

# **Lucy Sheen interviewed by Samenua Sesher, Respect Due, Museum of Colour**

**00.01**

## **Introduction Music**

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00:08**

## **Samenua Sesher**

You're listening to Respect Due.

**00.16**

## **Introduction music**

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00.22**

## **Samenua Sesher**

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their

achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour.

In this episode, we will hear from the incomparable Lucy Sheen. Lucy is an actor in film, TV and theatre. She is also a writer and activist campaigning for better representation of British East and Southeast Asian people in creative industries.

Lucy was born in Hong Kong, but was brought to the UK as part of the first official programme of transracial adoption. She continues to advocate for adoptee rights today.

**01:43**

### **Lucy Sheen**

I came over to the UK from Hong Kong in the late fifties, early sixties. The UK was a very different place to what it is now, in terms of its ethnic makeup. So, I was very much the only Chinese person in my local vicinity, which was just outside of Windsor - so very conservative, very white. I had as normal childhood as it could be, there were just added extras, in terms of the fact that I was a transracial adoptee, so I didn't look anything like my immediate family, or indeed anybody else around me. So, I survived school, various iterations of it. And then in a moment of, I suppose weakness, maybe, I ended up auditioning for drama school. I went to Rose Bruford, which was the only drama school that I could actually get a grant for. I suppose I naively thought,

‘Oh, I’ll be playing all the big roles, do a bit of Coward, Oscar Wilde, etc... revenges, tragedies. And, I was told by more than one tutor, ‘Oh, well, what you can look forward to is a life of playing maids, prostitutes, opium den madams and mail-order brides.’ I was like, ‘But I’m at drama school.’ You know, I was cast, in one sort of year... Fan Sheng, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and a maid... and it’s like, ‘Hang on a minute, isn’t drama school where you are allowed to kind of like crash and burn, fail, get your teeth around, you know, all of those amazing playwrights?’ But apparently not... that was in the seventies, eighties. But that kind of shocked me and I realised then it might not be that easy. So I got into drama school, but then what’s the real world going to be like in terms of the roles that I was cast in?

**03:57**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Lucy’s first role, however, was something quite special. Straight out of drama school, she landed a role in the now cult classic film, *Ping Pong*.

**04:06**

### **Lucy Sheen**

*Ping Pong* was a first in that it was a storyline which actually looked at the concerns of the British-Chinese community. And it looked at the British-Chinese community as a community like any other. So, there were... it was a large cast, so first-, second-, third-generation people who still had linguistic characteristics from Hong Kong or wherever they come from, and people like me and the male lead who was kind of, like, Oxbridge-educated. So, it was the first time, I think, that

Chinese people had been seen like any other group of British people. And it was unusual. We weren't just behind a counter in a Chinese takeaway or in a restaurant; they were people who had jobs, who were entrepreneurs, who were different.

**05:09**

### **Samenua Seshar**

This first experience in film would shape the course of Lucy's career.

**05:14**

### **Lucy Sheen**

I mean, I was very lucky because I did things the wrong way around. I mean, at the time when I went to drama school, if you were a serious actor you did theatre, not film or television... definitely not adverts, that really wasn't the done thing. So, what do I go and do? I land a role in a film. And had I been the only British East Asian in a film which was, from a white perspective, about a different topic, I suspect my career path would have taken a very different course.

In the early days, because there were so many theatres still around, repertory theatres, etc, I was very lucky: my first theatre job was at the Royal Exchange. And, yes, I was a jobbing actress, I was really lucky. And then things shifted, kind of, in the early nineties. And I went through a really dry... well, more than a dry spell, it was another fifteen years before I set foot on a stage, which ended in 2010 at the Orange Tree.

## **06.21**

### **Samenua Sesher**

How did you deal with the drought? Because you had a fantastic start and then things just dried up? The offers didn't come in? How did you deal with that?

## **06:36**

### **Lucy Sheen**

In terms of the theatre, it literally was like somebody switched a light off, and I wasn't quite sure why. And my day job side hustle turned into the only thing that was giving me a wage. And then, because I wasn't getting that much telly work either, it was, 'Yes, I'll take more shifts, I'll take more responsibility,' etc, etc. Come 2010, I just thought, 'I can't, I can't be dealing with this. I can't at my age. So, I'm going to find a job based on the skill set that I have, for sort of corporate PAYE, and I will find something that I can live with that means that we don't have to worry about paying the bills, etc.'

