BENNY CHIA

LIFE ON THE FRINGE

THE ~~NAKED~~ almost MEMOIR

mccmcreations

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PRELUDE

I ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD to conversations with Benny Chia at the Fringe Club. Often, I would deliberately walk up the steep hill instead of taking a cab, because it allowed me time to leave the hectic workaholic pace of Central behind to prepare me for what was always a meeting of minds, creativity, and ideas as well as little anecdotes on life and personal discoveries.

The best days were those spent on the balcony of Colette's over lunch or tea, our backs to the humdrum, our faces to the quieter hills, sun streaming between buildings, and trees above us. The past and present stood still, as we entered our chat like two travellers walking in the same direction, believing in hope and possibility, and comparing notes on the paths we chose in the arts world that led to these intermittent intersections and encounters.

When Benny asked me to read this manuscript, I was at once perplexed and curious, given that in the grander scheme of the arts world in Hong Kong and internationally, his experience and expertise was substantial, whereas my role has been minute. I felt there were many other more suitable candidates for the task. I felt this was something close to his heart, and my stepping up was an act of faith in our friendship, not knowing if this would place it on unsettled ground. You see, his request also came at a time that the Fringe Club, Benny's creation and lifeblood, had reached the end of an era.

Would a memoir be a tell all? Would it be a hard read, a slog along the debate-worn road on the struggle of the arts and missed opportunities? What tone or viewpoint would Benny take? What

would I say if I didn't quite take to it, given that we have always spoken quite candidly in our discussions?

As soon as I read through the first few pages, I smiled. I entered the moment that was so familiar, for Benny writes with honesty, hope, and humour.

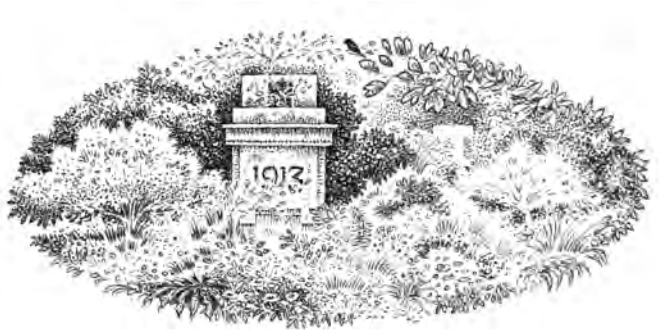
We journey with Benny through his childhood in a cramped flat with no artwork or music, yet through his curiosity, he discovers a love for stories, books, and comics. Accompanying his mother to the cinema, he comes under the spell of movies and musicals – they offer escape to a world of story and possibility beyond the confines of his surroundings. At school, Benny discovers music and eventually an appetite for travel and adventure that draws him into a life in the arts. Benny's creative search for meaning, as expressed in the many facets and modes of the arts, has taken him to all corners of the world – to meet, learn from, and to work together with artists from all walks of life.

This is the Benny I know, who like the Fringe Club and its stories, stands like a welcoming beacon on a city hill – representing the creativity, resilience and commitment of Hong Kong over the past 40 years, and creating and facilitating artistic encounters that do not always fit convention, only because he's quietly one step ahead, waiting for us to catch up.

Marissa Fung-Shaw

Mrs. Fung-Shaw is a former Trustee, Asian Cultural Council and Member, member of M+ Board of Directors, and Co-Chair of The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection

PROLOGUE



A CHANCE CONVERSATION in an elevator changed the direction of my life. It was a summer morning forty-four years ago when I stepped into that lift. About two minutes later, I had an offer for a job at the Hong Kong Arts Centre that would take me on a magical journey, meeting a host of good people who would rescue me in cliffhanging moments, friends who would show me a way forward, and artists who taught me to live by my ideals even when the going gets tough.

Over the decades, I have witnessed – and played a part in – our city's sea changes from a cultural desert into a fertile art habitat. I wanted to put all that in writing. The idea came to me when I was waiting for a long night to pass. I had found myself keeping watch on the bedroom ceiling and listening for the sounds of the early morning traffic to return. I wanted Hong Kong to return as I'd known it. I never knew life could be like this, waking up to the same Groundhog Day, the same drill, and stepping into the same muddy puddle, over and over again. Except, in this plot of ours,

unlike in the movie, there was no ultimate redemption. At the time, there seemed no end in sight.

