Ming Ho

In conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

GABRIEL GBADAMOSI: Ming Ho, thank you for speaking with WritersMosaic. I'd like to review a little bit your career. You've been a writer for television, on long-running drama series such as *Casualty*, *EastEnders*. You've also written for radio, and you're writing for the stage. You've just recently been writer-in-residence at Theatr Clwyd, and your background is Chinese and Welsh, but you've lived in England much of your life. So, let's begin there. Why did you choose writing when your father, an atomic scientist, might have wanted you to be a scientist?

MING HO: I don't think my dad ever had those kinds of expectations of me, to be honest. I think I'd always been a child who was more on the literary side since I was very small. So, I mean I learnt to read when I was about four, I suppose. I was always making up stories and plays and getting my friends to be in my plays in school and writing poems. So, I think that was… it was never a conscious choice; it was just something that I did. And I think probably for most of my school days, I was more interested in perhaps performing, thinking I was going to be an actor. And then when I became a student, got more interested in maybe directing. So, I

think I didn't ever think of myself as being necessarily a writer in itself, it was just another thing that I did that was all part and parcel of storytelling. I think, where I grew up…my dad worked for the nuclear industry, so he was at Dungeness power station when I was born. And so for the first seven years of my life, we lived down on the Romney Marsh… which today, Dungeness area is quite trendy. People go down there for trendy weekends and take pictures of Derek Jarman's cottage and all of that. But in those days, it was just, you know, quite a bleak place, the furthest away. That's why they put power stations there because nobody else goes there unless they have to. It was a kind of quite a stress-free existence I suppose for my parents in those days because they both had secure jobs. My mum had been a singer before she married but, by the time I was born, she had become a primary school teacher because she couldn't carry on the singing any more. And it was a small… I used to think of it as a village, but now I think it's designated a small town called Lydd. And we would walk to and from school each day. My dad would drive to the power station about 20 minutes away and there were no other people that I knew of [who were] mixed race in that town. I think there was one Malaysian lady that my mum was quite friendly with, who gave us her fridge when she left. But, apart from that, I didn't see anybody who had my mixed heritage and, as far as I was concerned, I was just a totally white British person. That was my cultural experience. And then we moved to Gloucestershire when I was nearly eight. And we lived in Wales for a short time in between with my grandparents, when we were between houses. So, you know, my entire experience culturally was very much, you know, the dominant 1970s white popular culture. I was quite proud, I think, of being ethnically Welsh because I did speak a little bit of Welsh when I was

small. My grandparents spoke Welsh with my mum at home and, you know, I found that all quite romantic. So, I think my Chinese side… I wouldn't say I actually suppressed it, but it wasn't something that I was keen to explore in those days.

GG: A very interesting short film that you made… *British People*, in a series of short films called, I think, *Citizens of Nowhere,* which people will remember as a remark made by one of our former prime ministers…

MH: Actually, can I just do a clarification there? There was… I wrote a play called *Citizens of Nowhere*, which was commissioned by Chinese Arts Now, which was a live audio drama. And then, I was asked by a producer to submit for another project, which was a short film project called *The Uncertain Kingdom*, which was the series of 20 short films. And so, *British People* became the film that was a spin-off, if you like, of the characters in *Citizens of Nowhere*.

GG: But one of the things I noticed in that short film is that it concerns a Chinese family that actually has been living in Scotland. There's a mother, who's now thinking of returning to Hong Kong; there's a brother who keeps his Scottish accent, identifies with the socialism of Keir Hardy, and sees his sister who's kind of going up to a hustings to become a Conservative candidate for Parliament; which in some way involves a kind of whitewashing, a kind of codeswitching that she becomes R.P., and so on. In your work, are you looking in some ways about, kind of, how we fit into wider British society and what the costs of that might be?

MH: I think I'm thinking a lot more about it now because I think my experience has been, as I said, very much being in isolation really when I was growing up. And I think people who grow up in kind of wider groups of ethnic heritage perhaps… I mean I think, you know, thinking of yourself, you know, having written a book about your own childhood…

GG: I'm Irish and Nigerian.