And on the evening that I'd decided that that was going to be it, a friend of mine said, 'Oh, I've just put you up for a play that's happening at the Orange Tree'. And I thought, 'Oh well, you know, no skin off my nose, no harm, no foul, I won't get it.' I went for the audition, and I got the job. And that kind of started a resurgence in that I ended up playing opposite Benedict Wong. It was a lovely play. And I just thought, 'Well, I'll give it one last shot, and if it doesn't work out, then I can truly say "I tried".'

I then got cast in another play for a small independent theatre company. I then got seen by Thea Sharrock for the retrospective of the David Hare plays at Sheffield Crucible and it just kind of like, went on. And then I started writing and that, funnily enough, took off; I got commissioned to do a short play at the Royal Court with a couple of other British East Asian writers. And it just kept happening. And it's weird. (laughs)

**08:34**

### **Samenua Seshar**

As well as building a successful career as an actor and writer, Lucy has consistently spoken out against stereotypes in film, TV and theatre.

**08:44**

### **Lucy Sheen**

I suppose, I was a quiet advocate until 2013. Yes, 2013 when the RSC announced the cast for their production of *The Orphan of Zhao*, often referred to as the 'Chinese *Hamlet*', and out of a cast of 17, there were only three British East Asian or Southeast Asian actors, none of which were playing protagonistic roles. Now, there are no small roles, only small actors. But the sad thing is - and it's something that myself and my colleagues and friends talked about - if they had cast a British East Asian as the orphan, we would probably have all gone 'yes, amazing!', and that would have been that. But they cast a maid - important, but she gets her head decapitated. One young lad was playing the doctor's ghost son, an amazing scene, but also one half of a devil dog. And it's like, hang on a minute. Why couldn't they have cast the British East

Asian actress as the princess, the daughter? Why couldn't they have cast one of the British East Asians as Tu'an Gu, the general? And that caused up a huge stink. And there was one point at which myself and a couple of other actors... it was just like, even if we wanted to - and it's, you know, in my youth I'd always yearned to be at the RSC - we will never work at the RSC, ever. We've burned those bridges, because you don't, as an unknown actor in that sense - also from a minority within the minority in the way we are actually represented and seen in British culture - you don't stick your head above the parapet and accuse the RSC of not doing what they should do, because they're a publicly funded organisation.

And it kind of went global, which was like, wow... social media can be amazing. But I think that for one or two of us there were sleepless nights, thinking, 'Have we gone one over what we should have done?' And it is scary. And I think it was the fact that, you know, if we can't even be involved in the retelling of our own culture, our own heritage, then what on earth can we be involved in?

## **11.12**

### **Samenua**

This is fascinating, but I want to ask if this has informed your writing and your decision to write, because over the last decade you have written a play about your own experience and you have directed a documentary about transracial adoption. How did you decide... what was the catalyst for you writing about your own story?

## **11:37**

## **Lucy Sheen**

I guess part of it was I was also tired of seeing representations, particularly in Hollywood films of adoptees, where adoption is... you end up being a psychopath, or you're broken and you have to be mended, invariably by the white parents that adopt you, and you have to be grateful for that. And I just thought, 'That's not the case.' That, you know, like any other group in any society, we as adoptees, or transracial adoptees, we cover all of the gamut of emotions and experiences. I think there tends to be particularly in East Asian adoptees - so Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese - there is a higher, I think, incidence of that adoption not playing out how adverts advertise it as the 'forever family', 'happily ever after', which is always going to be difficult if you don't actually understand where your child is coming from; even if they are not old enough to actually recall their former life, that is still part of them.

And I think particularly with transracial adoptees, the challenges and possible problems... you grow into them. Because you realise, as you grow older, what you have lost - what has been, in essence, removed from you without your knowledge. So, the life markers of leaving home, or having your first serious relationship, or getting married, having a child... put into stark relief the fact that if you're a transracial adoptee, as in my case, my life doesn't start, there is no start - although there *is* - before I get to the orphanage in Hong Kong. Everything prior to that, any connection, has been erased. So, you are rootless - that kind of racial and cultural DNA that everybody else has is missing one or two links. The things that make you both unique and part of a community in a wider sense... you don't have those. And I think you are - if one is



being honest - in a sense, always chasing those, hoping that you're going to find some of those missing links.

