

# AMERICAN BORN

SHOW BY SHOW, ROLE BY ROLE, MELVIN MAR TENACIOUSLY BREAKS BARRIERS, CREATES OPPORTUNITIES AND TELLS STORIES THAT PORTRAY THE FULL SPECTRUM OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY | PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILLIP GRAYBILL







**B**efore amassing credits on films like *Jumanji: Welcome to The Jungle*, *Jumanji: The Next Level* and *Bad Teacher*, or producing series like *New Girl*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, *The Grinder*, and *Speechless*, Melvin Mar was growing up in the Los Angeles suburb Montebello, watching a lot of movies and TV while his parents put in long hours with the family business. They'd immigrated from Hong Kong before settling in LA, where Mar's father's family had deep roots—especially in Chinatown, where Mar's grandmother lived until the end of her life.

"My dad would deliver bean sprouts and supplies to all the restaurants in Chinatown. I was a 6-year-old kid sitting next to him in his pickup truck," Mar recalls.

When it came time for Mar to decide on a career path, the first-gen Chinese American was stumped. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. The part of Los Angeles where I grew up was where my family made their living, but it's a world away from movie studios. I was supposed to be a good Chinese kid and become a doctor or a lawyer."

Mar first studied architecture but fizzled out. A combo of kismet and work ethic took him from a job at a Tommy Hilfiger store to an internship with legendary producer Arnold Kopelson. This was thanks to his store manager, who encouraged Mar to aim for bigger and better things—and whose brother worked for Kopelson.

Although the internship was unpaid, Mar seized the opportunity. "I was so broke I was living with my parents again, asking them for gas money. My father called me a special kind of stupid for a very long time, volunteering for somebody wealthy enough to pay you but who chooses not to, and you keep going back. He wasn't wrong."

The internship program paid back in other ways, including the opportunity to pitch ideas. Mar began to build muscles that would serve him as he moved, consciously or not, toward



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becoming a producer.

He learned other lessons, too. "After hanging out with my friends in K-Town, I came to one of those pitch sessions and said, 'Do you know what'd be really cool? Asian American *Swingers* in K-Town,'" Mar recalls. "This is like

'98 or '99. The intern coordinator says, 'That's a great idea, but there are no Asian actors.' It wasn't like, 'We should fix that.' It was just, 'This is the way it is. Oh, well.' That never left me."

When Mar scored a paid position as a PA at DreamWorks, his family was thrilled, mostly because he finally had health insurance. He progressed to assistant to Glenn Williamson, where he was privy to the development and production of *American Beauty*, before becoming an assistant at Scott Rudin Productions.

Decades later, when actors, agents, directors, writers and fellow producers are asked what Mar's greatest strength is, the answer is unanimous: He gets it done no matter what. It's an ability he's employed to great success, particularly during a 20+ year partnership with Jake Kasdan.

The two first met in 2002 when Kasdan was directing the film *Orange County*, which was produced by Scott Rudin, whom Mar was working for at the time.

"Mel was very involved, clearly one of those ultracapable, eager, how can I help, what can I do, go above and beyond in every way kind of assistants at that time. I could see right away that this was somebody who had a lot to contribute to any endeavor," Kasdan recalls.

In 2005, Kasdan was gearing up to make an indie feature called *The TV Set*. Mar had moved on to a job with Vin Diesel, but Kasdan had never forgotten him. "I called him up and said, 'I don't know what you're up to, but I'm going to make this little movie, and I could use your help.'"

The relationship strengthened while Mar continued working as Kasdan's assistant and testing the waters as a development exec. In 2011, Kasdan directed the pilot for a 20th Century Fox Television series called *New Girl*. Its success led to a deal with 20th that shifted Mar to an executive role for his and Kasdan's new company, The Detective Agency, where Mar became a high-level producer with qualities Kasdan was in awe of.





Melvin Mar with *Fresh Off the Boat* costar Hudson Yang in 2014.



Melvin Mar and Michelle Yeoh on the first day of shooting for *American Born Chinese*.

"It's his industriousness, his gift for putting people together and identifying who the right people are, his fearlessness about being turned down, his eagerness to move the ball," Kasdan says.

"He's not afraid to have a real level-headed conversation with a creative person about what it's going to take to get something done," Kasdan adds. "There's a whole world of producers for whom that's the most uncomfortable part of producing. When it gets hard, you hope someone else will deal with it. He does not have that. He hopes that he'll be the person who can get in there and deal with it."