MH: Yes, Irish, and Nigerian…and having grown up in a family with siblings as part of a wider community which was a very mixed urban community. And I think my own experience of growing up in, to start with a quite remote rural place; and then in a kind of very southern, you know, very affluent, quite artistic town but, you know, very predominantly white, middle-class, and then moving to London when I was older… I think I hadn't begun really to unpick my different layers of identity, until quite recently. And I think that family that I created in *Citizens of Nowhere* and then in *British People*, was an attempt to kind of tease out those different layers because I was very obsessed at the time with Brexit and I still am. I'm so angry about Brexit: the whole idea that you can, kind of, roll back 50 years of mixed identity and us, kind of, being interconnected with the world and saying, 'No, actually isolation is what it's about. You can only be one thing', really grates on me. And, you know, what does it say to people like us who are of mixed heritage… who can't identify ethnically instantly with one group and one group only? Who are we? You know, we're non-people. So I created that family to look at different ways of responding to being ethnically something that's not white British, but

feeling yourself to be white British, or feeling yourself to be as British as anyone else.

GG: Let me take you back again to that short film, *British People*.

MH: Yes.

GG: I was particularly, kind of, struck by something within the storyline, in which it flashes back to the childhood, the school childhood of the brother and sister. And we see the brother making a sacrifice on behalf of the sister; and the sister wordlessly but guiltily accepting that sacrifice to be able to continue her path. The brother is expelled, and she can remain in the school. Sacrifice…

MH: Yeah.

GG: … Sacrifice in relation to identity? Your mother sacrificed a career as a singer, which she had, to be with your father. And, as a carer of your mother in later years through dementia, did you feel sacrifice as a theme beginning to emerge for you?

MH: I think sacrifice is something that I would imagine to be a conscious choice; a bit like bravery. You know, I don't think you can say you're brave unless you have deliberately chosen to do something in full knowledge that it scares you. You can show fortitude, you can show, you know…

GG: Courage.

MH: … courage. But I think to actually be brave, you have to overcome something which you know scares you and choose to do it anyway. And I think, similarly, sacrifice means that you look at a situation and you go, 'I could do this but I'm going to do that because it's better for somebody else'. Now, I don't think that I necessarily did that consciously, it's just, 'Here is my mum and she needs looking after', and obviously I'm going to do that. And there were times along the way when I did look at my own situation and think, 'I can see that this is making me lose my place in the world, really'. But I couldn't really see a way around that. There was no way that I could choose not to look after my mum because there was no one else to do it and because she's my mum and I love her, you know. But equally, if somebody had been able to wave a magic wand and say, 'Do you want to not sacrifice your career as a TV drama writer and you can somehow carry on doing that and look after your mum and she'll be fine?' Well obviously, I would have said, 'Yes, thank you. You know, I don't want to sacrifice anything.' So, in terms of the characters in that film and play, I think there's one character who does make a conscious choice; because she makes the calculation that the world is not fair and the world requires me to fit in and say the right things and behave the right way and then I can play the people who run it at their own game and I will become one of them and I will rule the world myself. So I think that's a conscious choice for her, and her brother, who sees himself as having more moral integrity, feels that the way to deal with the injustice in the world is to fight it, not

go along with it. And his sister feels well actually, you have a better chance doing it the other way.

GG: So, I'm just going to take … this is a process – the process of thinking of oneself as white British; thinking of oneself as British; and is that white, but then it's British? It's a values-based theme: the whole idea of can you disappear, or do you kind of kick against that and somehow kind of assert a quite distinct identity when it comes to a central theme in your work in the last decades, related to your mother's dementia or Alzheimer's… and focus on the exquisite and extraordinary radio play produced by the BBC, *The Things We Never Said*? Now, first of all, I must say the two actors, the mother and the daughter, played by Siân Phillips as the mother, and Lia Williams as the daughter, do the script enormous justice. The script itself is fascinating. It starts off as a kind of monologue from the daughter and then becomes a dialogue with the mother. And as the dementia progresses, the dialogue slips and it becomes a series of inter-cut monologues. And then towards the end, they somehow speak in the same voice, rather like a kind of duet in an operetta. So, I could see your mother's profession of music; I could see that kind of song. But I could also see a kind of poetry emerging; the texture of things in which, as it were, daily rituals kind of merge families, keep individuals as one breathing, active whole. What was it you were looking to explore as you began writing the play, and what did you find as you continued and got towards the end before it was ever produced?