Sometimes, my mind harks back listlessly to that long weekend when millions of people – otherwise docile homebodies – took to the streets to protest against the government passing laws that would eventually change the city for good. Overturned garbage cans, shattered glass, dismantled railings. Shop windows boarded up for their protection. Hordes of angry protesters barricaded themselves at road junctions. MTR stations closed – their drawn shutters battered, rammed, fire-bombed. Phalanxes of police in riot gear confronting the angry mob. Teargas canisters smoking where they hit the ground. Guns fired. Passing through the streets in Central, it was the closest I've ever been to a war zone. I can still feel the acrid smoke rasping in the back of my throat.

The last time I saw Hong Kong looking so desolate was in photographs of Christmas 1941, when the Japanese army invaded our city. It's disconcerting to juxtapose these two periods of history. I felt the need to cling to some sense of normality. Central District has always been a gauge of Hong Kong's cardiovascular health, fast-paced, hectic but peaceful. And then, without warning, the COVID-19 pandemic visited us; like a hostile and deadly sniper taking random aim at people, it kept them off the streets. The double blow floored us, well and good.

I opened the doors of the Fringe Club – set up in a disused cold storage warehouse – to the public for the first time in January 1984, after launching the Fringe Festival the previous year. Almost forty years later, at the height of the pandemic, it ran out of steam. We had to call it quits. As a financially responsible operator, we scraped the bottom of the barrel to pay what we owed the staff, all the outstanding bills, and disbanded. After immersing myself

in it from the day of its conception, nurturing it, taking care of it through sickness and health, having to part with it was like a limb being torn off.

I had to do something to settle myself, so I went about digging up old work diaries, press clippings, photos, newsletters, files, and spent all day rifling through them. I wanted to hold on to something, put past events on record: I didn't want the Fringe as I remembered it to slip from my grasp. The next day, I took out my treasured Montblanc pen from its case, filled it up with the turquoise ink that I like, and proceeded to write.

Months later, I had diligently filled up several notebooks with some satisfaction. One night after dinner, I sat myself down in an easy chair to read them but soon got up to rummage through the fridge for snacks. Filled with dates of events, names of people and places, it read like a series of timelines with self-important annotations. It lacked the flavour of a page-turner, or any flavour at all. It was then that I decided to write it as a memoir, a cross between a work journal and an autobiography. I thought this would create at least some voyeuristic frisson if nothing else. I picked up Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir* from an online bookstore and other similar books to get some idea of how to go about it. Ms Karr, for one, was for telling it like it was, warts and all.

How far should I go? Should I knock on those forbidden doors, or was it better to keep things under lock and key? I am by nature a private person. Little is known about me outside of work, and I am comfortable that way. Also, it's a cultural thing. Where I come from, we feel shy about revealing too much of ourselves and what we're really thinking, especially about something considered inappropriate, disrespectful, or disgraceful, not just about ourselves but to people related to us. Yet, at

the same time, I knew I didn't want to bore anyone by being overly proper and polite.

The story of the Fringe has never been told from start to finish. Some episodes are so uncanny – things happening the way they did, problems seemingly unsolvable resolving themselves, and the chance encounters of people – that they read like fiction.

Many of those events occurred when the mere thought of Hong Kong's future was enough to keep people up at night. The uncertainty, instead of being a deterrent, sent artists into an overdrive of activity. Let it out. Make a splash before the curtain was brought down on them. Social and political matters were the main focus, what people talked and worried about. The Fringe, considered an outlier and a mere diversion, was left pretty much to its own devices. The media loved to write about it. It made good headlines. Grungy and wacky, it provided the levity against the grim news of the day in the lead up to handover. It adopted the motto made famous by Voltaire, the French freethinker: 'I don't agree with what you say, but I defend your right to say it.' It became a barometer of freedom of expression.

