

Comedian Ronny Chieng has gone from Foundation Studies student to international superstar, and he isn't afraid to shine a light on the issues that unite and divide us.

ALL IN THIS together

BY EMILY McAULIFFE

We're all stupid and none of us are more or less stupid than the rest. This blunt premise underscores much of Ronny Chieng's (TCFS 2004) comedic material as he strips away ethnicity and class to tune audiences into the ridiculousness of human behaviour.

From a laundry list of oddities, the Melbourne University law graduate turned stand-up comedian and actor has called out the idiocy of those who complain that Facebook steals data they willingly hand over, has targeted the 'hypocrisy' of Texas's state motto of 'friendship' (which he deems to be 180 degrees off-message), and has even suggested a peaceful future for ISIS shouldn't be discounted given Japan's successful pivot from war crimes to Pokémon.

As a Chinese Malaysian, Ronny routinely plays the Asian card in his sets, but isn't reticent in dragging his own race into the ring to spotlight the absurdities of the Chinese – conceding that stereotypes hinged on bad driving, online censorship and obsessions with wealth are fair game.

The concept of universal stupidity formed the cornerstone of his 2017 sitcom *Ronny Chieng: International Student*, filmed at Melbourne University and Trinity College, which mirrors his own experience studying law and commerce in the early 2000s. During his studies, he deduced that the Asian minority wasn't made up of helpless victims, nor were local students remorseless bullies – rather, 'everyone was equally dumb'. But in some ways, it seemed natural: 'it's because we were all just kids'.

Ronny says the experience of attending Trinity and the University, in itself, felt like the making of a series, which put him in good stead when it came to writing the show. 'Going [to Trinity] felt like going to school on a TV show,' he says. 'We were on this beautiful campus and were essentially alone, because our parents weren't around. Everyone – me included – suddenly had to make adult decisions, even though we weren't really ready to make any decisions.' ▶







For Ronny, this newfound freedom was a lot of fun, but he doesn't recall being particularly funny – even though his ability to crack jokes would eventually outrank his ability to interpret the law. A winning routine at a Melbourne University comedy competition in 2009 flicked the indicator that would eventually lead him down an unexpected career path, and though Ronny was admitted as an Australian lawyer and officer of the Supreme Court of Victoria in 2012, being named best newcomer at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in the same year signalled the start of a serious stand-up career.

Ronny credits his Trinity drama classes for helping get him out of his comfort zone on stage, and memories of certain Melbourne Law School students for providing method acting-style fodder in his role as status-obsessed Eddie Cheng in the Hollywood blockbuster *Crazy Rich Asians*. 'I knew the character well – I feel like I went to uni with some of those [crazy rich Asians],' he quips.

This plum silver screen role in 2018 was yet another professional coup for Ronny, who three years earlier had secured a coveted correspondent's gig on America's *Daily Show* in New York City. The late-night talk show dissects world events and interrogates what host Trevor Noah describes as 'American stupidity'. (This eye-to-eye world view makes it easy to understand why Ronny is returning to the *Daily Show* for a sixth year). In his role, Ronny has interviewed the likes of Bill Gates (about toilets, no less) and famously mowed down Fox News presenter Jesse Watters for a racist Chinatown segment that portrayed elderly Chinese people as having no political opinion and which

misappropriated Japanese, Korean and Chinese cultural references.

Though he regularly makes light of Asian stereotypes and turned to comedy the idea of 'token Asians' in his *International Student* series, Ronny is firm in calling out entrenched racial bias that throws equality off balance, particularly in his familiar storytelling sphere. 'I feel like television in Australia has a real problem with not putting people [from minorities] in positions where they can make decisions,' he says. 'You can talk about all the diversity you want and all the quotas, but if people aren't empowered it just becomes tokenism. It becomes, "Oh, we have a gay Asian person or an Indigenous person here, so we're not the problem". You can pat yourself on the back for putting minorities in some of your stuff but, in my experience, if they're not empowered [to tell stories], it means very little.'

While he believes society is becoming increasingly aware of racism and inequality, Ronny notes that understanding is easy to say, but difficult to know. 'It's fair to say things are changing – credit where credit's due,' he adds. 'A lot of people are working very hard to change things.'

Despite being outspoken on matters of race, when asked whether he sees himself as an influential public figure, Ronny responds matter-of-factly. 'No. I don't think anyone is listening to me about anything. I just want to tell interesting stories and funny jokes, and if they happen to touch upon [stereotypes and race], then I won't be afraid to talk about it, but I won't say those things for the sake of it. I only bring things up if I

feel there's something interesting to say that hasn't been said before.'

Ronny's ability to glean new angles and see things for what they are – perhaps shaped with the help of his law degree – coupled with his signature deadpan delivery, is arguably the very thing that has made him so successful, with routinely sold-out shows suggesting people do care to listen to him. And despite a sharp, unvarnished on-stage persona, which is known to creep into his personal life (in his Netflix special *Asian Comedian Destroys America*, Ronny says his wife accuses him of 'always sounding sarcastic or angry') – he comes across as polite and down to earth, viewing his career with pragmatism and humility.

'I assumed I'd have to go back [to law] right up until I got the job at the *Daily Show*,' he says. 'In my head, I thought, there's no way I can keep doing [comedy] forever. It was only after I got that role that I thought, oh, you can actually do this full-time.'

Alongside *Daily Show* host Noah – a Black South African raised under apartheid – Ronny told the *Washington Post* that he doesn't know any other show that has as much of a genuinely diverse cast giving their opinions straight to camera. And although world news reports can deliver edifying new truths through a different lens, when the details are finally unpicked and the day's events hung out to dry, what generally emerges is that we're all just as stupid as one another. ■

In 2020, Ronny was in Australia filming *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, a superhero film based on the Marvel comic character of the same name, due for release in 2021.