MH: I think what I was trying to do… This play came out of… I wrote another play – I was on the Royal Court Writers' Group, which was the first group they did for people over the grand old age of 26 – and I wrote another play called *Exhumation,* which was kind of a sketch for this play in a way. It was a slightly more realistic play… again, inspired by me and my mum, looking at the subsidence issue that we had with our house, and using that as a metaphor for my mum's eroding cognition, if you like. But it had… it had some more realistic elements in it; it had another couple of characters. And I was given a workshop of that and then I looked at that and looked at the feedback and realised that, actually, I hadn't been brave enough, that I was still kind of partially stuck with my TV writer's structure of thinking that I had to write a proper narrative and that I had some slightly abstract elements within that but it still had a beginning, middle and an end, and all of that. And actually what I really wanted to say… the essence of it was not a play about… an observational play about dementia, because there had been quite a lot of those since and there were a few emerging around that time. But I didn't want to write a play that looks at a lady with dementia and sees her kind of going around being dotty and say, 'Gosh, isn't this hard?' It was an attempt to explore the actual space between two people in a relationship where everything that your shared history made up the fabric of that relationship is unravelling; and how do you maintain that relationship when one of you knows, 'I came out of your body literally, you gave birth to me, and yet you can look at me and I see emptiness in your eyes now. And I know that you love me more than life itself. You would've done anything for me, and I hope I would do the same for you now. But I feel that, I'm conscious of that, but I can sit beside you and on a good day, you might be kind of quite glad

I'm here and think that I'm a nice lady and "what a lovely girl", as my mum would sometimes say to me when I visited her in the home; and yet I know that doesn't have any foundation to it. It's not because, you know, that I'm your daughter and you love me; it's just because in that moment, I seem to be quite a nice lady.' I wrote the play, I think in its first form in about 2016, and she died at the beginning of 2020. So, you know, we had a few years more, but those were years when, you know, it just got more and more the case that I had to accept that I couldn't access that history with her anymore and that I had to engage with her on the level of being in the moment each time I saw her. And she might be in a good mood; she might not. She might not even be awake some of the time. That play was a way of trying to access the yearning of all of that lifetime that I'm trying to reach out and say, 'Please, please, feel it! Even if you can't think it, please feel it!' And the desperation of somebody like me who is desperate for the other person to feel it and knowing that they're not entitled to ask for it and that they can't make it happen. It was an attempt also to evoke how precious normality is because people often think that the things that you miss most when someone has dementia is, 'Oh, well they won't remember your birthday, or their own wedding anniversary, or their wedding day or, you know, the birth of a grandchild or something like that.' Whereas I found that the things I missed most were the days we could just sit at home being *us,* watching telly, not necessarily saying anything. So, I think that whole play was an attempt to evoke the preciousness of the ordinary – that those are the things that I miss most now.

GG: So, when I was listening to *The Things We Never Said*, I saw a poet emerge. Let's take one instance. It's an extraordinary, elegiac poem for the loss of another person; the loss of one's own identity and the celebration of having been and somehow continuing to be in the memory of things. There's a tea set with bluebells…

MH: Bluebells, yeah.

GG: …the bluebell tea set. And in other pieces of yours, the places in which you grew up, these begin to tell a story; not a story that's meant monumentally to last forever, but which reaffirms that we had our lives; we have the memory of this still.

MH: That tea set… that tea set was a real tea set, and it was significant because it had actually been my grandmother's tea set. So, to my mum, I knew it had been significant. When her dementia began to progress she started obsessing over these things and saying, 'Where's this? Where's that?' You know, 'They've sold off this and that.' And the fact is that years later when she had forgotten about it and I think when she was in the home, I found the bluebell tea set in the house. And I so wanted her to know that because I wanted her to know it still exists. And, in a way, it had become a symbol for 'our life still exists, our history still exists', you know. So, to me these things are kind of precious artifacts that say that 'that was a life that was lived,' and there's a thread between this life and that life.

GG: As I'm speaking to you, I can see, I can feel even a kind of… a tension, a kind of pull, a conflict between on the one hand, continuity of the material culture of your lives and letting go… disappearance…

MH: Yeah, yeah.

GG: …as though really what we're saying is, 'Well, we are dust', and the memory of you, your mother, your father, your grandparents, that… that will go.

MH: It will, and I think I'm particularly conscious of it because I don't have a partner or children myself. So, I think… and I don't have siblings. So, I think at least if I had siblings, we would have a shared history. [Laughs]

GG: I'm just going to take you, if I might, a little sidestep. Talk to me about Wales.

MH: Yeah.

GG: Are you Welsh?

