

Merrily Breaking Barriers

The New York Times

January 26, 2020 Sunday

Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2020 The New York Times Company

Section: Section ST; Column 0; Style Desk; Pg. 1; WITH ...

Length: 3243 words

Byline: By Maureen Dowd

Body

The show's first Chinese-American cast member talks resisting conversion therapy, playing politicians and quitting Twitter.

Bowen Yang went wild and crazy when he was christened as the newest cast member on "Saturday Night Live."

He ordered some coasters from Amazon. Gray ones.

"I never thought I would be a coasters person," he says, marveling. "And here I am."

This is not your father's "S.N.L." The powder of choice at Studio 8-H nowadays is Emergen-C. The sweet-tempered Mr. Yang, 29, seems like a shockingly well-adjusted addition to a show renowned for a lurid history of tortured souls and drug overdoses.

Forty-five years after John Belushi became a sensation with a skit about a sword-slashing Samurai grunting fake Japanese, 'S.N.L.' finally has its first Chinese-American cast member. When Awkwafina hosted in 2018 after her star turn in "Crazy Rich Asians," she said in her monologue that she was a fan girl standing outside 30 Rock 18 years earlier when the first and only other Asian female host, Lucy Liu, had appeared in 2000 to promote "Charlie's Angels."

"It totally changed what I thought was possible for an Asian-American woman," she said.

The Liu show featured the actress giving Tracy Morgan a massage, walking on his back, and Mr. Morgan telling her, "We love you long time."

Mr. Yang is also one of the first openly gay comedians on the show, along with the luminous Kate McKinnon. "Bowen Yang Is Bringing the Queer Agenda to Television," Out magazine proclaimed with satisfaction.

He has made a mark playing Kim Jong-un (for which he learned his lines in Korean), Andrew Yang and his own creation on "Weekend Update": "Trade Daddy," the catty Chinese trade representative negotiating with the Trump administration.

"A tariff is like a tax but it's a little bit bitchyyy," Trade Daddy explains. "And a retaliatory tariff is when China goes, 'No rare earth minerals for you, you've been baaaad.'"

Merrily Breaking Barriers

For his "S.N.L." audition, feeling he had run out of Asian-American public figures, he did an impression of The New York Times's iconic former chief book critic, Michiko Kakutani, who is so reclusive that most people don't know what she looks like or how she talks.

With nothing to go on, he resorted to inventing a character wildly different from the shy, stylish writer. "I made her this very gruff, aggressive woman," he says. "And of course that's not what she sounds like, that was the fun of it."

He goes into Kakutani mode, imagining her racing to review a pile of books: "Jonathan Franzen and 'The Corrections,' drivel, claptrap. Well, I got to go punch Junot Díaz in the face now."

Mr. Yang met me one recent morning in Midtown at the Wrecking Club, a "rage room" where patrons suit up and smash defunct office equipment with crowbars and sledgehammers, "Office Space"-style. In his experience, it's an ideal third-date spot.

After demolishing some printers and scanners, he donned his signature Bruno Chaussignand half-moon spectacles and a car coat by Clothsurgeon, a label that retrofits vintage sportswear brands like Champion. The comedian is not one for diva demands, even though he loves divas.

"I want to have two suitcases full of hair extensions by the time I'm 40," he says brightly. He chose the name Faye Dunaway as his Instagram handle because "she's the perennial diva." (Indeed, just last year, Ms. Dunaway was sued by an assistant who said she subjected him to abusive tirades and called him "a little homosexual boy.")

Mr. Yang's thrill at getting promoted after a season-long test run in the writers' room was marred by the controversy over another comedian hired at the same time, Shane Gillis. Lorne Michaels dropped Mr. Gillis days after hiring him when footage turned up showing him lobbing homophobic insults at other comedians and making racist comments.

Mr. Gillis used epithets for gay and Chinese people and said that Chinatown disgusts him. He said that an Asian person trying to learn English is "more annoying than any other minority playing music at a restaurant loud on their phone." ("I'm a comedian who pushes boundaries. I sometimes miss," he wrote in a statement posted to Twitter after the clips emerged. "I'm happy to apologize to anyone who's actually offended by anything I've said.")

Mr. Yang went on a long-planned solo vacation to Turks and Caicos as the story blew up. He opted to stay out of the fray.

"I truly didn't feel like it took away anything," he says. "It was just this kind of weird coinciding thing. And the reason I didn't comment on it was because there was a sense of opposition being created between the two of us, right? But a lot of it was invented because it wasn't like he was making any comments about me specifically. So I felt like that gave me agency to move away from the situation. And then a thing that Lorne said to me, too, while that was all happening, which kind of gave me a lot of comfort, weirdly. He said 'The last thing I want you to do is be the poster child of racial harmony.' And for some reason it gave me the freedom to not even really do anything at all."

