mandarin Translator
(2021)



Jonathan Hindmarsh
Set & Costume Designer



Amy Hume
Vocal Coach (2021)



Stephanie Jack
Lily



Samantha Kwan
Translator (2023)



Michelle Law
Lily (Rehearsal)



Deborah Faye Lee
Marcy (Alternate)



Mabel Li
Sabrina



Carissa Licciardello
Production Dramaturg



Ailsa Liu
Community Engagement
Coordinator



Jeffrey Liu
Zhen Hua (Alternate)



Dr. Nicholas Ng
Composer



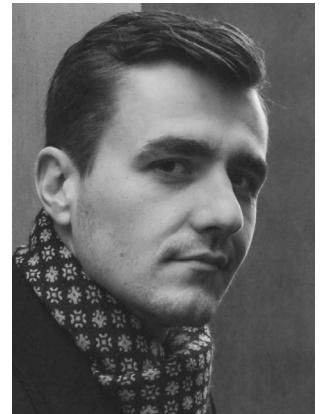
Nicole Pingon
Assistant Director



Polly Rowe
Additional Dramaturg



Zac Saric
Associate Sound Designer



Julian Starr
Sound Designer



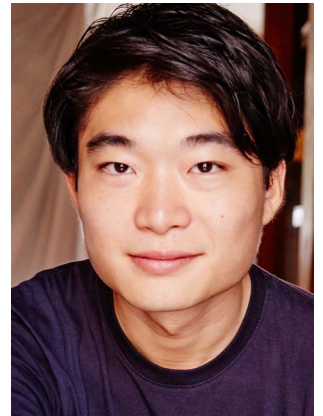
Keerthi Subramanyam
Assistant Set &
Costume Designer



Trent Suidgeest
Lighting Designer



Ayah Tayeh
Assistant Stage Manager



Charles Wu
Zhen Hua



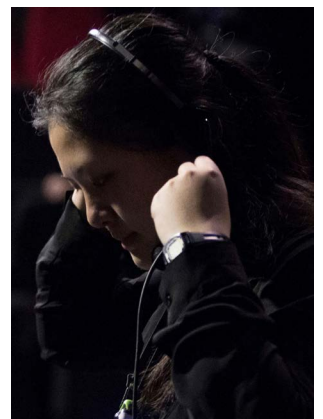
Shirong Wu
Joy



Jessica Kejun Xu
Community Engagement
Coordinator



Sylvia Xu
Cantonese Translator (2021)



Wun Zee
Assistant Stage Manager

WRITER'S NOTE

MICHELLE LAW

Miss Peony was written over the course of several years, but the concept for it was seeded more than two decades ago.

I was 11-years-old and visiting family in Hong Kong. My Kow Foo, Kum Moh, Biu Goh and I were watching the Miss Hong Kong pageant on TV, my jaw on the floor the entire time. Because I was born in, and had grown up in Australia, I'd never seen so many Asian women on screen before. It was incredible witnessing so many women who looked like me being celebrated for their appearance and connection to culture when I'd learnt to dislike these things about myself and assimilate in order to survive living in a western country.

One contestant stood out to me: a woman struggling to answer interview questions in Cantonese before ultimately giving up and speaking in English. She had an Australian accent.

I remember sitting straighter on the couch as I watched her. She sounded like an ABC (Australian Born Chinese) and a banana, just like me – yellow on the outside; white on the inside. She gave me hope that maybe there was finally a place in the world where I belonged. And then she was eliminated from the pageant.

Miss Peony is a story about the unique sense of displacement experienced by diasporic peoples and third culture kids. It's about the trauma of experiencing exclusion from all sides, and the ways in which we cope with the unspoken judgement and elitism from our own peoples when racial divides demand very narrowed definitions of cultural authenticity. It's also **an exploration of intercultural racism and lateral violence among Chinese nationalities**. We may be the world's largest ethnic group, but we are not a monolith. The same can be said for our languages.



Michelle Law, Courtney Stewart (2021)

Translating and surtitling this show has been one of the most exciting, political and challenging experiences of my creative practice to date. I could not be more grateful for our astounding translators Professor Jing Han, Sylvia Xu, and Samantha Kwan, who have spent countless hours massaging and troubleshooting this gargantuan task. I hope this script provides encouragement for more productions to decentralise English and the spoken word while making theatre more inclusive and accessible to historically excluded audiences.

A big thank you to the entire team at Belvoir for embracing *Miss Peony* and new Australian work; to our joyous and generous cast and crew; to Tracey Yu and Reiko Bui for their insights into the pageant universe; to the Asian Australian artists who took part in development workshops for *Miss Peony*; to Louise Gough, Polly Rowe and Carissa Licciardello for their dramaturgically brilliant brains; and finally

to director Courtney Stewart. Court, thank you for being there from the very beginning of everything, for being an enduring role model, and for continuing to be the most wonderful friend and collaborator. Thank 'your', sis.

This play is dedicated to my Ma Ma, Law Wong Ching Lan.