I was handed the keys to a building, an ice depot so full of history and character, that I could own, even for just a month and despite its rundown condition (now a selfie destination every bride-to-be and taxi driver knows about). There I was given the chance to launch three unique festivals, try my hand at scriptwriting, produce original and critically acclaimed dance and mime theatre pieces, and make friends with arts practitioners around the world in Bergen, Kaiping, Melbourne, San Francisco, Singapore, Sydney, Seoul, Shanghai, Taipei, Venice, and Vienna.

Like looking at paintings and photographs, I am engrossed in observing human faces in their multitudinous expressions. I try

to portray the *personae dramatis* in my stories captured in those 'decisive moments', as Cartier-Bresson might call them. In so doing, I might have taken some poetic freedom in recalling conversations and rearranging the furniture. My intention has been to bring past events into sharp focus. For those who have passed on – sadly, there have been a few – I remain truthful to their loving memories.

In the end, I didn't make much use of the usual memory aids or archived materials. I simply let memories come and float to the surface. Sometimes the act of remembering can be like birdwatching: you don't always find what you've come for, but you may find another species. In some cases, when I had doubted the veracity of my recall, I contacted those persons of interest for a cross-check or a comparison of subjective truths.

During those long, interminable years of the COVID pandemic, we commissioned Osbert and Sheryl, a couple of urban farmers, to create what the French call *jardin sauvage*, a naturally wild garden of herbs and edible flowers, on our roof. They grew mint, pandan, lemongrass, rosemary, thyme, calendula, nasturtium, dill, sweetgrass, and many other varieties. We used them to create a tisane – a fresh herbal tea – taken with Madeleines that once helped revive Marcel Proust's childhood memories.

Vivian, our bar manager, baked and served them in the room where Dairy Farm used to sell cold milk and ice cream over a long marble-topped counter. Sometimes, in an unearthly moment, alone there, I swear I could still smell the buttery and vanilla aroma transfusing the room and hear the faint echo of the crowd applauding and cheering from the roof where we once had Benjamin Zephaniah rapping and ranting in verse against political, social, and racial injustices; the timeless Jane Birken, insouciant as always, coming from her Valentine's Day concert to chat with her

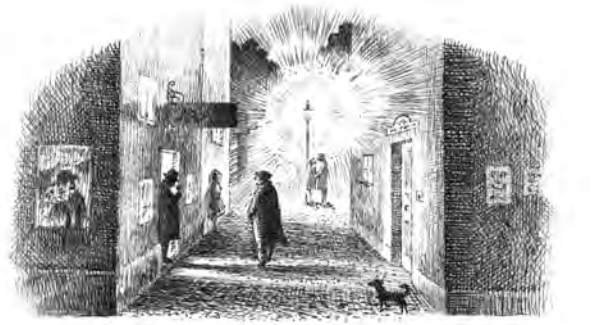
fans; the pyrotechnic erth performing Gargoyles and setting fire to a scaffolding; and showing off-beat movies to an audience who came dressed up in fancy costumes for fun. Now, only the willowy dill and slender eucalyptus were there taking bows from a phantom crowd in the wind – a silent coda to those rhapsodic nights haunting my memory.

What we choose to remember tells a lot about who we are. For those of you who already know me, I hope you'll know me somewhat better after reading this. For those I haven't had the pleasure of meeting, I hope this will arouse enough interest for you to want to know more about someone who has chosen a life in the arts and made a career of it. I hope every reader will enjoy hearing these stories, when the arts first took root in our soil, unafraid and full of hope for the future.

Benny Chia

chapter 1

INTO THE ARTS BY HAZARD



I DON'T REMEMBER my mother ever owning a book, or even reading one. Maybe prayer books, for she was a devout Catholic. She didn't think I should read any books other than schoolbooks. Yet I was addicted to all kinds of storybooks and comics and would read them after everyone had gone to bed, under my blanket with a flashlight if necessary.

You wouldn't have called my mother an arts person. Where I grew up, in a tenement, there was not a single painting on the wall, not even a reproduction; only a framed picture of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, his pierced hand on his bleeding heart. To this, we knelt every night to say our rosaries and beg forgiveness for our sins.

And no music either. The only times we'd hear music played was on the second-hand gramophone Mother had picked up from Cat Street, along with a stack of scratchy 78 rpm singles. We'd use the music to drown out the insults and complaints thrown at us nightly from the landlady: she and Mother had an ongoing feud.

