

THE CONVERSATION

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Joelistics (left) and James Mangohig in In Between Two. WilliamYang

Ancestry, storytelling, and fighting racism with rap

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“We are our ancestors’ unfinished sentences, we are their wildest dreams and their most elaborate re-mixes,” says Asian-Australian rapper Joelistics’ (Joel Ma) at the end of a breathtaking 70 minutes of beats, raps, and storytelling in *In Between Two*. It is a verbal tribute to his ancestors that opens up a kind of cosmic dance for all of us, for elders past and present, and for those of us born here, who came here, and those whose identity is complex and multiple.

In Between Two brings together wordsmith-performers Joelistics and James Mangohig, both Australians with Asian-born fathers. When the two men met some years ago in Darwin, they forged an immediate bond built on their shared devotion to hip-hop, Regurgitator (a Brisbane band with an Asian-Australian rocker on lead vocals), and the fact that both had white mothers who married Asian men.

Ma grew up in Sydney when racist rhetoric and bullying spiked following Pauline Hanson’s famous warning that, “We are in danger of being swamped by Asians”. He recalls of the time that “suddenly, where you came from was important”. He raps back to Hanson, serving up doses of the ugly rhetoric of that time such as the observation that “mixed race” kids such as himself had eyes that formed a “slight incline, as in not a full slope”. At one point Ma observes wittily, “That cultural cringe, I own the shit out of it.”

Author



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Fundamentally, this is an evening of Australian family stories, ones that cross continents, countries, and cultures. Each man presents distillations of parents, grandparents, and siblings, as the other performer underscores the tale with beats and notes on the guitar, bass, beat machine, and keyboards.

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Produced by Contemporary Asian Australian Performance, *In Between Two* is a continuation of a series of Asian-American storytelling using a form developed by photographer and master storyteller William Yang. Earlier this year this resulted in *Backstories* at the Adelaide International Festival. Dramaturged by Yang and Annette Shun Wah, and sensitively directed by Suzanne Chaundy, the new iteration, like the earlier ones, involves the careful curation of family photos shown on large screens at the back of the stage as the performer speaks directly to the audience.

The pairing of Ma and Mangohig is particularly well-suited, as both have extraordinarily different tales to tell. That both are charismatic, even charming, as entertainers and human beings, adds a further dimension and sense of ease for the audience. The two men are, quite simply, very much at home on stage.

Ma's family story is the stuff of novels. His grandmother Edith, an Australian-born Chinese beauty, was matched with a handsome young man from Hong Kong who, in 1933, selected her to be his bride from a series of photos. The couple settled in Sydney and eventually ran *Chequers*, one of the world's great nightclubs during its heyday in the 1960s. His parents, "hippies" who travelled the world together, broke up by the time he was two years old.

Mangohig, by contrast, grew up in a church-centred evangelical environment with a preacher father who hailed from a small town in the south of the Philippines. His mother, the daughter of conservative Dutch migrants, overcame parental objections to the marriage, and the couple settled in Darwin, where Mangohig's musical interests were developed in church. Frequent family trips to the Philippines made him at home in both cultures.

Both men experienced crises in young adulthood, finding redemption through music. For Mangohig, this meant leaving Darwin, a short, unsuitable marriage, and accepting the condemnation from his church that he was "no longer using his talent for God". Ma, who spent his teen years "living up to the negative" expectations of others, came to see that it wasn't simply that he "wasn't Australian enough [or] Chinese enough," but that he was often simply "too stoned."

"The art of sampling," Ma recalls, meant "finding those little nuggets of gold" and making something new out of them. This is where the life paths of both men connect today. Indeed, in the crafting of their stories composed of these little nuggets of gold, Ma and Mangohig show that they are their ancestors' most elaborate re-mixes.

In Between Two is showing as part of the OzAsia Festival. It will be staged as part of the Melbourne Festival from October 11-15.

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