Spotlight Interview: Ying Ying Li in conversation with Abby Rosebrock

What makes a good mentor? A good mentee? When does mentorship become dangerous? *This Could Be You* grabs the warm and fuzzy idea of mentorship by the lapels, lifts it up, slams it down, and collects the dirty change that falls out of its finely lined pockets.

Ying Ying Li recently spoke with her friend, Abby Rosebrock, about stand-up comedy, dislocated identity, "Evil Mike Birbiglia," and the persistence of hope over experience. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

YING YING LI (YL): Do you usually wake up this early?

ABBY ROSEBROCK (AR): Yeah, I do. Thanks for making it work! What about you?

YL: Yes, I do. I try to. It's my only time to myself. So it's good.

AR: I was trying to think of a way to ask what inspired the play in a way that's not completely prosaic, because everyone asks that. But I am curious! Do you want to talk about where it came from?

YL: I think I wanted to write a play about Asian American identity, but I didn't know my entrance into it. It was different from how I normally approach something, actually. Normally I think, "What if this happened?" And then I write that—that thing happening—and then themes pop up, and I'm like, "Oh, that's smart." But this time, the first impulse was theme. It took me a while to figure it out, but eventually, where I arrived is that I think I'm interested in people of color who are extremely conservative in a way where they're anti-self, you know. Like they're saying things, or supporting things, that are against themselves. But they're pretty proud of it, you know? And then I thought, well, how can I do that in a way that is humanizing and not flattening or patronizing?

Then I thought of the Gloria character. I did this thing for a while where I tried to purposely have some older, Asian American women doctors in my life, and then they were awful! They didn't listen to me! I was like, "What?! I came to you!" And now my PCP is like, a white guy named Chad. Literally! As an artist, I wanted to explore that intergenerational dynamic, where they are looking at me, and they're not like, "Great, a young me, let's like, look into each other's eyes and

I'll fix you!" You know, they don't see me like that. What is that all about? I think that's why I was interested in Gloria.

I guess I just decided to write what I know. I know what law firms are like, sort of. So I set it in a law firm. And then the other thing that I wanted to do—I realized when I write, I keep taking glancing blows at what I'm trying to write at. I thought, if somebody is doing stand-up, they kind of have to talk about it head-on. So writing this play was a way of forcing myself to make that happen. And I know a little bit about it, that stand-up world. And then the idea of looking for approval, that desperation was interesting to me. So I guess I just put 'em all together.

AR: The theme of needing approval, especially as it relates to performance, really resonated with me. The play does so much to explore different kinds of comedy and what makes something funny, and different approaches to inspiring laughter. Can you talk about comedy as a genre, and standup as a sub-genre of comedy in the play? And if you think the need for approval is especially strong in comedians?

YL: I mean, I like comedy. So it seems to just pop up whenever I write. I'm like, "This is very serious," and then a pratfall happens. You know, the part of me that's very Leslie Nielsen, *Naked Gun 2½.*

AR: Oh, yeah.

YL: Yeah, that genre. So I'm like, fine, I'll write that in a little bit.

I took a stand-up class a long time ago, and when we had to do "graduation," like in the play, I realized I was really nervous. If you do a straight play, and it's sad, or affecting, you can kind of sense it, but it's quiet. If they don't like it, it's quiet, if they like it, it's quiet. But in comedy, if they like it, they laugh, and if they don't like it, they don't laugh. And so there's shame. Like, everyone knows, are you doing good, are you not doing good—you know in real time, and everyone else knows. So I think that's where the desperation comes from. Like, everyone can see your grades right now.

And I think it's a more overt version of the desperation for approval that I think I see in some people of color who are super conservative. I'm in a lot of local Facebook groups. And I live in New Jersey. I see a lot of people espousing views that are against their own selves, but it feels

performative. It feels like it's for approval—for white approval from the majority of people in power. Even just little "off" comments. I think stand-up comedy is just a more discrete example of that need for approval and how that can lead you to certain places.

I don't think the stand-up comedy world is necessarily more nefarious. Or, it probably is. I think an argument can be made that it is. But I wasn't interested in an exposé. I was more interested in that mechanism of creating desperation, and what that can lead to.