Mother entrusted me with the task of winding up the gramophone and playing cheery hit songs such as 'Goodnight Irene' and 'Bye Bye Blackbird', one after another.

I have to start with talking about my mother because, though she passed on a long time ago, it is she who got me where I am today, steeped in the arts like a Madeleine in a cup of Proustian tea. She hadn't wanted this for me; quite the contrary.

My mother's baptised name was Philomena, but nobody ever called her that. She met my father at her graduation dance or something and fell for him. Father was quite a handsome devil in his day. She eloped to start a life with him in Singapore and, in due course, gave birth to four sons, two of whom survived, the eldest and the youngest. Joe is the eldest and I, the youngest, six years between us. Eventually, she left my father and brought us back to Hong Kong to raise us here, working as an outpatient nurse and administering vaccinations and inoculations against smallpox, polio, and diphtheria, all dangerous infectious diseases at the time.

For many years, we lived in a windowless rented cubicle in an old three-storey building on Mosque Street, with a communal kitchen and a portable can for toilet. To give our home a bit of colour, we pasted Christmas wrapping paper on the walls. It wasn't an easy life, but Mother was as hardy as she was stubborn: she stuck it out.

For relief, she went to the movies, and when I was old enough, I would queue up for tickets for the Saturday matinees. Her favourite cinema was Queen's Theatre in Central, and her favourite films were Hollywood song-and-dance movies with happy endings. She would often take me with her, as I could go for free, while Joe would have needed another ticket. Mother was frugal.

EPILOGUE

I TOLD WONG KAJENG, the concert pianist, in a WhatsApp chat that I had written about him in my memoir. He asked me what it's called. I told him, 'A Life on the Fringe', or something just as bland. He said tongue-in-cheek: 'Your next book should be called "Dreaming of Food and Sex". That would be a best-seller, I promise you.'

I'm not so sure about the sex part. Don't think I'd be up to it. I'm no Norman Mailer or D. H. Lawrence. Nowhere near. But I love to talk about food, for I always believe food is an art. These days with time to spare, I do dream and talk rather a lot about it. Maybe also to compensate for something I didn't get enough of when I was growing up.

I won't forget for lunch it was always the five slices of white bread – Mother bought from the corner store every morning – split down the middle with my brother Joe. We'd spread Dairy

Farm butter on them like a couple of dedicated bricklayers intent on getting it even and right. There was never any jam around, so sometimes we'd sprinkle white sugar on it to add sweetness and extra texture to break the monotony. We'd then gobble them up and wash them down with a sweetened condensed milk called Longevity. That's why I love buttered toast to this day. Given the choice now, I'd choose French butter on sourdough bread. Add a dab of lavender honey on toast to make it a treat to die for (*A Very Long Engagement*, the movie).

Since then, I've made quite a food journey of discovery. But I've never lost my love for the kind of food Mother cooked for every Chinese festival, such as sticky rice dumpling, steamed turnip cake covered in chopped Chinese sausage and coriander, crispy sweet sesame ball, and a mean beef brisket curry that she'd learned to cook to perfection from her days spent in Ipoh of old Malaya.

On those occasions Mother would take over the tiny, shared kitchen in the crumbling tenement we lived in at that time and cook up a storm, over a small kerosene stove and wood fire. The intense aromas of the cooking would call a temporary truce in our decade-long feud with our landlady and her hostile clan and make everyone swoon for life's simple pleasures.

On weekends, Mother would treat us to some Hokkien (Fujianese) mee in this hole-in-the-wall restaurant on Lyndhurst Terrace, after the movies at Queen's or King's Theatre in Central. We would savour the noodles – seasoned by sweet dark soy and oyster sauce with shrimps and cabbage fried in lard – in the after-glow of those feel-good MGM dance musicals.

