

# WOMAN OF WORDS



She's famously hilarious and one of Australian theatre's hottest young writing talents, but actor and creative NAKKIAH LUI lurks in dark places for her best material

by **RACHEL SHARP** photographed by **JESSE LIZOTTE** styled by **KATHERINE GREEN**



ASOS Design polyester-blend coat, \$160; asos.com. Marni cotton top, \$1,595, and resin earrings, \$375; 02-9327 3809. OPPOSITE: Dolce & Gabbana viscose bustier top, approx \$1,500, and viscose dress, approx \$1,900; at mytheresa.com. Zara viscose beret, \$39.95; zara.com. Christian Louboutin leather heels, \$975; 02-8355 5288





Moncler nylon dress,  
POA; moncler.com. Nerida  
Winter straw hat, POA;  
neridawinter.com. Miu Miu  
bamboo brooch, \$520;  
02-9223 1688. Zara leather  
heels, \$159; zara.com.  
OPPOSITE: Target  
polyester robe, \$39;  
target.com.au. Kowtow  
organic cotton beanie, \$69;  
au.kowtowclothing.com.  
Miu Miu leather sandals,  
\$1,150; 02-9223 1688





Planet Corroboree  
cotton T-shirt, \$25;  
[planetcorroboree.com.au](http://planetcorroboree.com.au).  
Leggings and glasses,  
Lui's own. Ryan Storer  
14k gold-plated crystal  
necklace, \$1,050;  
[ryanstorer.bigcartel.com](http://ryanstorer.bigcartel.com).  
OPPOSITE: Balenciaga  
printed cotton-jersey  
dress, approx \$1,800;  
at [mytheresa.com](http://mytheresa.com)







Marni cotton jacket, \$2,475; 02-9327 3809. H&M canvas bucket hat, \$20; 1800 828 002

# H

umour for me has always felt like some type of dirty trick,” says performer and script-writing prodigy Nakkiah Lui, over her first extra-strong soy flat white of the day. “Sometimes I feel so bad about it because it’s like going through a back door into someone’s head, but I think you need laughter to change hearts and make people ask questions.”

The 29-year-old co-writer and star of hit ABC series *Black Comedy* continues, “Even as a child I was annoyingly, insufferably filled with curiosity. Questions all of the time. Always about everything. I know everyone thinks I’m opinionated, which is probably true, but my opinions change. I like hearing what people have to say, as a writer primarily but also as a performer. I think it’s fun to write characters and have them grapple with what you’re trying to figure out.”

Curiosity was a compulsion that served her well, too, when she won a scholarship at age 15 to the prestigious Pearson College UWC in Canada (named after 1957 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the late Canadian prime minister Lester Pearson). “Being a curious person was cool at this school—and there were some pretty liberal teenagers there. We once had a village meeting debate on whether or not the school should have a sex room, because we all bunked in shared dorms,” she recalls with a wry chuckle. “That was really funny for me, because I definitely wasn’t having sex at all.”

When she arrived home, Lui had some time up her sleeve before starting law school, which she filled by writing a play—her first—for the Short+Sweet Theatre festival. She was barely 18, but still caught the eye of a theatre reviewer for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. “I only wrote it because my mum’s friend’s godson ran the festival and needed more Aboriginal playwrights,” she recalls. “My parents ended up being in it—and they cannot act. I’ll always remember what *The Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer said: ‘What it lacks in theatrical finesse, it makes up for in Lui’s lucid writing.’” Despite their lack of theatrical chops, Lui credits her family as the source of some of her best comedy material. “I’m really blessed—my family are hand-in-hand equal amounts ridiculous and intelligent. They’re completely absurd but also really funny and super truthful. You know how some families like cricket? My family’s all about politics. When other people talk about sports, we’re like: ‘So, racial theory...’ They’ve always been huge inspirations, to the point a lot of my characters are named after them.”

After loved ones, Lui credits the dark digital realm as her next favourite hot material source. “You know those really seedy parts of the internet, like Reddit and online forums? I like hanging out there. It’s like, ‘oh, that’s interesting, so that’s a thing.’ Or, ‘oh, those people are really horrible, however, they do show what’s really going on.’ It’s just a way for me to engage in discourse that’s outside my own little bubble without having to be unsafe. I read a lot online, too—I’m one of those people who actually pays to get past paywalls. And I always do a lot of research on what I’m writing about. I am a nerd at heart.”