MH: I would say that I've always felt that I was and yet when I'm asked to define that in terms of… Obviously, nowadays, there are all sorts of funding initiatives and stuff where you can apply for things if you are from a certain ethnic group; and I kind of hesitate to own that for myself because I think, 'Well, I'm not a Welsh-Welsh person, in comparison with a proper Welsh person today, in terms of I don't

live there, I don't speak the language anymore, but I am ethnically Welsh.' So, I think to myself, 'Well, I am as Welsh as I am Chinese'. And people are much keener to pigeonhole me as being 'You must be Chinese because you have a Chinese name, and you have a slightly Chinese-y face.' Whereas, you know, where are the people who are claiming me to be Welsh? Well… Theatr Clwyd, thank you very much. Tamara Harvey. Yes, they have claimed me as Welsh; they gave me a residency to go and write some work for them which I really enjoyed doing. I've written another thing, which I'm hoping will see the light of day, which is a much bigger main stage play which is specifically about something that happened in Llandudno – in the past and in the present. But, I mean I've always felt more Welsh than Chinese because at least I did have my Welsh grandparents for the first 13 years of my life. We spent a lot of time in Wales when I was young. I went to school there for a few months in a Welsh-speaking school, you know. So, and also that was something that seemed to be culturally quite romantic, you know, that whole Celtic thing, you know. So, being Irish or Welsh or Scots, I think, you know, always seems more romantic than English somehow.

GG: Reading you, and certainly now speaking with you, rather than look at the nebulous edges of Welshness, I see within a structure of feeling… your Welshness. I see that from outside. You don't have to accept this, but something to do with the way you memorialise family; what family means for you that may be in ways I don't recognise. Also, Chinese, and also part of your English upbringing.

MH: I think probably Chinese people would say that that's a very Chinese thing, as well. But I don't recognise it in my own experience as being that because I didn't grow up in a framework where we had that. But I mean I did find when I was clearing out the house… I found some photos of my dad's from the 1950s, which I had never… I don't remember having ever seen during his lifetime, which is very sad because I would love to have asked him about them. But one of them was what appeared to me… it was quite shocking to me because I didn't initially understand what it was… was a picture of his own father's funeral. His father died, again, very spookily, pretty much around the time that my parents got married. So, if not exactly the day, it was within the week. He died of a heart attack quite suddenly and so my dad wasn't able to go back for the funeral because in those days it was a long voyage by ship of several weeks. When he came over initially, he came on a Japanese cargo ship, which took about six weeks. So, that wasn't an option; he didn't go. So, obviously the family must have sent him some photos of that. And when I found this in our house, it looked to me a bit like a Ku Klux Klan picture because they were all wearing kind of white pointy outfits. And I didn't understand that this was mourning wear for Chinese families at that time. So, they weren't quite as pointy as the really scary ones, but it did kind of bring me up because I thought, 'Gosh, this is… this feels culturally very alien to me. I don't know what this is, and I don't really have anyone around to tell me now.' That whole ritual side of things… I think when my dad died, certainly I remember kind of having a flirtation with, kind of, Buddhism or Confucianism, or thinking that I want some kind of funeral ritual, you know?

GG: Daoism.

MH: Yes. … you know, something that is that kind of ancestor worship kind of thing, that kind of shrine thing; because I don't really have any… any other faith to peg it on. I'm not… I mean I've grown up, obviously, in a kind of generally CofE church tradition but, at that time, when I was traumatised, I did feel the need to have some kind of ritual. And I remember, because I was doing Victorian Literature at the time in my degree… and I remember reading a lot of stuff – I've got books on the shelf over there still – about Victorian mourning and the whole idea of having a very structured mourning period and, you know, the gradations of what colours of mourning you could wear, going from black to purple to grey to, you know… You know, at the time that being quite an oppressive thing if you were not feeling it in the moment; but, equally, seeing that that can actually be quite helpful because if you have an outward sign that says, 'I'm still mourning' a year later, you know, at least people know not to expect too much of you. Whereas I think I probably buried all of that quite quickly because I had to get on and do my finals; I had to move to London; I had to try and find a job; I was dealing with my mum being traumatised. And I think because we didn't have any rituals, I think there are things which affected me years later that maybe could have come out more healthily if there had been some kind of communal structure.

GG: On the other hand, think about it like this: that it is very general in the experience of migrants and migrant families that the next generation doesn't remember… doesn't know what those funny costumes at a funeral are about. And

that, as it were, the kind of… the specificity of our ancestral cultures, like with dementia, begin to be erased. So the question is what happens in that gap? Is it nothing? Is it only loss? Or is it a space within which we can creatively remember? We can create what we don't know; we make it up. If we need rituals to get us through these critical periods in our lives.

MH: I think, I think…

GG: Your playwriting strikes me as a bit like that!