**14.08**

**Samenua Sesher**

I was going to ask – does it continue, does it stay there even if it's in the background, is it there?

**14:15**

**Lucy Sheen**

I think it is, yes. My opinion is as a transracial adoptee, you either get to the point where you embrace the fact that you are neither one thing nor the other: you are not particularly welcomed by the nation that you were brought into, and very often you are shunned by the culture of your birth because you are a strange hybrid of what you look like and what you sound like, which don't... the two things don't marry. And it took me a long time to actually come to terms with that. But once you do, I think you... you're happy with that. Well, I'm happy with that, because I'm now secure in what I'm not to many people, and that is their problem. Not mine anymore.

**15.03**

**Samenua Sesher**

Can I ask you a quick question about language? I remember when I went to South Africa and I was doing some work there, and it became really clear that I looked like I could absolutely be South African, in

terms of my face and so forth. And so, of course, people started to talk to me in the myriad of languages that exist in South Africa, and they would say, 'Oh, what's your home language?' and I would say 'English' and they would sort of look at me like, 'No, what's your home language?' (laughter) and I would say, 'I'm really sorry, I've only got English,' you know, and it was the strangest feeling.

And I was just wondering, because of the way that the early part of your life started, how the language has worked for you? Do you speak any type of Chinese?

**15.50**

### **Lucy Sheen**

I've tried and I've tried, I think I have... I'm sure psychologists would have a field day with me. I get to a certain point and I can't go any further, and the first time I went to Hong Kong was a very peculiar experience. I guess it was the first time that I realised how much of the time in the UK I spent going around with my head down, not actually looking at people, whereas when I got to Hong Kong, I looked like everybody else and it was the white tourists that stood out like a sore thumb. Yes, and as long as I didn't open my mouth, I was fine. I don't know whether you felt that when you went to South Africa. It was such a weird sensation to be physically in the majority. I was just like, wow, you know?

**16.43**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Yeah, it really was, and I mean I had been to other African countries, I had been to Ghana... I actually had been to South Africa before, but a different part - this time I was in Joburg - and it was a very strange sensation to be part of the majority, and it was really was difficult to describe. But interestingly, if I am in West Africa, I still don't necessarily look like I belong there. But in South Africa, I absolutely did; I just fit in like everyone else... until, like you say, I opened my mouth! (laughter)

I am going to just bring you back into the industry now. Over the last three decades, how do you think the industry has changed? You have talked a little bit about it, but do you see more nuance in the type of stories being told and the kind of roles being offered to British East Asian women?

**17:36**

### **Lucy Sheen**

No - to British East Asian women or men. Men are still emasculated, or they're these evildoers or caricatures. Women are still - particularly younger women - still hypersexualised, fetishised, or they're there to be rescued by a white knight in shining armour, as it were. So that hasn't... that hasn't really changed. And that stems from, I think, the way that people of colour are perceived, and it's ingrained. And I think there's a very peculiar attitude that this country has when it comes to East and Southeast Asians, which means that we very rarely go beyond those tropes and stereotypes. So I don't see much give. There are the odd things that happen.

But you know, sort of you look at the States - and the States is obviously not perfect, either - but you look at the States in terms of recent work - *Minari*, *The Farewell* - you see a group of Asian Americans, they just happen to be Asian and American, you know, there's nothing... they're normal, as it were, and I hate having to use that, but there is a normalcy to what they do and it is a story about a family, and it could be any family. *Minari* is the American dream, isn't it? But that's still being perceived as a foreign film, but it's the ultimate American dream. And it just happens to have Asian characters.

**19.11**

### **Samenua Seshar**

What do you think needs to change? I mean, I remember *The Chinese Detective*, and what's horrific is that I have to think that far back to pull up a Chinese lead. But like you say, because East and Southeast Asians are the minority *within* the minority, even though others are sort of pushing forward and there is a bit of a break... but somehow, it seems that there's been even less movement for East Asians and South East Asians, so what do you think needs to change in the industry?