This was among the first epiphanies that manifested on my palate. The next one happened during a long school summer holiday. I was preparing for my matriculation exam. My buddy

Philip's dad – who ran the Macau Ferry Service that plied between Hong Kong and Macau; a four-hour sea journey on board a small passenger ship – treated us to a weekend in Macau. There were four of us. He put us up in the Bella Vista Hotel atop a promontory overlooking the Praya Grande; there was a wide and colonnaded balcony where they served a five-course dinner in Macanese style (Portuguese-influenced local cuisine). Placed on our table were silver-plate cutlery, crystal wine glasses on white, and embroidered placemats that we took special care not to leave food stains on.

An elderly gentleman took us through the dinner menu. The items were all unfamiliar to us. After taking our orders, he asked if we'd like some wine to go with them. That's how I was introduced to the first bottle of Mateus Rosé wine. When the effervescent pink drink was poured into the wine glass, it misted over. The bottle-green flask had a label on it that evoked the idyllic Portuguese countryside. This and the whole setting transformed us instantly from a clutch of gawky adolescents into sophisticated men-about-town.

Young and foolish, I was also intrepid when it came to putting food I hadn't tasted before in my mouth. I told myself I'd try anything at least once for the experience and to challenge my taste buds. That's how I developed a taste for stinky cheese and French food.

I was on a visit to Rouen – a French city an hour and a half drive from Paris – famous for its imposing Gothic cathedral. Margaret and I were invited to lunch at Pierre's apartment near his workplace. Pierre is a French Lebanese building engineer. He had a copain at work, Francis. Pierre and Francis worked and had lunch together. On this day, they'd prepared a simple lunch for us – *crudités* (a cut salad of fresh vegetables) and *navarin d'agneau* (lamb

stew). They also prepared some cakes for dessert. They had two whole hours for lunch, so we ate at a leisurely pace. To bring the meal to a nice finish, Pierre surprised us by taking to the table a small block of runny, yellow-brown rind cheese with an overpowering ammonia smell.

'This is probably too strong for your taste,' Francis said. And Pierre said with a wink and a smile, 'not everyone can eat it. But they say if you could, you'd be allowed to live in France for as long as you want.'

If there was one thing I wanted very much at that time, it was to live and die on the Left Bank of Paris. Without a moment's hesitation, I sportingly cut up a big piece and chucked it all in. That's how I sealed my fate, with my first taste of *Pont-l'Évêque* – its aroma or stench, love it or loathe it – and didn't stop there. To this day, I have no fear of cheese, no matter how strong.

'You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food,' wrote Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*, as he recalled the days when he had a big appetite but no money. `He ordered a humble potato salad and apotheosised thus in his terse trademark prose:

`The *pommes à l'huile* were firm and marinated and the olive oil delicious. I ground black pepper over the potatoes and moistened the bread in the olive oil. After the first heavy draft of beer I drank and ate very slowly.'

To replicate the experience, I went to Brasserie Lipp on Boulevard St-Germain and picked the spot on the banquette where the great man had ensconced himself, and I ordered the famous *pommes à l'huile* on the menu. I remember this vividly

because it was the day that I'd received a cheque from *She* magazine in Singapore for a story I'd written for them. One of the proudest days of my life.

It was approaching lunch hour and the place was filling up, and the Parisian waiter had expected me to order more than a measly potato salad and was typically dismissive in his manner. There, munching on the boiled potato I had a revelation that hunger might have improved Hemingway's appreciation of Cézanne's geometric landscapes, but it did nothing of the kind for me; only made me salivate at menus displayed in clear glass and shiny copper cases outside restaurants where I fancied eating but couldn't afford to.

How did we start serving food at the Fringe Club? It started with lunchtime concerts. It was in the early days. It drew a small but keen audience. Cat, who liked to look after the well-being of those coming through our door, saw to it that no one had to give up lunch, not even for art's sake. She roped in her mother to help. They got hold of two large electric rice cookers, one for cooking rice, the other for a simple meat and vegetable dish. To advertise this to passers-by, she and our pixie curator, Lisa Cheung, would sit by the window and eat with feigned gusto.

Come the Festival, we got really busy. One of the performers volunteered to help in the kitchen when she wasn't performing on stage. She was a proselytising vegetarian. Soon we all merrily munched on sprouts, green leaves, nuts, and beans, generally feeling good about ourselves.

As the Festival was coming to an end, our green cook had to return to her UK home, and Kim showed up. She used to be chef on a luxury yacht and was taking six months' shore leave which she wanted to spend exploring the clubbing scene in Hong Kong.