It was a chance email after her beloved grandmother passed away in her third year of law school, inviting her to a camp for young playwrights that pushed Lui to finally chase her passion. She left university, focused on writing, and was soon offered a residency at Sydney’s Belvoir St Theatre, where in 2013 her first play, *This Heaven*, about an Aboriginal death in custody at Mount Druitt police station, attracted rave reviews. Today, with the Nick Enright Prize for playwriting under her belt—awarded at the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards 2018 for her Sydney Theatre Company play, *Black is the New White*—Lui is widely considered the most talented Australian writer for stage since David Williamson.

“I think stories are the greatest things we as humans have ever invented. I have not met a single person ever who doesn’t love one in some shape or form. Stories are what develops our empathy. I’m an avid consumer of them all day—whether it’s waking up and watching YouTube videos, or listening to podcasts over breakfast, reading or watching reality TV while I work. I kind of figure myself as an [ideas] vulture. Anything that I find interesting inevitably ends up in my work.”

When asked whether it takes a naturally funny person to write good comedy, she turns surprisingly serious. “I consider myself a pretty funny person. Most people I know who are good at comedy are. But a lot are quite bitter, too. You know how there’s a thin line between tragedy and comedy? That’s kind of the sweet spot [when writing]. I grew up in a family that used laughter as a tool for survival. I don’t think you can have courage without having humour. If you are trying to change the world, taking risks and being brave, you also need laughter and love.” Lui has found those two Ls in her screen editor and director husband Gabriel Dowrick, who she met when they worked together on *Black Comedy*. The son of best-selling





author Stephanie Dowrick, he's the first Caucasian person in Lui's family for five generations. "After two months of dating, we went out to dinner [in order for] Gabe to meet my parents, and he said to my dad, 'Well, Raymond, I'm the silver lining of colonisation' and that's kind of been our joke ever since. My parents love him, [their] white son-in-law."

Lui's face lights up even further when asked about her Aboriginal heritage. "My mum's Gamilaraay from north-west New South Wales, near Gunnedah. She moved to Sydney when she was 15, and eventually became a nurse, but she grew up living in a tent by the river until she was 12 or 13. My biological father is Torres Strait Islander, and my dad who raised me is Wiradjuri, the son of a drover from out Dubbo way. He was a boxer, then became an academic. I look at [my parents'] upbringings, then I look at my sister and I and the life we live now. I'm very lucky that for the most part I was brought up in a very white-collar middle-class [area, in western Sydney]. To me, that's such exponential growth—a shift in dynamic and equity in a really, really positive way. Education was a really big thing in my household. A lot of my friends are first-generation Australian from migrant and low socio-economic backgrounds and it's the same thing for them. Now I see my role—especially as a young woman, an Aboriginal woman—is to open doors."

Like education, the art of storytelling, she says, is a simple but vitally important vehicle for bringing a community together, regardless of race. "When you look at the really dark times

throughout history, they were times when people weren't able to tell stories. Whether you look at the reformation period or countries with censorship laws now, stories were the first thing to go. It's great to come together and laugh, or experience something. Our empathy muscle grows."

Connected as she is to her country, Lui recently signed to mega-agency WME in Los Angeles and hopes to live there soon. "I was meant to be there this week with [Logie-winning actor] Miranda [Tapsell], but the trip got cancelled because of the whole coronavirus thing. We want to do a feature film together about time travel—like *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* meets *Hot Tub Time Machine*," she adds, pushing aside her empty coffee cup. Melbourne-based Tapsell is a regular creative partner in crime; the pair, who have been best friends since they met in 2013, co-produced the 2017 podcast *Pretty For An Aboriginal*.

"I'm also working on a feature film with [AACTA Award-winning director] Samantha Lang and doing a six, half-hour episode comedy series about Aboriginal doomsday preppers for the ABC. It's silly but quite timely given I think we're all feeling slightly unsafe about where the world's at. I co-wrote that one with my husband and we start filming very soon."

That's a lot of plates spinning at once, but Lui's never been one for half measures. "If you're going to do it, do it big. If you fail, then fail gloriously, because what's the worst that could happen? I think the worst is a life of regret thinking, 'I wish I'd tried.'" ■ *Black Comedy* is available now on ABC iview.