Michelle describes the play as "*an exploration of intercultural racism and lateral violence among Chinese nationalities*".

Before you watch the play consider this theme.

1. How might intercultural racism be depicted on stage without validating or affirming these beliefs?
2. How might this translate into a narrative?
3. What theatrical devices could you use to explore this theme? For example character, place and time. How?



Michelle Law (2021)

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

COURTNEY STEWART

PROGRAM

My deep and undying love for new Australian work began right around the time I met Michelle and went into the very first development for *Single Asian Female* - her first play, which had a season at Belvoir in 2018. It's so rewarding to continue this lovefest on *Miss Peony* together.

TEXT

We are experiencing an incredible era in the history of our industry where the hunger audiences have for new and diverse voices is being met with a wave of artists who are spearheading their own stories. Sometimes it takes a crisis to enact big and rapid change. The pandemic has forced us all to challenge what constitutes 'business as usual' - and *Miss Peony* is what it looks like.

DESIGN

Miss Peony is a tale that transports us to a world where the afterworld intertwines with reality, where past ideals dance with the present, and where the power of resilience and self-discovery shines brightly. This larger-than-life story, penned by the trail-blazing Michelle Law, celebrates the rich tapestry of Chinese culture, while exploring themes that resonate universally—love, family, and the pursuit of one's truest self. Ultimately this story is a love letter to Chinese women all over the world. We are enough. Just as we are. As Adeline says to Lily, "you were always enough. I believe you can win just as you are." We are ALL worth something.

My hope is that this work makes space for you

to laugh, that it inspires conversations, provokes reflection, and reminds us all of the power of unity and understanding. May it remind us to embrace our differences, celebrate our shared humanity, and strive for a world where the vibrant stories of all cultures and communities can find a home on our stages.

I couldn't be more grateful for my collaborators. Thank you to Nicole (Assistant Director) and Gayda (Stage Manager), for your incredible insight and leadership. Kristina (Choreographer), Jonathan (Set/Costume Designer), Julian (Sound Designer), Nick (Composer) and Trent (Lighting Designer) for your passion, sharp dramaturgical eyes and glorious designer instincts. To Keerthi, Zac, and Ayah thank you for being legends and helping us realise this show. To Wun (Assistant Stage Manager) for binding us all together. Sam, Jing, and Sylvia for leading the translation task - your generosity and love for the work is beyond appreciated. Michelle, Gabby, Jing-Xuan, Mabel, Charles and Shirong - the virtuosic cast - your talents are unparalleled. To Polly, Carissa, Laura, Amy, Sheena thank you for all the additional support and guidance. To the entire Belvoir team for supporting the show every step of the way. And last but not least, again to my dear Michelle. Sis, thank you for this gift of a show. I don't think I've been in a happier room. The industry is lucky to have you. Thank you for fighting for us and our stories. It is an absolute privilege making work with you xxx

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Courtney Stewart (2021)



Kristina Chan, Courtney Stewart, Nicole Pingon (2021)



Nicole Pingon, Courtney Stewart (2023)



Zac Saric, Michelle Law, Charles Wu, Courtney Stewart (2023)

CHARACTERS

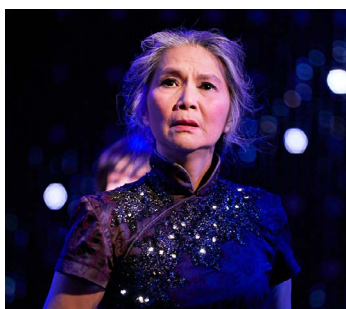
WHO'S WHO IN MISS PEONY

PROGRAM



LILY 26-years-old. An assimilated, Australian born Chinese woman who rejects the traditional Chinese values with which she was raised. Spiritually lost and searching for acceptance.

TEXT



ADELINE Deceased. Lily's Por Por (maternal grandmother) who appears as a ghost. Once a Hong Kong beauty queen, and then a prominent member of the Sydney Chinese community.

DESIGN



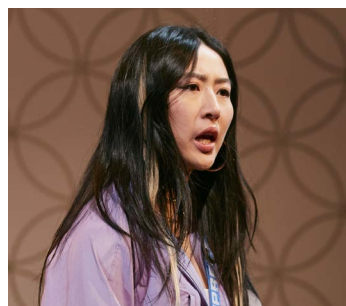
MARCY 25-years-old. A first-generation migrant from mainland China and contestant in Miss Peony. Passionate about her family business and single-minded in her pursuit of success.

PRODUCTION



JOY 23-years-old. A Taiwanese international student and contestant in Miss Peony. Fiercely intellectual and a loveable oddball. Romantic, and seeking connection in a foreign land.

MEDIA



SABRINA 18-years-old. An Australian born Chinese LG - Little Girl - from Western Sydney and a contestant in *Miss Peony*. Grew up idolising Miss Peony winners and is pageant obsessed.



ZHEN HUA 28-years-old. An Australian born Chinese man who hosts and produces Miss Peony. Cares deeply about his community and works hard to protect it.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Miss Peony is set in Sydney, Australia in the present day and takes place over several weeks during a highly competitive Chinese community beauty pageant called: 'Miss Peony'.