**19:44**

### **Lucy Sheen**

Yeah, I think there are two things. Firstly, we've had a plethora of production companies saying how much they appreciate and realise that diversity is a real problem, it needs to change... Well, that's easy, to put your name to an open letter or to sign a petition or whatever, as

many organisations found out during the resurfacing, shall we say, of Black Lives Matter. And they were caught out and pulled up, and quite rightly so. And I think it's not rocket science. In order to achieve equality, inclusion - I hate saying diversity, because it's another one of those tick boxes - to actually better reflect British society in our drama, for all of its wealth and its diversity and its richness... you need to fund people. You need to not invent more schemes for writers of a particular background, you need to start hiring them. You need to start putting them into positions in front and behind camera that are significant. You need - in a risk-averse industry, I agree - to actually put your money where your mouth is, and start taking on people that aren't the same people... that are people that perhaps are not agented, that have talent, that need to have the door open a bit wider for them, and somebody to stick their foot in it so other people can come through.

Similarly, on the reverse side of that, with British East and Southeast Asians, we need to start speaking up more. We need not to be afraid. I think we... you know, it's that thing, you tell a community they are something for long enough and you end up believing it. We're not a model minority. We are not, you know, acquiescent and silent. You know, the history of China itself is full of revolution and discourse, you know, and people ranting and raving and trying to do something about that. So, absolutely, that is not part of our history if you come from that particular part of the Asian continent. We need to be more forthright - if we don't tell people that certain behaviour is not acceptable, they're going to continue to do it.

Similarly, which is, I think, also an important thing... As a community - and I use that quite loosely because, unlike other ethnic minorities, I

think we are not as unified as we should be, and that, I think that is, you know, a consequence of divide and rule, and if you find a small corner that allows some entry into the wider, more accepted world, then you're going to hang on to it, like funding, you're going to hang on to that... I think we have to take a long, hard look at ourselves, and just because we are of a minority does not mean that we are not capable of being prejudiced or racist ourselves. The level of anti-blackness which was displayed last summer shocked me. I mean, I knew that it was there - you can say it's a cultural thing, fine, but we have to do something about that. And I was quite vocal about that, and got some quite hard pushback, you know, 'race traitor' and all the rest of that nonsense. We can't ask other people from... who have suffered or undergo similar challenges because of their heritage or the colour of their skin, if we are not willing to call out the very thing that we want people to stop doing to us. We have to be very clear about that.

So we have to start getting our own house in order. But I think that is coming together in a way that I haven't seen for a long while, people understanding that as a section of British society, people of heritage, people of colour, whatever we wish to call ourselves... we are much stronger together, our voice is much more potent, and that doesn't mean that we lose our individuality or uniqueness. We absolutely hold on to that and to our heritage, but we join forces with other people who share many, many commonalities in terms of the challenges that we face on a daily basis - which other people don't, you know. And unless we make people understand what that means - living through that kind of pressure, fear, you know - things are never going to change.

## **24.22**

## **Samenua Sesher**

Okay. I am going to quote you on that, because that is so beautifully put (laughter). So to any actor who is listening to this now thinking, 'Oh, last legs, time to go into academia or something...' - what would you say to an actor who's considering giving up?

**24:44**

## **Lucy Sheen**

This is such a weird industry to be in. I think it's true that the moment that I stop actually enjoying it... because that's part of the joy of doing what we do, is that we actually get paid to have fun and to enjoy what we are doing, by and large - there are always those moments where you think (sharp intake of breath), but that's life, isn't it? I think if you're not enjoying it, then perhaps it's time to put your skills into another... use those life... I mean, the amazing thing about being in this industry is the skills that we have are not just required for the entertainment business, I would say that they are an absolute requisite for any industry sector. If you don't have imagination, if you don't have curiosity, or creativity, then you don't get the Einsteins or the Stephen Hawkings of this world - you need that. And it's not just about the three Rs. Obviously, they're important, but what you have as an actor, or as a creative, are those life communication skills of being able to understand people, of being able to have empathy, of being able to see literally outside of the box: unfold it, turn it upside down, and rethink problems or solutions to things. So, you know, doing drama is not just about having fun. It's about being able to communicate, and that's what

we need more of these days as human beings: actually being able to communicate.

## **26.19**

Credit Music - 'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

## **26:29**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Lucy Sheen was nominated by besea.n. besea.n is a grassroots movement created to shine a light on British East and Southeast Asians.

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Seshar, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.