

## The Guardian: Single Asian Female – no topic is taboo in Michelle Law’s impressive debut

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Emily Burton, Courtney Stewart and Emily Vascotto in *Single Asian Female*. Photograph: Dylan Evans

The family Michelle Law has created in her debut play, *Single Asian Female*, is my family. Not just because they, too, are a family of Wongs, and not because they are Asian. The family Law has created could be any Australian family. This one just happens to be Asian.

Produced by La Boite and showing at Brisbane’s Roundhouse theatre, *Single Asian Female* follows a family of Asian women as they navigate the intricacies of race and racial stereotypes in the predominantly white community of Nambour on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast.

The show opens in a Chinese restaurant, complete with chopsticks, lanterns, *chao fan* (fried rice), an upstairs bedroom and Pearl (Hsiao-Liang Tang), who has just finalised her divorce but still bears the responsibilities associated with her ex-husband’s business dealings, delivering a table-top karaoke rendition of *I Will Survive*.

Her daughters Zoe (Alex Lee) and Mei (Courtney Stewart), 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 the red-haired, image-obsessed Lana (Emily Vascotto) – 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, including Hello Kitty pyjama pants, a pink puffy jacket, jelly shoes and a comically large Doraemon head mask. Her best friend, Katie

(Emily Burton), 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.



At a crossroads: Hsiao-Liang Tang as Pearl. Photograph: Dylan Evans

But such tokenism doesn't just disappear after graduating from high school – it follows people into their adult lives as well, and Law's script deftly and humorously examines the different ways in which objectification manifests for Asian-Australian women. We are taken through a slew of Zoe's cringeworthy dates, and there is a subversive kind of joy in watching the Anglo actors, Vascotto and Burton, play these characters – a way of literally talking back to the racialised misogyny faced by many, if not all, women of colour who are actively dating, and turning the notion that "all Asians look the same" on its head. The final date, with Paul (Patrick Jhanur – the only male member of the cast), an immigration lawyer, is no less awkward, but the joy of Law's characters is that they are approachable – partly because they are all unapologetically flawed but still willing to learn.

Law interrogates the basis of many Chinese (and broader Asian) stereotypes, but does not cheapen them by constantly using them as the butt of jokes. Yes, Pearl runs a Chinese restaurant, and both Zoe and Mei play the violin, but Law's writing forces the audience to view them as three-dimensional characters – as more than just representations of ingrained racial stereotypes. Racial slurs and prejudices are sprinkled throughout the play but not treated lightly. Every "gook", "chink", or "where are you *really* from?" has its place and purpose. There is also an acknowledgement that everyone has their prejudices – and that Asians, too, can be racist.

The play is packed with social commentary but manages to avoid feeling contrived. It tackles the blase way in which white people use "political correctness" to hit back at accusations of racism or sexism, for example, and even manages to sneak in a reference to Pauline Hanson. There is a frank discussion between Zoe and Paul about the confusing terminology around first-, second- and or even third-generation immigrants. Zoe has anxiety, has seen psychiatrists for her mental health, and has taken medication to manage her condition. Law does not shy away from discussing the impacts of domestic violence in a marriage, which is swept under the rug in many Asian families on the basis of saving face.



The play is funny, touching and at times profoundly moving. Photograph: Dylan Evans

Most importantly, it is refreshing to see female Asian characters discuss sexuality so openly on stage – complete with views about abortion and promiscuity. It is a subject that is often taboo in 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.

It is clear that Law has carefully considered the nuances of her work – no reference or prop is insignificant. A rainbow slinky symbolises a mother's love, a Missy Higgins shirt a throwback to the previous decade. Mei's favourite novel is *Jane Eyre*, a story about a young woman who feels out of place in a world that is supposed to be offering her all manner of opportunities. In one scene, the song *Yue Liang Dai Biao We De Xin* (loosely translated: my heart is like the moon) plays in the background while Pearl talks of the love she has for her children.

*Single Asian Female* is not just a play about being Asian, single, female or any combination of the three. It is a play about family, about culture, and about the ways in which we treat people who seem different from what we consider to be "normal". It is funny, touching and at times profoundly moving. It forces the audience to consider their relationships with their own cultures, as well as those that may be foreign to them. The play is a gift to young women of colour, an extraordinary opportunity for them to see their faces reflected on stage – and I hope it will push those who have been estranged from their culture to find their equivalent of a Doraemon head mask and a pair of Hello Kitty pyjamas.

• *Single Asian Female* is at the Roundhouse Theatre in Brisbane until 4 March