The production uses magical realism, with the action of the play taking place in the 'real world', but with supernatural elements. The action of the play takes place in both the 'real world' where the audience observes the narrative and performative sequences where the audience assumes the role of the pageant audience. This creates a world where the characters behave in both observed and private spaces.

Locations within the play include a hospice room, a casino conference hall, a hotel room, a hot pot restaurant and a backstage green room.

The play explores themes of community, culture, and lateral racism. The play offers to representations for some of the diversity of the Chinese-Australian diaspora, and what it means to be accepted in that community. Colloquial English is used by some characters to identify themselves or others such as 'ABC' short for Australian Born Chinese, or a first-generation Chinese-Australian. Other times derogatory colloquialisms such as 'fob.' (fresh off boat) or 'Banana' expose hierarchy of acceptance within the community.

This dialogue is performed in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Surtitles are used in simplified and traditional Chinese and English, played concurrently. Michelle Law decided to write this play in three languages after her grandmother watched her first play *Single Asian Female* (2017) couldn't understand the dialogue. "I always wanted the next play to be something that a lot of people could understand, especially people from the Chinese community if they can't speak English."- Michelle Law

[READ MORE ABOUT SURTITLES](#)



Mabel Li, Jing-Xuan Chan, Charles Wu, Shirong Wu, Michelle Law,

CHARACTER PROGRESSION

READ THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT

PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA

This activity is best completed once you have read or seen the production.
When reading the excerpt consider the following questions:

1. Describe the status of each character. What in the script gives you this information? Does their status change throughout the play? How so?
2. How does this scene demonstrate the characters journey from the start of the play. How has Lily's perspective shifted from the start of the play? What new information do we learn about Marcy in this scene?
3. How does the relationship between the characters suggest a perspective shift for each character?
4. What does this scene convey to the audience about the cultural complexities of being Chinese-Australian?
5. How is language used to convey the intended meanings of the play?

Content warning: The following scene refers to an instance of sexual harrassment.

SCENE 11

A HOTPOT RESTAURANT.

Later that evening. The women sit in silence, solemn. LILY stirs the hotpot and serves everyone, trying to lighten the mood.

LILY: More fish?

MARCY: (To Joy) Don't worry about Zhen Hua. He's a fool.
[in Mandarin] 你別再想着振華了，他就是個傻逼。

JOY: I'm ashamed to say this, but I was scared.
[in Mandarin] 說出來太羞耻了，但是我當時很害怕。

MARCY: It WAS scary!
[in Mandarin] 這事是很可怕！

JOY: I never scared of Ken Lam. I scare of myself because I felt like I have enough rage to hurt him. Maybe even kill him. All of my anger towards men almost spill over, cause a mess. Does that make me evil?

LILY: Evil? It makes you relatable!

JOY: Do you know what I did when he pulled out his dick? I sighed, because I am so used to that kind of behaviour from men. And then I was angry because I shouldn't have to be used to it. Sometimes I just want to get a boyfriend so other men will finally leave me alone. If I belong to another man, at least they will respect his 'property'.

[in Mandarin] 你知道他把小弟弟拿出来时我做了甚么吗？我叹了口气，因为我已经对男人这样的行为习以为常。然后我就生我自己的气，因为我不应该习惯它。有时候我想交男朋友也只是为了让其他男人放过我。如果我属于另一个男人，至少他们会尊重他的「财产」。

SABRINA: Oh Joy. You don't believe that.

LILY: What'd she say?

SABRINA: She wants a beard, but even that won't stop guys from being gross scumbags.

MARCY: She's right. Society teaches men to hate women from a young age. Even the so-called 'nice guys' may feel emasculated if you're more intelligent than them or earn a higher salary.

[in Mandarin] 她说的对。社会教导男人从小厌女。如果你比他们更聪明、收入更高，即使是所谓的「好男人」都会觉得被精神阉割。

LILY: I had one customer at work in a 'The Future is Female' shirt kiss me on a New Year's shift, tongue and everything. It wasn't even the kiss that disturbed me. It was his attitude. The sense of entitlement.

SABRINA: Once I had a guy peeping tom me in the Market City Timezone toilets and I called the police but it took them ages – ACAB – so the guy got away and it never got resolved. In the end I was so freaked out I had to stop going to Timezone and give my VIP membership card to my nephew. He used all my points on a Sonic backpack. It was terrible. So it's understandable why you're so angry, Joy.

JOY: Maybe I brought this upon myself. I'm an academic in gender studies taking part in a beauty pageant! What am I doing? I should quit.

[in Mandarin] 可能是我自己拿来的。我堂堂一名性别研究学者，居然来参加选美比赛！我到底在干甚么？我应该退赛。

SABRINA: Don't quit, Joy!

LILY: Miss Peony needs women like you, Joy! You're inspiring. You're all inspiring. Forget about Zhen Hua and – and have some more quail eggs instead!