Somehow the name Fringe Club popped up on her online search, though it wasn't exactly the kind of club she was looking for. She ended up landing herself a half-day job, doing what she's good at and, the rest of the time, doing what she liked doing most.

Kim would go from all-night clubbing to her early morning swim, before turning up for work. A bit hung over but sober. Then one day she came in late, her left arm in a sling. She said she'd slipped and fallen and broken her arm. It's really awkward to work in the kitchen with only one arm. Sally Barnett, our intern from New Zealand, ever so kind and helpful, came to her aid. Kim, despite her disability, was very professional and could whip up vegetarian dishes that were not only healthy but also taste good, with her one good hand. That's how our legendary vegetarian buffet lunch got started and kept going for more than thirty years.

Kim rejoined the crew of her yacht after spending six months with us. As we were wringing our hands over what to do next, Joe Pumin Porndit showed up. He was the line cook of the Thai food section in the Furama Hotel. His mother, Jen Jer, was our cleaning lady at the time. She volunteered to cook us a Thai meal that turned out to be a scrumptious feast. I was impressed. I suggested she take over our kitchen and do a Thai version of what Kim had been doing. She demurred saying, 'My son is a better cook. I'll get him to come and talk to you. He can show you.'

What happened was the Furama had sold its business and would soon close down. Jen Jer's son Joe was therefore freed up. He came to take over the running of our kitchen. For over twenty years, up until COVID-19, when we had to face closure ourselves, he took care of our vegetarian lunch buffets, bar snacks, opening reception cocktail canapés, and managed to spice up the salads and pasta dishes with a plethora of Thai flavours – his secret recipes

of satay sauce, mushroom soup, tom yum kung, and pesto paste remain secret to this day – adding another layer of memories of the Fringe for someone like KJ.

While we were getting to grips with our catering, Michelle Garnaut from Melbourne made her debut with a restaurant called *M at the Fringe*. Deco-inspired by the bohemian eclecticism of Miettas' on Alfred Place in Melbourne, it served standard Western as well as Mediterranean dishes such as souvlaki, falafel, and tagine. It was unlike any others and soon became very popular.

I was taken with the idea of having a place right above our theatre where you could get a drink or a main course before a show and come back for dessert afterwards, like the trattorias on Broadway in New York to attract theatre-goers. I asked Michelle to create a special menu and set the price in keeping with our affordable shows.

Eventually *M* and the Fringe parted ways after being together for twenty years; the separation, as these things go, caused hurt and pain on both sides. The head-to-toe renovation of the Fringe building had taken way more time to complete than expected. We couldn't sit around and wait. Michelle subsequently moved her business to Shanghai and Beijing. After a long hiatus, Circa 1913, a restaurant serving a fusion of Japanese and French cuisine, took over. It was the brainchild of Alen Ng, a production designer and builder for luxury products launches. He was introduced to us by Kathy Chan, our Club Manager. His slight build and mild manners belied his unshakeable self-belief and single-mindedness. He did his own design and took his time to source fabrics and other materials. He wanted an understated, elegant backdrop for his signature dish that we called *La cage aux folles* behind his back. Instead of serving sashimi on a simple plate, Alen used an ornate

Chinese bird cage to create a wow effect. 'You always feed your eyes first,' he liked to say. Truth is, not everyone likes to eat from a birdcage. Maybe once was enough. But Alen was unfazed and kept marching to his own drumbeat. He kept Circa going from 2016 until 2019, when COVID-19 disrupted food business and the habit of eating out; he had to throw in the towel.

At this juncture, Andrew Sun, food writer and a super connector, introduced Julia Bombana to me. Julia is married to Chef Umberto Bombana. His flagship restaurant, *Otto e Mezzo*, is the only Italian restaurant outside of Italy recognised with three Michelin stars. I'd pictured Julia as a version of Hermès handbag-toting *tai tai* on Jimmy Choo heels. Andrew assured me she's nothing of the kind.