AR: The theme of authenticity is big in the play as well. I found it really moving the way characters want to be authentic with each other, or seem to want to express authentically, and want other people to express themselves authentically, but that human desperation for approval sort of thwarts them, even in this genre of performance that would appear to support the most authentic kind of direct communication. There's a lot of posturing and trying to please and warping of one's own instincts.

You said you took a stand-up class. What's your relationship to the medium?

YL: What's *your* relationship to stand-up? I want to hear about that, too. I took a stand-up class when I was still working as a lawyer, a long time ago.

AR: Oh, wow.

YL: I graduated, and then I did like, two more shows after that, where people knew me, and then I stopped. I was too chicken to do an open mic. I was too scared to do a bringer show. The people who go out so many times a week, and just grind it out at night, I think that's amazing, and I wish I was strong enough to do it. But I never did it. I was younger then, and I think, looking back, I was myself. But it was a time when it was still valid to be like, "Oh, that comedian is a *woman* and she's *funny*." Now that's so outdated—what a ridiculous thing—and there are many more women in that space now. But back then there was a whiff of that still, in the air. It was different. And then you're kind of thinking, what kind of "woman" presence am I going to be? What box am I going to fit into? Am I the crazy aunt? Or am I going to try to be attractive, conventionally?

I do remember how great it felt to get a laugh. It was like drugs, just euphoria, like, "I'm full, I'm full!" And then it fades so quickly, like, "I need more!" I totally remember that. But ultimately it was a lifestyle I could never take. What were your thoughts about it?

AR: I think I probably did the same amount of experimentation that you did. I just thought it would be a good idea to try. And the shows that I did were bringer shows, which was somehow even more painful than asking friends to come to a show with a $60 ticket, as we do in the theater. Saying, well, there's a $15 cover, and you're gonna have to buy two cokes, and both of the cokes, at least, if you don't buy alcohol, are gonna cost like $13 a piece. It was just terrible. The first time I went was beginner's luck, and it was really fun, and the laughs were euphoric, like you said. The second time, it felt like diminishing returns. The rehearsal process made me feel crazy, because you really do have to memorize. It's a great exercise to try to write a monologue that sounds like totally vernacular, off-the-cuff speech, and then to deliver it, memorized, as if it were off-the-cuff. But the rehearsing made me feel crazy, just repeating my internal monologue to myself over and over again. How did you find the rehearsal aspect of it?

YL: That's so interesting, I'd like to explore that with you more. It sounds like you were writing plays in the theater and then you tried stand-up?

AR: No. I took an improv class and met a lot of funny people and was just kind of exploring. I thought about comedy before I ever really thought about playwriting.

YL: I didn't know that. That's so interesting, as an entryway.

AR: What do you think steered you away from comedy? Or, away from comedy proper? Because your writing is hilarious. But what do you think made you want to be a dramatist?

YL: I don't know if it was a series of rational, deliberate decisions. It was more like, I don't have whatever it takes to grind it out as a stand-up. I think if I were more desperate, I could have. I think you kind of almost have to feel that, to do something so scary. But I didn't. So I think that's why. After that, I took an improv class. And then I did a sketch-writing class. I did more sketch-writing. And I guess I was inching my way more towards playwriting.

It's interesting when you say you're trying to make it sound like it's not memorized, but it is. I wonder if it's like a bigger lie, because the posturing of intimacy is bigger doing stand-up than doing a play, where it's like, "Yeah, of course, it's not real." Stand-up is more sleight-of-hand-y.

AR: You're right. You're really forced to confront the artificial nature of communication when you're rehearsing a stand-up set.

YL: Yeah you feel crazy. I remember just sitting on my stoop in the early morning, saying my set over and over.

AR: I wondered from your play if you've ever gone down the rabbit hole of more experimental, Andy Kaufman-type alt comedy. Ria's stand-up sets delve into a variety of styles. Do you have favorite comedians or favorite sub-genres of stand-up?

YL: To the question of more out-there, Andy Kaufman-type humor, I appreciate and respect that a lot. But I feel like I can only take it in small doses, and then I need something more human, I want to say, or grounded. I can't live in that realm for a very long time.