Mr. Michaels notes that "everyone wants Bowen as a Voice Of and that's a lot of pressure on him. But he's remarkably funny and consistent."

When Mr. Yang grabbed Mikey Day's crotch in a skit with J-Lo, the deadpan Mr. Michaels mused to himself, "Oh, we just did that on television. And it was really funny."

Mr. Yang's dead-on impression of his boss consists of a single word, complete with a Canadian intonation, often heard when a skit isn't working at rehearsal: "No."

His "guiding principle" of late has been inspired by the trans pop star Kim Petras, who responded to the hate-mongering Westboro Baptist Church picketing her appearance in Kansas City by posing saucily in front of the group and captioning the picture with a message: "Hoes Mad."

Merrily Breaking Barriers

When Mr. Yang got hit with criticism on social media from "a group of people who are convinced that there's this conspiracy theory that only effeminate Asian men get elevated," he simply thought to himself, "Hoes mad, hoes mad, hoes mad."

Coming Out Twice

Mr. Yang cogitated about polite refusal in the attention economy as he dealt with a Twitter feed that grew more homophobic and racist as his celebrity grew.

"It's nothing I haven't heard before in my life," he says. "It's a scale issue. We tell ourselves, 'It's important to get a sense of what people are saying about me.' But it really feeds some narcissistic impulse to check and see if people like you. I would scroll through my feed, and it would be horrible. And it felt masochistic in a way, like I was setting myself up for pain and humiliation, like a private way of seeing something bad. Sitting with that was an awful, awful exercise."

Mr. Yang got drawn into some internet dust-ups late on Saturday nights and on Sundays. When Andrew Yang's Yang Gang got on his case, criticizing him for squinting too much and not nailing the candidate's mannerisms like the "Yang claw," Bowen recalls, "I was very drunk one night and a lot of them were saying some mean things and I just kind of blocked them." (Which infuriated them more, of course.)

Andrew Yang himself has no such problems with the bit. "I'm thrilled that Bowen Yang is on S.N.L. and I enjoy his impressions of me a great deal," he wrote in an email. "Anytime I've been on the debate stage, I actually look forward to that week's episode to see what Bowen does next. Plus, his last name is Yang so he starts the impression halfway there."

In a pledge that many make but struggle to keep, Bowen says that he quit Twitter "once and for all" over the Christmas break.

"It was the perfect time to slink off, like doing an Irish goodbye at a party," he says. "Aidy Bryant said, 'You'll never look back.'"

He is reading a book called "How to Do Nothing," by Jenny Odell, which The Times called "a manifesto for opting out of an internet-dominated world." Mr. Yang is taken by Ms. Odell's example of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, who likes to say, "I would prefer not to."

He and his older sister, whose first name is Yang, had a peripatetic upbringing. "I wouldn't have been born if my parents had stayed in China," he says of the one-child policy the country had then. "Which is kind of funny. But it also just kind of fills me with this existential dread."

His parents are only just beginning to understand what a cultural touchstone "S.N.L." is. His father's story is mythic in their family: Ruilin Yang grew up in a straw and mud hut in an arid, rural part of China, just south of Mongolia, with illiterate parents, according to Bowen.

"He pretty much destroyed his eyesight from all the hours he spent reading books by candlelight," the son says. "Then he got into university at a time when it was almost impossible to do, just after the Cultural Revolution. So growing up my sister and I had that classic first-generation mitzvah over our heads: that we work hard, since hard work could get you anywhere." The children spoke Mandarin at home and went to Chinese Sunday school.

The family moved to Brisbane, Australia, so that Ruilin could get a doctorate in mining explosives. That's where Bowen was born. His mother, Meng, a gynecologist in China, stopped working for a while to raise her children. They moved to Canada, where they lived until Bowen was 9 -- something that he and Mr. Michaels bond over -- and then to Aurora, a suburb of Denver.

When I tell Mr. Yang that he seems too sane to be on "S.N.L.," he assures me, "I'm pretty damaged."

Merrily Breaking Barriers

He seems placid as he talks about teenage years that must have been painful. When he was 17, his parents discovered a conversation on AOL Instant Messenger. "Me sort of having lewd conversations with someone, just revealing that this was who I was, that I was gay," he recalls. "They just sat me down and yelled at me and said, 'We don't understand this. Where we come from, this doesn't happen.'"

"I'd only seen my father cry when my grandpa died and now he's sobbing in front of me every day at dinner. And I'm thinking, 'How do I make this right?' This is the worst thing you can do as a child of immigrants. It's just like you don't want your parents to suffer this much over you."