He proceeded to set up a meeting for us to meet in a small dim sum restaurant called *Nove* – number 9 in Italian – tucked in a side-street in Central. To get to it, you have to squeeze past stalls selling ladies' undergarments, stockings, and knick-knacks displayed in heaps. A narrow passageway opened to a burst of gold and red lanterns suspended from the ceiling. Wrapping round the walls were the rich details from the reproduction of a Chinese classical painting entitled *One Hundred Horses* by Lang Shining (a.k.a. Giuseppe Castiliglione, Jesuit court artist to three Qing emperors).

Julia, in a faded T-shirt and black jeans, greeted me with a big smile. She got to her feet, gesturing to the theatrical surroundings, and said, 'This is all Albert's [Albert Kwan, design architect] ideas. He used to work a lot with David Tang. Does it remind you a bit of the China Club?' She quickly sat me at a booth and got down to business.

'These days there are so few good *dim sum* places left,' she said.

'Once those old *sifus* (masters of *dim sum*, in this case) retired, it's very hard to find someone to replace them.'

At this point, Julia went and fetched *sifu* Bal Gor 波哥 from the kitchen. He showed up in his smart chef's uniform. We chatted. He said he was way past his retirement age. But he looked to me like he could easily do a few more laps without gasping for breath. Julia said he's a master of traditional Cantonese *dim sum* with sixty years of experience.

'These days nobody bothers to learn the trade, too hard,' she explained. '*Dim sum* is mostly mass produced in central kitchens – food factories.' She wanted a place where you could taste authentic *dim sum* and Cantonese dishes, and sip *pu'er* tea all day. 'Just like the Hong Kong we used to know, back in the good old days.' So, once she'd heard of Bal Gor's intention to hang up his toque, she made him an offer.

She made a bid for the space vacated by Circa 1913. It wasn't exactly the best time to open a new restaurant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people didn't feel it safe to eat out. I asked her why she wanted to take the risk.

'There's never a right time,' she said. 'You do it when the conditions are there. Besides, Chef [Bombana] loves old buildings. He says they have deeper flavours.'

It had always been my dream to have a tea house at the Fringe. But never thought it possible because, for one thing, our kitchen space was rather small and the floor was leaky. We couldn't figure out where those leaks were springing from. On a bad day they'd drip down to the theatre below. Also, the air-conditioning system had a way of conking out at a time when you could die from heat stroke. These and other nagging problems came with a century-old building. Julia and her team didn't just patch them

with sticky tape and hope for the best. They did thorough repairs for the long haul.

I had a chance to sit down for a chat with Chef Bombana after he got off work in Otto e Mezzo. The COVID-19 pandemic was still raging and nobody knew when it'd be over. 'Is this the right time to do this?' I asked again. 'Now is always good,' he said. 'I only want one restaurant [of my own in life]. Now I have more than one. I'm happy.'

The restaurant Nove at the Fringe opened to business on time. Albert, who designed the interior, was on site to supervise the works throughout. Due to the pandemic, everything slowed down, but he was able to get the help he needed to get the job done in time.

When I told Eugene Pao, best-known jazz guitarist in Hong Kong, that we had a Cantonese tea house and we'd like to name a dim sum after him, the way they had done with Peach Melba, the famous dessert, for the celebrated opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba, he was amused and said, 'Why not?' Julia also liked the idea.

'You must name one after Ted, too,' Eugene played along and said blithely, 'or he'll be jealous.' Ted Lo, an equally well-known jazz pianist of Hong Kong, is his buddy and they often performed together. Chef Bal Gor went ahead and created the *Eugene bao and Ted Lo shou* for the Nove menu at the opening.

Looking back, the struggles that we'd gone through, during those seemingly endless pandemic years, have become things of the past. No one could've guessed that it would end as abruptly as it started. I hope we've learned our lesson this time not to take things in life too seriously. What we think can't be changed will change. What seems hopeless will eventually turn a corner. What was thought to be just a fun and frivolous act

of naming a dessert or *dim sum* dish for you, could be your shot at immortality.

'As above, so below,' the Taoists like to say.

The world is a mirror of ourselves. In the end, we create the kind of society we live in. Let's tread lightly into the future. There's no telling where it's going to take us. Like the punchline of a good joke, it only works if it catches us by surprise.

THE END

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