Kasdan's longtime agent Richard Weitz was impressed by the same qualities and jumped at the chance for more when *New Girl* was picked up as a series.

"I saw an opportunity to build a business. Melvin had no experience in TV, but I just loved him. I called (Fox Television Group Co-Chair) Dana Walden, and between us and a couple of other

execs, we helped to build a company."

That company churned out a slew of series, including *Speechless*, *Bless This Mess*, *The Grinder*, *Doogie Kamealoha, M.D.*, *Fresh Off the Boat* and *American Born Chinese*.

"It's not easy to get one show on the air, but we've gotten a lot, which I think really proves Melvin's worth as a producer," Weitz says. "He's found people with original voices, people who have skills, whether they're directors or writers or actors. With casting, he looks beyond just who's hot on a list. Jake has that as well."

"People talk about how it's hard to come up as a producer. A lot of it has to do with making room for real partnerships," says President of Sony Pictures Television Studios Katherine Pope. "I really love the partnership that Melvin and Jake have. If you're someone who's established and you're looking to build out your work, then take on partners. Take a chance on

people. They might end up being somebody as amazing as Melvin."

Pope first met Mar when she was the head of television at 20th Century Fox, working with him and Kasdan on *New Girl*. "Often someone says, 'I'll talk to anybody,' but ends up not caring what that person says back. Melvin's superpower is listening. That was the thing that impressed me the most about him," Pope recalls.

"The combination of Jake and Melvin was so necessary when we were making 22 to 24 episodes a year of *New Girl*. They always said, 'Of course we can get this done. No problem.' Which was so important for me, (showrunner) Liz Meriwether, and (executive producers) Brett Baer and Dave Finkel."

Persistence of this caliber can get you far. But to go as far as Mar has, you need a great idea.

That idea came in 2013 with *Fresh Off the Boat*. It was a game changer not just for Mar, but for the industry as a whole.

Set in Orlando in the '90s, the show was based on the biography of chef-restaurateur Eddie Huang, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan.

The show was the first project Mar spearheaded in his partnership with Kasdan. "Up till then, I always worked on Jake's stuff. Film or TV, it started with him either producing or directing," Mar says. "I remember having a whole speech in my head for Jake about how I really wanted to do *Fresh Off the Boat* and how doing our first real family sitcom would be good. But I didn't need it. Jake recognized it immediately."

"*Fresh Off the Boat* was not the most straightforward proposition at that time," Kasdan recalls. "It was the first network series with an Asian American cast in 20 years and the second one ever."

The show embodied Mar's core tenets: Immigrant stories *are* American stories. Universality can be found in specificity. Defy expectations.

"Melvin was so passionate because this is how he lived. He loved '90s culture, he loved the music, and he saw a lot of the young boy in him as a lead," says Weitz. "To have that show not only get picked up to pilot, but to series, then become a staple in the ABC comedy lineup—that was when Melvin broke out and became a legit producer."

Showrunner Nahnatchka Khan didn't find out until much later that *Fresh Off the Boat* was Mar's first-ever series as a TV producer. "I was shocked. I never would've known. He was so present and so experienced in all facets—being a partner in the development of the show, finding the A+ crew to pull off the best level of production, representing our show in the best light to our studio and network partners, and fighting all the right battles to make sure we had the best opportunity for success."

A feat that stands out for Khan is when Mar decided to shoot the season three premiere in Taiwan. "It was a huge deal to move a U.S. production out there for one episode, but it was very

important to our show," Khan recalls. "Melvin broke barriers. I don't believe that any half-hour network show from 20th TV had ever done anything remotely close to that. In the face of a lot of doubt, he just kept reassuring us all that it was gonna happen. And he made it so."

Beneath the broad, loyal audience, critical acclaim, and multiple seasons was a greater impact according to actor and producer Daniel Dae Kim, who appeared on *Doogie Kamealoha, M.D.* and is a close friend of Mar. "I believe that entertainment can deliver powerful messages, on both an explicit and implicit level," he says. "The same media that created negative stereotypes to begin with can also provide more accurate, authentic portrayals of who people are."

"It's why the work that people like Melvin do is so important," Kim adds. "His projects have helped reshape the narrative for Asian Americans and the way we are thought of in our culture."

For Kasdan, *Fresh Off the Boat* taught an important lesson. "There were vast audiences out there that had never seen themselves represented on network television," he says. "What else can we do with that opportunity and responsibility?"