I did want Ria to experiment with different sub-genres, because she doesn't really know who she is. Some common advice for stand-ups is, "Don't try to be anyone else, because there's only one you," but that's easier said than done, especially for someone who doesn't know who they are.

I think as I mature, I appreciate comedy that addresses that the world is really scary and messed up, and feels increasingly so. There's comedy that's very funny and almost gentle, where we don't have to talk about things we can't solve, that's talking about things that are more safe, and perennial, like mortality. Which like, yeah, that's deep—but it's also kind of safe, considering the world as it is now. So I appreciate when people touch upon how the world is more messed up. I like that more and more. It's so strong that we can acknowledge it, and still laugh, genuinely. I think that's a more beautiful feat.

AR: I totally see that distinction. I think you're right.

Speaking of the world as it is now, I loved the engagement with YouTube tutorials, and how painful it was to witness the characters learning about beauty from a little person on a screen, a stranger. Or conventional ideas about beauty. It made me reflect on how identity, and one's

sense of self, right now, are so mediated through all of these different fragmented voices and mediums. What inspired that? Do you watch a lot of YouTube, or have friends who do?

YL: I don't anymore, but there was definitely a phase where I watched YouTube beauty and wardrobe things all the time. It's weird because—before YouTube, and the internet, if you were seeking advice from a stranger, it was because that person was wise. They were older than you, they'd been okayed by their publisher or agent, or had a book, or gave a speech that you saw. But for me, watching YouTube videos like ten years ago, I was seeing girls who were younger than me. Still in high school! There's a part of you that's just like, "Aww, a little girl!" But then they know this *thing*, this skill, that I'm trying to learn. And I'm like, "Fine, I'll take off my big-sister hat, and just show me that." I don't know if that answers your question, but I think it's an interesting dynamic, the young expert.

AR: Our conversation is really illuminating how powerful your title is, *This Could Be You*. Because it really seems to be a play about people looking to other people to tell them who they are, or to help them find themselves. And it's easy to do that nowadays, with so many people of all ages claiming authority on the internet. But then it's also easy to get lost, as happens with Michelle, the conservative mouthpiece at the end of the play. And you do such a great job of satirizing both poles of the mainstream culture war. Maybe satirizing is too reductive a term. But you capture different sides of the current discourse in a complicated, profound and comedic way. I'm thinking of when you talk about stereotypes, and Netflix shows that sort of purport to be modern and contemporary and diverse, but still buy into really limiting visions of people of color. A corporate-friendly, pop wokeness that lends itself to commodification. And then this sinister right-wing movement that we're seeing now, that's struggling to find relevance. How consciously did you think about politics when you were writing?

YL: It was a framing device from the beginning. I wanted at least one person to go from one end of the spectrum to another in some fashion. It was Ria, of course, but I hope Gloria, too—I think Ning opens her up a little tiny bit. But originally, in my mind, it was even more pointed. Yes, I think politics were on my mind.

AR: The play is so focused and thematically disciplined. But at the same time, it's really capacious, and so I just had a lot to react to. And I wondered, to sort of pivot, if you wanted to

talk a bit about the character's mother's memory loss, and dementia, that really painful theme in the play.

YL: I didn't plan on it, but it just kind of happened as I was writing. I think it makes sense to me, because Ning is so hungry for adult guidance. I think what I wanted to get at was, for kids of immigrants who do well academically or professionally, one thing that we don't know is how to talk to grownups—like how to talk to our bosses—because we grew up with parents who didn't speak English, and their friends were also first-generation immigrants, right? Like blue collar, or, not super Westernized. So, traditional hierarchy, or whatever cultural mores of the country of origin, are so strong. So we didn't practice talking to grownups. The only grownups we talked to were our teachers. And if you don't get taken under the wing of a teacher, then you just do what you did at home: you're quiet, and respectful, and you don't show your true self, and you think that's how you're supposed to be. And it's a disadvantage in a lot of situations. So it makes sense to me that Ning's mom's not just like, just not even there anymore. I guess I like that loss or that absence. And then I also wanted—I think Ning is a very hopeful person. She does funny things. But I do think ultimately, she's a very hopeful person. That could be comedic, but I think it's also cool, or beautiful, or something. And then her mom's dementia—dementia is an illness where there's no hope, right? It's just corrosive. So Ning has to fight even harder to continue that hope. There's more of an acrobatic feat to keep that hope when you're on a downward slope.