One day he came home and his father told him he had arranged for eight sessions with a specialist in Colorado Springs; it turned out to be gay conversion therapy.

"I allowed myself the thought experiment of: 'What if this could work?'" Mr. Yang says. "Even though as I read up on it, I was just like, 'Oh, wait, this is all completely crackers.'"

"At the first session, he asks me, 'Would you like this to be Christ centered or a secular sort of experience?' And I was like, 'I guess nonreligious.' But even for him to ask that question means that there was this kind of religious agenda behind it anyway."

"The first few sessions were talk therapy, which I liked, and then it veers off into this place of, 'Let's go through a sensory description of how you were feeling when you've been attracted to men.' And then the counselor would go through the circular reasoning thing of, 'Well, weren't you feeling uncomfortable a little bit when you saw that boy you liked?' And I was like, 'Not really.' He goes, 'How did your chest feel?' And I was like, 'Maybe I was slouching a little bit.' And he goes, 'See? That all stems from shame.' It was just crazy. Explain the gay away with pseudoscience."

I wonder why his parents, both scientists, could not see the absurdity of it.

"It was a cultural thing for them, this cultural value around masculinity, around keeping the family line going, keeping certain things holy and sacred," he says. "It was me wanting to meet them halfway but realizing it had to be pretty absolute. It was an either-or thing. There was not that much middle ground."

I ask about the vice president's history of anti-L.G.B.T.Q. stances and Mr. Yang calls it "very troubling," and "part of a value system that is so anathema about what they think America is and what they think is normal."

Once the therapy was complete, his father let Bowen go to New York University, where his sister, already a student there, could "chaperone" him.

"The irony of it all is I went to the gayest undergrad in the country," he says, smiling, about his alma mater, which he mocks in stand-up routines as "a real estate firm," "celebrity day care center" and "a multicomplex head-shot studio."

"I spent freshman year trying straightness on for size and failing miserably," he says. "I sort of tricked myself into having a crush on a girl but it was just kind of a weird, weird, weird pit stop. Then I would look at a boy and be like, 'Oh, I want to talk to him.'" Mr. Yang has a tattoo on his arm, drawn by a nonbinary Chinese tattoo artist, with ancient signets. They represent his parents' last names. He never got mad at them.

"I had this second coming out with them while I was in college and went through this whole flare-up again with them, where they couldn't accept it," Mr. Yang says. "And then eventually, I just got to this place of standing firm and being like, 'This is sort of a fixed point, you guys. I can't really do anything about this. So either you meet me here or you don't meet me.'"

"It never got to the point of, 'I won't come home again.' I was just like, 'I'm not going to argue with them. Like my dad every now and then will be like, 'So, when are you going to meet a girl?' And I'll just calmly be like, 'Dad, it's not going to happen.' I mean, it's O.K. Both my parents are doing a lot of work to just try to understand and I can't rush them. I can't resent them for not arriving at any place sooner than they're able to get there.'"

Merrily Breaking Barriers

His parents and sister proudly came to his first show as a cast member last fall.

Steve Martin's Banjo

Bowen went to pre-med classes, got a chemistry degree, and took the MCAT, partly influenced by the character played by his idol Sandra Oh on "Grey's Anatomy."

"Seeing Sandra's character as someone who was just neurotic and driven by success, that looked fun and cool," he says. "I related and aspired to that on some level."

After opting out of medical school, Mr. Yang taught himself Photoshop and worked as a graphic designer at One Kings Lane, a luxury home décor website, for five years.

"The culture there is mostly women and it benefits from that," he says. "They put up with so much of my crazy stuff, when I had to go to auditions on lunch breaks or leave early to do shows."

He couldn't afford much on the site but he did splurge for one \$85 item from a tag sale of Steve Martin's belongings: a miniature banjo on a wire stand, which he keeps on his desk at "S.N.L." as a good luck talisman.

Ms. Oh, who played the Korean translator to his Kim Jong-un when she hosted the show, raves about Mr. Yang's talent. She first noticed him when she saw one of his hilarious lip syncs on social media, where he reproduces dialogue from diva scenes. (Reese Witherspoon freaking out on the cop over her D.U.I. arrest; a Long Island man known as "Bagel Boss," whose meltdown in a bagel shop went viral; Tyra Banks popping off at an ungrateful contestant on "America's Next Top Model"; a scrap between Don Draper and Peggy Olson.; and the Miranda Priestly frostbitten "You think this has nothing to do with you" cerulean monologue.)

"I thought, dang, Bowen Yang is doing Miranda Priestly better than Meryl Streep did it," Ms. Oh told me.