President of 20th Century Fox Television Karey Burke began working with Mar after she moved from Freeform to head ABC Entertainment. "Show by show and role by role, he has been unwavering in his mission to cast a wider net, make our shows more inclusive, and create heroes and characters that look like more people in the community," she says.

It's one thing to want to pursue this type of mission. It's quite another to possess the financial savvy and economic awareness to pull it off. "Melvin's an excellent businessperson first and foremost," Burke says. "He understands the nexus between his mission and making great commercial, aspirational television shows. That skill set is not easy to come by."

Over the years, Burke watched Mar

shed light on the AAPI community—dispelling any perception of it as a monolith and celebrating its own cultural diversity. "When we were casting *Doogie Kamealoha, M.D.*, Melvin led the charge in organically casting those roles. He did the same for *American Born Chinese*," Burke says.

Based on the graphic novel of the same name by Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* chronicles the trials and tribulations of a regular American teenager whose life is forever changed when he befriends the son of a mythological god. Though the series took more than 10 years to get made, Mar never wavered.

"One of the biggest reasons *American Born Chinese* happened is because Melvin was passionate enough about the show to bring everyone together and keep pushing the train until premiere day," said Destin Cretton, the show's director and executive producer. "He truly believes in the people he works with, and because of that, he never stops pushing until we're all at the finish line together."

In May 2023, President Biden hosted a screening of *American Born Chinese* at the White House. "Melvin, his wife, his daughter, the cast and executives were all there," Weitz recalls. "That was a defining moment for him. I could not have been prouder to be a part of that."

During the show's development, Burke was inspired by Mar's dedication to creating opportunities for actors both known and under the radar. "Shining a light on the work of Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan was as important to Melvin as creating the opportunity for our young star (Jimmy Liu) to be able to come over from Taiwan," she says.

"As a director and EP, I always felt supported by Melvin," Cretton adds. "When he talks about his new favorite writer or director or actor, I always pay attention because his excitement for talent is genuine and contagious. And he knows how to protect that talent to allow them to do their best work."

Khan couldn't agree more. "Working





with Melvin made me realize that anything is possible," she says. "That no is never the end. That if you believe in the project, you don't need everyone else to believe in it with you, that if you

have a key group of people by your side you can make anything happen. And by key group of people, I mean Melvin."

"Melvin has really figured out a way to be protective of his producers and shows

and people, but yet also understand the buyers and the studio," Pope says. "It can be a difficult line to walk, but Melvin does a really good job of it."

Jennifer Salke, who first worked





On the set of *Jumanji: Next Level*: Producer Hiram Garcia, star and producer Dwayne Johnson, producer Matt Tolmach, Melvin Mar, and writer-director-producer Jake Kasdan.

COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES

with Mar on *New Girl* when she was executive vice president of creative affairs at 20th Century Fox TV, agrees. "He has a great ability to move the ball forward and solve problems while managing the studio and the creative participants, which is incredibly valuable," says the current head of Amazon Studios, which made the forthcoming feature *Red One* with Mar and Kasdan.

"His strong relationships and background in both television and film help him easily cross over in both mediums and get a lot of great work done," Salke added.

"A lot of producers have a lane and they stay there," Burke says. "But Melvin, along with Jake, keeps pushing into new uncharted territory, unafraid to take on new challenges."

Rob Lowe costarred in the 2015 Fox series *The Grinder*, on which Mar was executive producer. "It remains one of my favorite things that I've ever done. It was an unbelievable experience,"

Lowe says.

When *The Grinder* was making its debut in 2015, announcer Joe Buck read a promo for the show during Fox's broadcast of game one of the World Series. Immediately following the promo, the broadcast lost power, TV screens went black for four solid minutes, and the game screeched to a halt.

After the glitch was resolved and the broadcast resumed, Buck jokingly blamed it on "the curse of Rob Lowe and (*Grinder* costar) Fred Savage."

Lowe was not about to let that fly. He immediately called Mar and pitched the idea of shooting a rebuttal video. "Nine out of 10 producers would take that phone call, laugh and hang up. Melvin said, 'Absolutely,' and we did it," Lowe recalls.

The video aired during the next World Series game. It was priceless viral advertising for *The Grinder* that began with Lowe's idea but wouldn't have come to pass without Mar's tenacity and behind-the-scenes maneuvering to get the video on the air.

"It's emblematic of what's great about Melvin," Lowe says. "He's fearless, he sweats the details, and he delivers."