Also, my grandmother that I was closest to also had dementia. So I have experience that I felt I could draw from.

AR: I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother. That's probably really hard.

What is your vision for the future? The play seems to express both a lot of hope and a lot of skepticism. Did you set out to write with both of those mindsets warring with each other? Or does one predominate for you right now?

YL: I think the facts support skepticism. But then like, I don't think that's my personality. I'm a hopeful person. I wouldn't make an *argument* for hope to anybody, because it's not logical, it's not rational. I don't need anyone to agree with me. But that's kind of my personality. So I guess maybe the play reflects that a little bit.

AR: The play really skillfully gets that across, I think. There's no compromising of facts. But at the same time, there's a bouyancy throughout even the darker scenes. And the ending is just really beautiful. But I won't spoil it for readers of this dialogue.

I could talk about this play for days, there's so much to talk about! We didn't even get to Evil Mike Birbiglia. Any thoughts on that guy?

YL: Now that we're casting, I think it could also be Evil Marc Maron. That guy is like—I feel like every woman who read the play was like, "Yeah I know that guy." He's just like, the guy that's unassuming, and not immediately intimidating. And who is quote unquote a beta. He's always looking for a power dynamic that benefits him. Now I'm not surprised as much when that happens, but when I was young, I was really surprised every time someone like that would become my friend in that way that's very unassuming, and then kind of flip. It's not always necessarily about romance or romantic power, it could be any kind of power. I call him "Evil Mike Birbilia," but I don't think he's evil. I think he just wants to feel powerful.

AR: You mentioned Leslie Nielsen. I also—this is a left turn—but I also wanted to say I think the play is a brilliant workplace comedy. Especially with the physical comedy with the boxes and the files and the stuff that happens in the office. It's just wonderful. I did actually think about the show "The Office" a little bit with the diversity program that you depict. It's a great satire of the current moment we're in.

What are your hopes for the audience of your play? What do you hope this play will do for people?

YL: I hope it will make them laugh. I'm still tinkering with it, and trying to make the story more clear, because I think my default is not to show too much, but—I should show more than I do. And then, for people who have been in those situations, to feel validated, or just a little pop of being seen... *[Laughing]* And this is the desperate side of me talking, but I just want people to like it and think it's good.

AB: *[Laughing]* Oh no, I feel that. I feel that for sure.

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Ying Ying Li was born in Beijing and grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. A graduate of Yale Law School, she practiced corporate law in NYC before restarting her life as a writer and performer. She is a member of The Public Theater's 2020–2023 Emerging Writers Group, and the Parent/Caregiver Playwrights Group, sponsored by Project Y Theatre and supported by New Georges and the 5th Floor Theatre Groundbreakers Grant. She is an alumna of The Tank's Playwrights Group, The Tank's TV Writers Group, and Harvardwood's TV Writers Group. Her plays include *Dance Moms* (Premiere Play Festival semi-finalist, NEA grant recipient), *Nectarine Girl*, *Doctor Mao*, and *Baskin Robbins at a Mall*. Her work has been commissioned by Project Y, and developed or seen at The Tank, Boomerang Theatre, Rule of 7x7, Decent Company, Yes Noise, The Brick, and on The Highline (so many helicopters, lesson learned). Her humor writing and videos have appeared in publications such as the NYT, Buzzfeed, Wired, MSN, Lifehacker, Men's Health, and Mental Floss. Ying Ying is a member of Actors' Equity and SAG/AFTRA. She has two delicious small children.

Abby Rosebrock is a Brooklyn-based writer and performer from South Carolina. Before she worked in theatre, she taught writing at Columbia and got a PhD in medieval English lit. Her work has been commissioned, developed, and produced throughout New York City and regionally in Los Angeles, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Idaho, Colorado, and Montana. Abby is a proud alum of writers' groups at Clubbed Thumb, The Orchard Project, and Ensemble Studio Theatre. Selected plays include *Singles in Agriculture*, *Dido of Idaho*, *Blue Ridge*, *Ruby the Freak in the Woods*, *Wilma*, and *Monks Corner*.