MH: Yes. I think so. I mean I think, you know, that play *The Things We Never Said*, I realise retrospectively that I had written it in the form of a kind of song cycle, which made sense because my mum was a singer of lieder, and that's what she did. And she would listen to those Schubert songs, you know, and I had done that entirely unconsciously. But I think also, I mean I've written about this for you – which will be on the *WritersMosaic* website – about how public mourning rituals can provide a focus for people's personal griefs. Because I think that… you know, the obvious example was Princess Diana, where there was this huge outpouring and people, myself included at the time, I put my hand up and say I looked at that and I thought, 'This is over the top'. You know, why are people doing their nut… Yes, it's sad, it's tragic, it's awful that somebody that young with two small children, you know, has lost her life and yet… Actually, I hate that phrase 'lost her life'. She died… was killed in an accident. Let's be frank about it. But I couldn't really see why so many people were so hysterical about it at the time. But I think

it was because we don't have the big rituals anymore; we don't tend to have… Some cultures still do; they might still have a big wake for a funeral. I think, obviously, there have been plays written about 'nine nights', … you know since…

GG: The Caribbean form of mourning.

MH: Yes. And also, you know, Irish culture and certainly, actually, Welsh culture. I think we certainly had a tradition also of expecting there to be an open coffin and that historically you would have the coffin in the house and people would come around and pay their respects. I think we felt slightly adrift really when my grandparents died because they died in our town in England and then we had to get their bodies taken back to Wales for the funeral because they were going to be buried in their own hometown. But we still went to the chapel of rest, and we saw the open coffin and we kind of did a bit of that. And then, when my dad died, we did that in our own house even though there was only my mum and me. Because we felt the need to do that, it was psychologically helpful to have that period of saying: 'We can look at this dead body and pay it respect as being the remains of the person that we love but we acknowledge that that person is somewhere else now.' Where that is, is debatable. Is it anywhere? But I think coming to terms with the body being the shell, I think is quite psychologically important. It was to me, I think. But, equally, other people don't feel that.

GG: Just because I really want anyone listening to go and find and listen to you; it's a very, very short sort of half hour or so – well, 48 minutes – *The Things We Never Said*. At the end in this, kind of strange…

MH: I mean, I have to say, actually I'm afraid you can't publicly listen to it at the moment because it is not on iPlayer; and I had hoped that they would put it back on there. So there is an MP3 that is available to personal enquiries. But if you'd like to read the script, you can go to BBC Writers Room and it is downloadable as a script to read from there. And there is also an extract that was in an episode of *Fortunately* by Jane Garvey and Fi Glover which gives you a little taste of it. I'm hoping that it will be re-released back on iPlayer when they repeat it; but for the moment, I mean if anyone's interested, please lobby the BBC, and ask them to put it out as a podcast, because I know I've had lots of enquiries about it. There's lots of people who would like to have it.

GG: Oh, uh… this must be listened to. I think it's a classic and it should never go out of circulation. At the end where the two interlocking monologues effectively become this kind of strange duet, there's a moment where they become the same person, but also distinguished from each other, in that the daughter describes herself as a 45-year-old woman whom somehow life has passed. But the mother is a girl… waiting.

MH: Yeah.

GG: …and they are both, both these things. It is absolutely beautiful.

MH: And I think that's such an irony, isn't it? Because, you know, for the mother… I mean, as happened with my mum, you know, her memory like a lot of people with dementia, regresses so that the things that they remember last and longest are the earliest memories, until even those, kind of subside. But, you know, in her head she was still a young girl; she was still a child. She was still thinking about her parents as they were when she was a small child; and she still thinks of her home that was the home that she had when she was growing up in Lancashire, before her parents moved back to Wales. And that's a life full of possibility, isn't it? Because if you're still a girl, you still get everything ahead of you. She didn't know that she'd already been married and had a daughter. And, to me, that seemed tragic. But equally to her, it wasn't, because she could still do those things.

GG: Finally, Ming… plans for the future.

MH: Plans for the future. Gosh… Well, I think… obviously, I would like to write some more TV; I would like to write film; I would like to write stage; I would like to write books; I would like to direct something again. I think, you know, that there are things in my own work that I would like to direct. I think certainly having worked on some short films in recent years, I think that is something that I'm interested in doing, now that particularly writer-directors in film have become much more respected in a way than just writers… that if you… if you have a vision,

I think, you know, if you can realise it yourself, that's more of a complete thing.

So, that's my hope for the future.

GG: Ming Ho. Thank you, very much.

MH: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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