"I think a lot of people outside of our industry have no idea what it means to be a producer," Cretton says. "It's a crazy job where you put out a hundred fires and solve a thousand problems, and the only thing people notice is that crafty is out of kombucha again. The most important quality in a producer is their ability to get things made."

When friends and family ask him what a producer does, this is what Mar tells them:

"Everyone knows what a restaurant is. Think about the movie or a TV show as a meal. The actors are like the dishes and the writer or director is like the chef. When you enjoy the meal, you say, 'My compliments to the chef.' When the bathroom is broken, you tell me, the manager of the restaurant. Everything is my problem. I need to support my chef. I need to make sure the dishes are done well. That's the job and I love it."

# Q&A

WITH  
MELVIN MAR

## WHAT'S AN EXAMPLE OF YOUR NOT GIVING UP?

Most recently, it was *American Born Chinese*, which I always loved. I read it on my honeymoon in 2006. I tried so hard to get that book. I didn't know what I wanted to do with it; I just wanted to option it. I would hear through the publisher that Gene Yang just wasn't into it.

I met Gene 10 years later on a panel hosted by mutual friend Andrea Cherng, whose family runs Panda Express. We got to talking, and a few months later he called and said, "I think I'm ready to do this. Will you do it with me?" I'm like, "You don't understand, man," and I told him the story of how long I'd wanted it. Then Kelvin Yu started working on it with his brother, me, and Gene. Dana Waldman, who has been like our fairy godmother, said, "John Landgraf likes this. You should set it up at FX."

Two months before the pandemic hit, FX passed on it. It just wasn't fitting what they wanted to do. It was dark days. The world was shutting down. As the pandemic kept going, Disney started reorganizing. Three studios went down to two. We were at Fox 21. We got merged into 20th, which is fine because we had a deal at 20th. Then, Disney Brand Television came up and Ayo Davis and Gary Marsh took that over. Ayo read *American Born Chinese* and said, "Let's do it." At the height of lockdown, Destin Cretton decided to join. Then, he goes, "I'm going to call Michelle Yeoh."

And in February 2022, we were watching Michelle come down on a wire as a Chinese goddess on the first day of shooting. Another crazy moment I can't believe.

## HOW DOES YOUR BACKGROUND INFORM THE WAY THAT YOU CHOOSE PROJECTS AND SHEPHERD THEM TO COMPLETION?

It's influenced me in that I pay a lot of attention to points of view. *Fresh Off the Boat* is about an American family. We're not telling a story about a Chinese family. It's a story about a Chinese American family. It took me a long time to realize that. The American part is important. We're all Americans. We just happen to have a slightly different point of view about certain things. We're telling a human story, an American story. The character could be someone of Asian heritage or not. It's not like, "Oh, if it's not AAPI, I'm not doing it."

## SINCE THEN, HAVE YOU FELT LIKE YOU'RE THE GO-TO PRODUCER FOR AAPI STORIES AND PROJECTS?

Yes, and I see that as a good thing. But a lot of other people are doing it now. In 1998, there was nobody. For 15 years, I thought I knew all the AAPI people in Hollywood. Now I don't. It's really great.

## SPEAKING OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES, HOW HAS PRODUCING FILMS INFORMED THE WAY THAT YOU PRODUCE TV, AND VICE VERSA?

I feel like the line between them has blurred so much, especially with how we consume and distribute things. The only difference is, to me, if you're making a television show, you're constantly thinking, "How long can I keep this going?" With making a movie, it's like, "How can I end this in the best possible way?"

## ARE YOU SEEING MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FILM VERSUS TV OR SERIES?

I think there's more opportunity for a

midsize movie now. I used to say, "If somebody gave you the script to *Rain Man*, you would think, 'How can I make this into a great eight-episode series?'" But it won an Oscar as a film.

It feels like we're headed back to that—where it doesn't pencil out to do the \$75 million, 10-episode version. A great midsize movie is awesome. I grew up on those. You don't have to ask people to binge eight hours' worth. A good 90 minutes is wonderful.

## IS THE ANSWER THAT A CREATOR SHOULDN'T RELY ON TRADITIONAL STRUCTURES OR DISTRIBUTORS TO GET THEIR PROJECTS OUT, WHETHER THEY'RE AAPI STORIES OR NOT?