JOY: Thank you, Lily. For your words, and for your eggs.

MARCY: We're 'inspiring' are we? I thought you'd rather be dead than be like us.

LILY: I'm sorry. I can't believe I said that.

SABRINA: I'm sorry too, guys. I promised myself I wouldn't be bitchy and competitive when I entered because that's not who I am. I'm just heaps passionate because the women in Miss Peony were my heroes growing up. They were the first people I saw on TV who looked like me and were winning at life instead of, you know, being investigated on *A Current Affair* and stuff. I entered because I was like, whoa, it'd be awesome to be that person for someone else one day. Be a role model for other ABCs out there. And on an international stage in Beijing! Getting to meet all the other Miss Peony winners from around the world.

JOY: Very good, Sabrina. On hard days like this, good to remind myself why I enter Miss Peony: to find a loving partner.

MARCY spits out her tea.

JOY: So many beautiful women competing and watching – better than dating app. Maybe I can find best friend. Then hopefully fall in love. I can't have that at home. Even though Taiwan make gay people legal, still my parents no accept. Still punishing me.

MARCY: I have the opposite problem. My parents gave me everything and now it's my turn to repay them. My brother ran our company into the ground. I'm the one with the business smarts but he has too much pride to let me take over. I entered Miss Peony to save Ausway; we need the prize money. If sales don't improve, we will lose all eight locations across New South Wales and have to file for bankruptcy. Please don't tell anyone.

SABRINA: Oh Marcy, I'm so sorry! My parents love buying bulk paw paw ointment from Ausway! Why did you enter, Lily?

LILY: I entered for my grandmother. And once the pageant is finished, I'll move to London.

JOY: Why you go to England? You want to be colonise again?

LILY: I guess the destination never mattered. I'm more drawn to the idea of starting anew.

MARCY: Trust me as a business owner when I say that starting anew can be overrated. Sometimes it's more worthwhile to focus on fixing what you already have.

JOY: Excuse me. I have to go wee wee.

JOY exits.

LILY: I haven't eaten hot pot since I was a kid. This has been really nice.

SABRINA: Hot pot is the best! But make sure you always go with your Chinese friends cause whenever I go with whites they're like, 'So you have to cook your own food?' It's so frustrating. I just want to drink my watermelon juice in peace.

LILY: I don't have many white friends. Or Chinese friends for that matter. I've always kind of been alone.

SABRINA: Oh Lily, that's so sad.

LILY: You don't have to feel sorry for me! I'm always busy with work. And I like to read. I just finished reading Jane Eyre.

SABRINA: That whole book is about lonely women.

LILY: Is it?

SABRINA: Here! Have some more juice! (Filling everyone's cups.) We should toast to – to making friends! And to making the top 12 and persisting despite all the shit that went down. I can't believe Miss Peony ends tomorrow night.

They raise their glasses.

LILY: Wait. Where did Joy go?

SABRINA: To the toilet. Good on her. Exposure therapy.

MARCY: No, she did not go to the toilet. She went to pay!

JOY returns to the table and smugly takes a seat.

MARCY: Are you serious right now!

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End of excerpt - Scene 11 continues in the full script.



Jing Xuan Chan, Shirong Wu, Mabel Li, Michelle Law

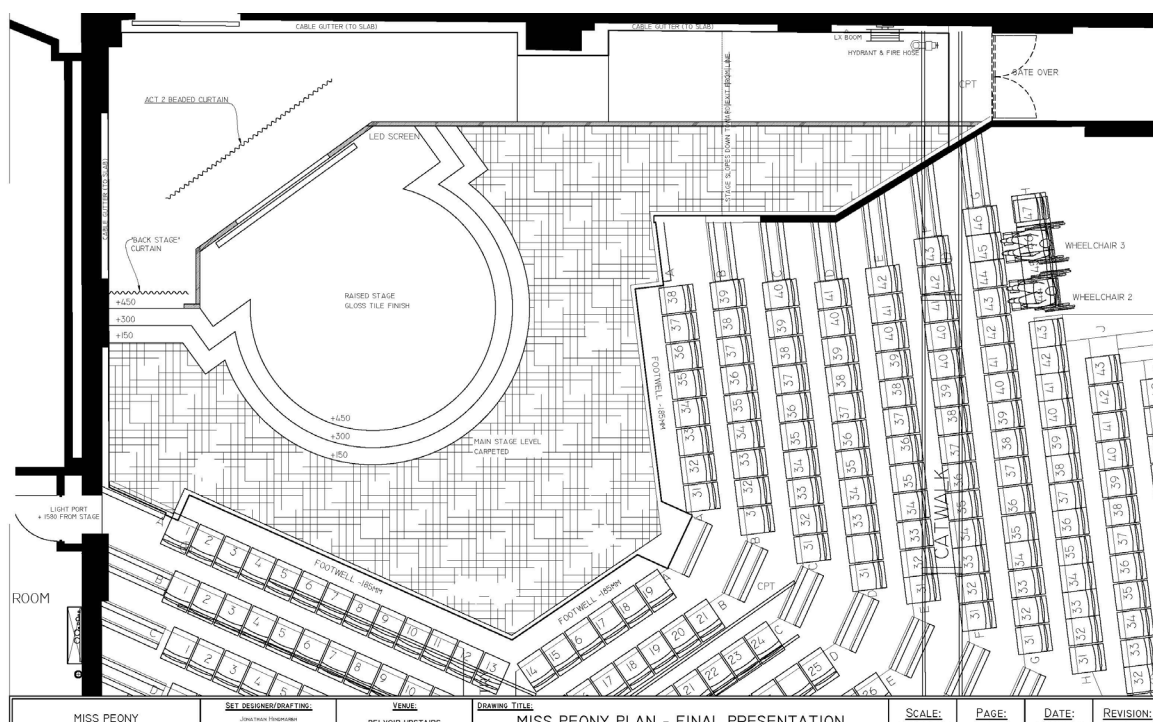
PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