Mr. Yang says he is still trying to "crack" Sally Field's funeral scene in "Steel Magnolias."

[Video: Watch on YouTube.]

His finest moment -- or at least his filthiest -- came with the viral Sara Lee "S.N.L." sketch he wrote with his friend Julio Torres. The sketch, which Mr. Yang also appeared in, featured the guest host Harry Styles as a social media manager for Sara Lee, so wildly incompetent that he mixes up his own raunchy Instagram account with that of the wholesome bread brand.

"The language around the Sara Lee captions in that sketch all came from that weird, gay, sad hive mind of the app culture of being rejected or being disappointed on those apps," Mr. Yang says.

When I ask Alec Baldwin about his young colleague, he says, "He seems supersmart. And he has that edge that some comic actors have that allows them to do both comedy and drama, like Robin Williams."

Mr. Yang has a supporting role as a competitive cousin in the new Comedy Central show "Awkwafina Is Nora From Queens." And he dreams of reimagining the cop buddy movie or really confusing people by starring in an action movie.

I asked Matt Rogers, a comedian who is Mr. Yang's co-host on their podcast, "Las Culturistas," if success has spoiled his friend, who has moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a doorman building in the Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn.

"He has nicer art on the walls of his apartment -- honestly, I don't even have the vocabulary for some of the stuff," Mr. Rogers said. "And I will say, his gifts have gotten better. He bought me a pair of Alexander McQueen sneakers. I was like, 'Girl, I bought you a hat from the rock 'n' roller coaster attraction at the store at Walt Disney World after I got off the ride.'"

Merrily Breaking Barriers

Mr. Rogers stressed how important it was that Mr. Yang is breaking barriers on "S.N.L."

"I get emotional as I say this, but so many people in this country watch that show and think, 'God, I wish I could see myself up there.' And Bowen allows so many different kinds of people to have that connection.

"I feel bad for everyone else that they're not his best friend."

[Live from New York, it's a few more questions!]

Confirm or Deny

Maureen Dowd: After Seth Rogen's "The Interview," about Kim Jong-un, sparked the Sony hack, you were nervous to play the Korean dictator.

Bowen Yang: Yeah, it was fraught. Everyone said, 'Be careful if you see a car waiting outside when you go home.' But so far, so good.

You once spent \$150 on an Uber to go to a Taylor Swift concert.

Confirm. It was at MetLife and we were coming from South Slope in Brooklyn. We'd been drinking the whole day and blasting her music and somehow justified spending triple figures on a car.

Uber sent you an email congratulating you as a top customer.

Confirm. It's mortifying.

In high school, you were voted most likely to be on "S.N.L."

Confirm. That was just a fancy way of saying you're the funniest.

Your dream "S.N.L." host is Cher.

Now that Sandra Oh has hosted recently, Cher would be amazing.

You hated "Cats."

Oh, my God, I didn't see it. T.S. Eliot was a racist.

You loved "Parasite."

I can't stop thinking about it.

There's one Trump supporter in the cast of "S.N.L."

Deny.

Your drink of choice is a gin martini.

Confirm. With olives.

The creepiest part of TikTok is the subculture of magicians.

There's one magician who waves around a glass of water and takes out a knife and cuts through the glass and it's revealed to be a chocolate cake. By blurring reality that way, they'll rule over all of us.

An Aladdin doll inspired your sexual awakening.

Yes, an Aladdin Ken doll with a smooth crotch. I must have been 5 and I was inheriting my sister's toys. That's how it happened. I was awakened.

You've never seen the Belushi Samurai skits.

Confirm. I feel bad. Don't tell anybody.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/25/style/bowen-yang-snl.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: Bowen Yang of "Saturday Night Live" dressed for some good-natured destruction at the Wrecking Club in New York City. (PHOTOGRAPH BY CELESTE SLOMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (ST1)

Clockwise from top: Bowen Yang of "Saturday Night Live" at the Wrecking Club in New York City

Cecily Strong, Mr. Yang and Harry Styles in a sketch on the show

Kenan Thompson, Scarlett Johansson and Mr. Yang in a Christmas sketch

Mr. Yang in a SoulCycle sketch

and Mr. Yang as Andrew Yang, with Will Ferrell as Tom Steyer, in a debate sketch. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY CELESTE SLOMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

WILL HEATH/NBC/NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES) (S8)

Top from left: BD Wong, Awkwafina, Lori Tan Chinn and Bowen Yang at the premiere for Comedy Central's "Awkwafina Is Nora From Queens" this month. Below, Mr. Yang as North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES FOR COMEDY CENTRAL

ROSALIND O'CONNOR/NBC) (ST9)

Load-Date: January 26, 2020