It depends on what the objective is. I was involved in this little movie, *Lucky Grandma*. I never thought of it like, "This is going to be a successful monetary situation." The most important thing was to get it made and get it out there. You think outside the box. If a traditional streamer is not going to do it, what are the other options? Do you put it out on YouTube? Do you put it out on some sort of app? You just want to get eyeballs and cut through the clutter.

The economics of everything are going to change. Are we going back to the time when you make a network TV show and have syndication pay your family for generations? Probably not. But the basic idea of telling stories is going to stay. How you monetize it is going to change. If you're passionate about doing it for that reason versus the benefits of monetization, then you'll be all right. In this time of chaos and upheaval, there's opportunity. Everything's on the table now. I love it.

## HOW DO YOU WORK TO NOT ONLY INCREASE INDUSTRY ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, BUT ALSO



COURTESY OF MELVIN MAR



On the set of *American Born Chinese*: Costar Ke Huy Quan, director and EP Destin Cretton, and Melvin Mar.

PHOTO BY ANDREW TOTH/GETTY IMAGES



Celebrating 100 episodes of *Fresh Off the Boat*. From left to right: Melvin Mar, producer Justin McEwen, Head of 20th TV Jonathan Davis, Randall Park (kneeling), Lucille Soong, Ray Wise, Hudson Yang, Nahnatchka Khan, Forrest Wheeler, Constance Wu, Ian Chen, Chelsey Crisp, and Head of ABC Programming Karey Burke.

### HELP THEM MAKE A LIVING?

I think that's what most of the 2023 strikes were about. This next negotiation, hopefully not a strike, is about that as well. But if you go back even further to earlier labor movements, opportunities are created when people get together and want to tell a story. You get together the best group of people that can do what you need.

That's where it starts. Is it going to happen immediately? Probably not. But you've got to stick with it. You've got to want to tell the story; then figure out

how to do it.

It feels like we've taken one step back with this contraction and upheaval we're going through. But there's been a lot of progress when it comes to diverse points of view on screen and behind the camera. I don't believe that people don't want to put diverse stories or faces on screen. We're going through a hard business moment. I think fewer shows with diverse points of view are being made because they're making less of everything. So it's got to shrink. It's just reality.

There is opportunity in looking for the next chapter. It's up to you, the producer, director, writer, to look for that opportunity.

### IS IT SMART TO LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITY WELL OUTSIDE THE BORDERS OF THE U.S. WHEN PUTTING A PACKAGE OR DEAL TOGETHER?

Of course. When you're dealing with movies, you're thinking, "Well, what's the worldwide box office?" With shows, you're thinking, "How do I make a



PHOTO BY ZACK DOUGAN/DISNEY

dent in this territory?" whether that's European territories or Latin America. It's all part of it now.

I spend a lot of time thinking about what we can do in Asia. On a smaller level, we shot an episode of *Fresh Off the Boat* in Taiwan. I was adamant about trying to do that creatively, but also trying to understand film entertainment in Asia. I have projects in development now that focus on that part of the world, because it's a huge economy there that's not just America-centric. You've got to figure out how to make shows that work everywhere.

**PEOPLE MIGHT BELIEVE THAT A SHOW CENTERED UPON A PARTICULAR EXPERIENCE IS ONLY GOING TO WORK IN PLACES THAT THE CHARACTERS' EXPERIENCE CONNECTS BACK TO. BUT WHY**

### **WOULDN'T AN AUDIENCE IN EASTERN EUROPE REALLY DIG FRESH OFF THE BOAT OR AMERICAN BORN CHINESE?**

That's right. It's sad that *American Born Chinese* didn't come back, but we did better internationally than we did domestically. Now when I'm thinking about ideas, this experience will help me think about how to start internationally, figure out how to build off of that, and then include the domestic audience.

I'm very proud of that show and everyone I worked with on it. That was one of my favorite experiences making a show ever. We're all in touch and doing other things together. But you expect when you sign up to work in this business that projects are going to end eventually. Sometimes it ends too soon, and that bums you out. And sometimes, it lasts longer than you expected. But that's all part of it. ■

The cast and crew of *Doogie Kamealoha, M.D.*, during a traditional Hawaiian blessing to start production.

**“** We do it on anything that shoots in Hawaii. It's to show respect and gratitude to the island and its people,” Mar says.

From left to right: Emma Meisel, Matt Sato, Wes Tian, Peyton Elizabeth Lee, producer Justin McEwen, Melvin Mar, showrunner Kourtney Kang, Jason Scott Lee, Mapuana Makia, Jeffrey Bowyer-Chapman, and director Sean Kavanagh.