The elements of production are the technical and visual elements used to manipulate the elements of drama in order to effectively tell a play's story.

In these notes we are going to look at the *Miss Peony* design concepts including:

1. the set model box and
2. costume reference images.

SET DESIGN



Theatre plan for *Miss Peony*, top-down view Jonathan Hindmarsh



Set Model Box, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

THE REHEARSAL ROOM



Mark-up of the set design in the rehearsal room (2021)

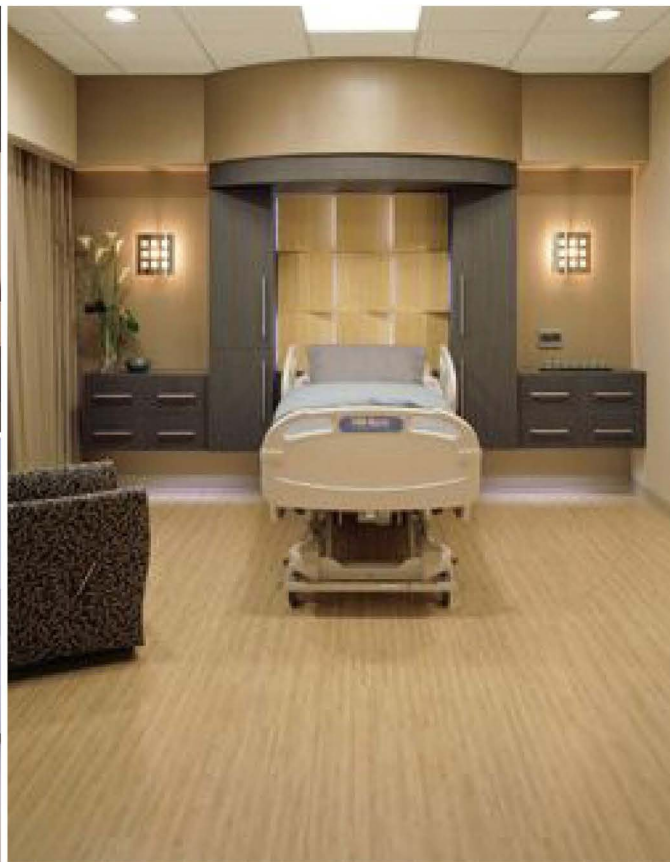


Rehearsal set in the rehearsal room (2023)

REFERENCE IMAGES

Reference images are used by designers to communicate aesthetic concepts with the director or to the cast. These might communicate a moment in the play, or an overall texture or style.

A HOSPICE ROOM



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

THE CASINO CONFERENCE HALL



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

SET REALISATION



Set Design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



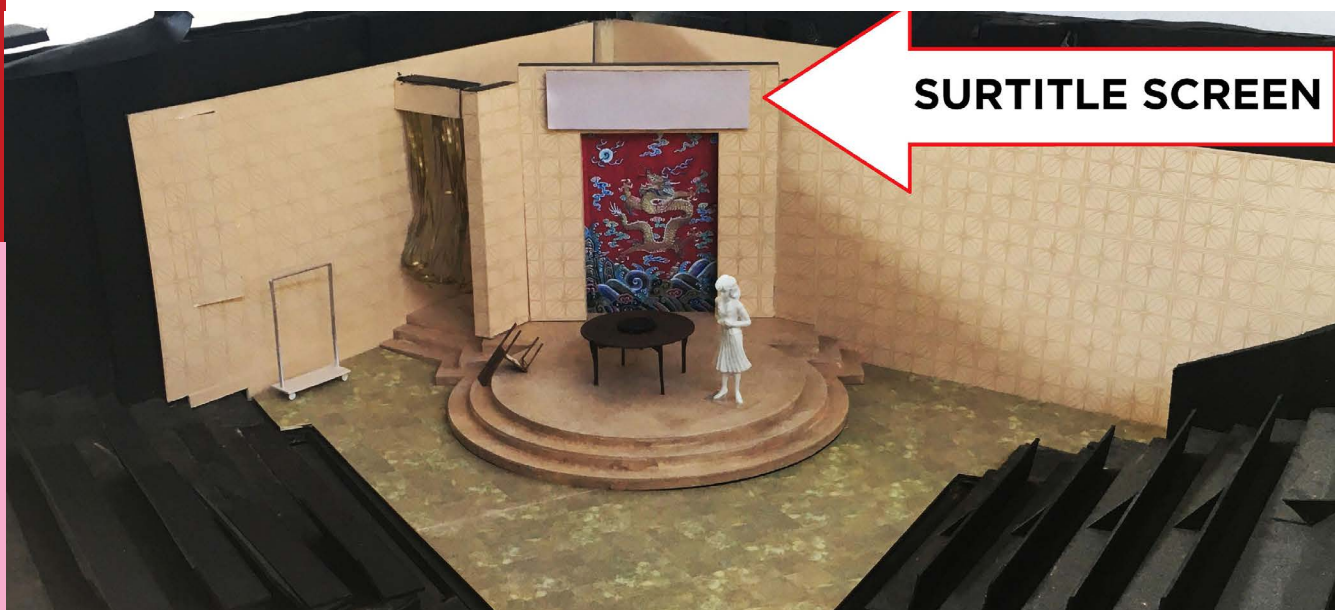
Set Design by Jonathan Hindmarsh

INCORPORATING SURTITLES

This script is performed in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Surtitles are shown for audiences that don't speak each of these languages, played concurrently in simplified and traditional Chinese and English.

What are surtitles? Surtitles are translated lyrics and dialogue that are displayed above a stage. The word 'surtitles' is derived from French: "sur" meaning over or on and English word title, as used in 'subtitle' (used in screen translations). The designer of Miss Peony, Jonathan Hindmarsh, and the director, Courtney Stewart, needed to consider these into the design of the production.

Each language is played throughout the play, whether the dialogue is spoken in English, Cantonese or Mandarin at any given time. This allows the performance to be accessible.



Model Box of Miss Peony by Jonathan Hindmarsh



Michelle Law, Gabrielle Chan, Set Design by Jonathan Hindmarsh

FINAL DESIGN



Model Box of Miss Peony by Jonathan Hindmarsh



The set of Miss Peony by Jonathan Hindmarsh

Questions to consider after seeing this production

1. What are the key differences between the early model box design & the final set design?
2. Why might this change have taken place?
3. How many different locations were represented in the production?
4. How are set pieces used to change the space? What impact does this have?
5. How has the designer used stage space, texture, colour and composition to enhance dramatic meaning?
6. How did the inclusion of surtitles into the set contribute to the overall design of the show? Why?

COSTUME DESIGN

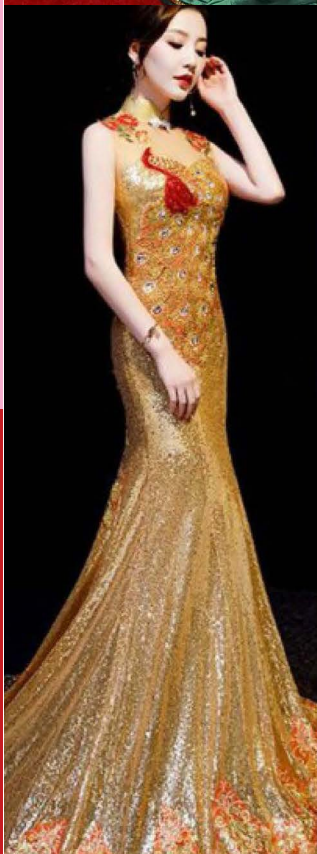
PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

Take a look at the following costume reference images collected by designer, Jonathan Hindmarsh. For each character, consider the following:

1. How would you describe this character based on the costume references?
2. What characteristics do you think this character has based on the aesthetic presented?
3. What do you assume about this character and their status based on the costume references?

THE PAGEANT



Costume Design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



Costume Design by Jonathan Hindmarsh

LILY



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

ADELINE



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

LILY



Michelle Law, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh

ADELINE



Gabrielle Chan, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh

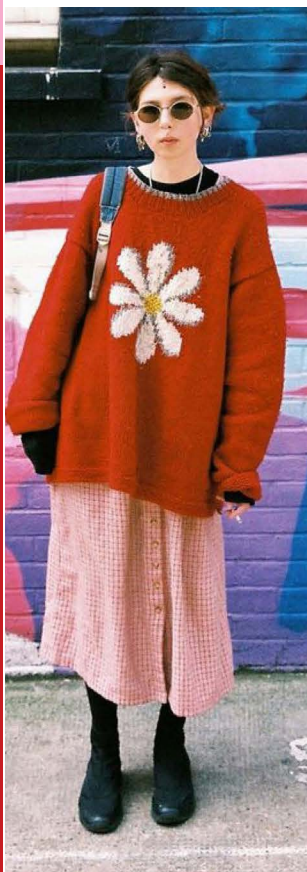
MARCY



marcy

Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

JOY



joy

Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

MARCY



Jing-Xuan Chan, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



JOY



Shirong Wu, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



SABRINA



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

ZHEN HUA



Reference images, character lookbook, by Jonathan Hindmarsh

SABRINA



Mabel Li, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



ZHEN HUA



Charles Wu, Costume design by Jonathan Hindmarsh



REHEARSING MISS PEONY

PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Michelle Law, Mabel Li

1. What do you think is happening in this scene? Give reasons for your answer
2. What evidence is there that this is a rehearsal?



Jing-Xuan Chan Shirong Wu, Mabel Li, Michelle Law, Nicole Pingon

1. Describe what you see in the photo above
2. What do you think is happening? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What in this picture gives you a clue that this is a rehearsal and not a performance?



Shirong Wu, Gabrielle Chan, Mabel Li

1. Describe what you see in the photo above.
2. What do you think is happening in this moment?
3. What do you think the relationship is between these characters? Give reasons for your answer



Charles Wu, Michelle Law

1. Describe what you see in the picture above.
2. What do you think is happening in this moment? Give reasons for your answers

POST SHOW DISCUSSION

PROGRAM

TEXT

DESIGN

PRODUCTION

MEDIA



Michelle Law, Gabrielle Chan

How does the play explore themes of ancestry and family?



Jing-Xuan Chan, Mabel Li, Michelle Law

**How would you describe the relationships between the characters in this play?
How does the juxtaposition of the characters reveal ideas of the play?**



Shirong Wu, Michelle Law, Mabel Li, Jing-Xuan Chan

How does the play explore themes of culture, class, wealth, power and love?



Jing-Xuan Chan, Mabel Li, Shirong Wu, Michelle Law

**How did the production use magical realism to tell the story?
How did the use of this genre help to tell Lily and Adeline's story?**

What moment in the play had the most impact on you and why?



Shirong Wu, Mabel Li, Jing-Xuan Chan

WATCH & LISTEN



Interview with Writer & Actor Michelle Law
Recorded at Belvoir's 2023 Season Launch, writer and actor Michelle Law introduces *Miss Peony*, the sixth show in the 2023 season.

WATCH NOW



Playwright Michelle Law's latest work explores experiences of the modern Chinese woman ABC News

Posted Tue 4 Jul 2023 at 12:15pm

Through the lens of beauty pageants, *Miss Peony* endeavours to examine what it is to be a modern woman with Chinese heritage. The piece is the first time a trilingual show will be performed in Sydney.

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Inclusivity for both the artists and audiences. feat. Mabel Li & Shirong Wu

Asian B**ches Down Under Podcast, with Helen Stenbeck

Li and Wu speak about the importance of having diversity in the creativity in the theatre production and offering comfortable space to welcome audiences from diverse backgrounds.

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Social Media | *Miss Peony*

Lots of sneak-peek content, and promotional information can be found on social media.

Take a look at the grid and the stories for more content during the run.





Michelle Law, Charles Wu

ARTICLES

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- Being Asian Australian, by Erin Wen Ai Chew

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-Sydney Morning Herald, 28 June 2023

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Take a look at the interview with Charles Wu for Being Asian Australian and the article with Michelle Law for The Age (pg 39).

In these articles the artists are asked questions about their cultural identity and the intersection of this to their work in the arts.

Law says "I feel like the conversation shifted into something about internal racism and gatekeeping within culture and rejection within culture."

1. What does Michelle Law mean here by 'internal racism'?
2. Do you feel this is reflected in other subcultures within Australia?
3. How did this play out within the story?
4. What other moments did you find powerful and possibly confronting? Why?

ARTS

That's the beauty of theatre

This multilingual work examines society and our prejudices, writes Hannah Story.

Michelle Law was 11 when she decided to enter a shopping centre beauty pageant in her home town on the Sunshine Coast.

"I think I was searching for a level of acceptance because I did really want to be acknowledged as beautiful or acknowledged as acceptable where I was growing up," she says. "To an extent, I still feel that, and I think most women feel that."

Law, a Chinese Australian, was one of only two non-white people to enter the contest. She was scared to enter the competition on her own, so she dragged along a friend who was also Chinese.

Law was awarded the title of Best Personality, which she puts down to her final pose, pointing at the judges with her hands clasped in the shape of a gun, *Charlie's Angels*-style.

"That's a really nice compliment, but not the type of thing you want when you're competing in a beauty pageant," she says.

Her friend managed to do better than her, and wound up coming third. "I remember being really salty about it," she laughs.

All this gives Law material for her new play, *Miss Peony*, set in a Chinese community beauty pageant. It finally opens at Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre next month, having been COVID-cancelled in both 2020 and 2021. It will then tour Melbourne, Canberra, Wollongong and Geelong.

Directed by La Boite artistic director Courtney Stewart, *Miss Peony* follows Lily as she is badgered into entering the pageant by her grandmother's ghost. Playwright Law also stars as Lily, in her first acting role since she performed in a remount of her debut play, *Single Asian Female*, in 2019.

Law explains: "It's a family comedy about a young woman trying to save her grandmother's soul at any cost, and going against her own values and beliefs about culture and womanhood."

It is written in three languages: English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Audiences will be able to follow along with subtitles in English, Simplified and Traditional Chinese.

Law decided to write a multilingual play after her own grandmother came to see *Single Asian Female* but couldn't understand it.

"That was really heartbreaking for me and her," she says. "I always wanted the next play to be something that a lot of people could understand, especially people from the Chinese community if they can't speak English."

In the years since the play was originally scheduled, *Miss Peony* has continued to evolve, in line with changing conversations in wider



Michelle Law, Shirong Wu and Mabel Li in rehearsals for *Miss Peony*. Photos: Sherry Zheng, Nick Moir

culture. Law points to the waves of anti-Asian sentiment that surfaced during the pandemic, at the same time as movies by second-generation migrants about their relationships with their elders, including *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and *Turning Red*, were critically lauded.

"I feel like the conversation has shifted to something about internal racism and gatekeeping within culture and rejection within culture," says Law. "And how when you are a third-culture kid [children raised in a culture other than their parents'], you are receiving rejection from both sides."

She recalls watching the Miss Hong Kong Pageant while visiting her extended family in Hong Kong when she was 11. One of the finalists had an Australian accent and didn't speak Cantonese very well.

Law says: "I remember being like, 'Oh my god, there's someone just like me on TV.'"

But the contestant was eliminated after she answered a question in English.

"[I thought] she's being punished for not fitting into the box of what it means to be a Hong Kong Chinese woman, but I've never seen anyone like her in the Australian media, let alone an Australian beauty pageant. 'If she's someone like me



'If she's someone like me ... would I ever be considered beautiful in either culture because I don't quite fit into either of them?'

Michelle Law, actor and playwright

... would I ever be considered beautiful in either culture because I don't quite fit into either of them?" *Miss Peony* is grounded in Lily's-

and Law's - search for self-acceptance. It's a subject Law has thought about a lot, as a woman who has lived with alopecia since she was 13. "I've gotten to a place in my life where I feel quite comfortable in myself, for the most part," says Law. "Having alopecia be quite a formative experience for me really accelerated that process because I didn't have a choice but to accept it or just despair."

"You have to unpick: if I am feeling insecure, why am I feeling insecure? Who's making me feel insecure? And really start to question beauty ideals and sexist systems that exist that make a profit from making you feel that way."

At the same time as the play explores ideas around beauty, it also asks: "What does it actually mean to be Chinese?"

Law started thinking more about that question while she was doing press for her body-swap comedy, *Top Coat*, which premiered at Sydney Theatre Company in 2022.

She recalls doing a radio interview where the Cantonese-speaking hosts first asked her if she could do the interview in Cantonese, and then questioned: "What gives you the right to tell stories about Chinese people?"

"I was really affronted by it," she

says. "And I was like, 'Oh, because I am Chinese.'"

"In this play, because it's a pageant about Chinese-ness, I was like, what does that actually mean? What I consider Chinese, maybe someone who's a more recent arrival, who is very much enmeshed within the Chinese community in Australia, wouldn't see me as necessarily Chinese because I am very Westernised and I was born and grew up here."

When she was writing the play, Law enlisted a family friend to be a "mole" in the Miss Australia Chinese Pageant in Sydney. At 28, the playwright was too old to enter herself. While she didn't make it into the top 20, her mole befriended another woman who remained in the contest and went on to share her experiences with Law.

"I interviewed her," says Law. "I had questions like, 'What happened?' 'What were the women like?' 'What were you wearing?' 'What did you eat when you were doing the pageant?' That was invaluable."

Law has been fascinated by the idea of a Chinese Australian beauty pageant since she first came across it in 2018.

"I wondered why it needs to be separate from, say Miss Australia. I wondered what are the specific criteria for that pageant versus something that is more mainstream. And why are people choosing to enter that pageant versus something like Miss Australia?"

"It made me think, obviously, they don't feel like they have a place there, so they're going here."

Pageants like Miss Australia Chinese have long been popular in Australia's migrant communities. Law muses on why that might be the case.

"It's a way for them to preserve their culture and their community in a way that feels really proud and that prolongs a legacy of what it means to be whatever migrant community you come from, especially for older generations," she explains.

She thinks that goes some way towards explaining the actions of Lily's late grandmother.

Adeline, the grandmother in *Miss Peony*, she sees Miss Peony as part of her legacy because she helped found it.

Even as migrant beauty pageants retain their popularity, contests like Miss Universe Australia have been improving when it comes to representing Australia's diversity - three of the five most recent winners of the contest have been women of colour.

While that shows some improvement in terms of representation, Law says there is more to be done.

"If you were watching a show that purports to represent the average Australian, I think you'd still find representations of yourself few and far between and representations of what beauty means in Australia to be few and far between."

Miss Peony will be at the Arts Centre from August 2 to 20

IMAGE: AET

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PRODUCTION

MEDIA