DESMOND CHIAM

The book of Desmond Chiam is one that should be prefaced by the early stages of his acting career in Australia and highlighted by a special chapter dedicated to the way in which he was inspired by a film from the legendary director, Stephen Chow (Kung Fu Hustle). In addition to emerging as a leading man in America, Desmond Chiam also became a screenwriter, so the notion of him penning this story as an autobiography someday isn't too far-fetched. The experience of being an eyewitness to the social discrepancies between his native country of Australia and various parts of America have made his lifelong journey to stardom far from a cushy fantasy. Nevertheless, the coming-of-age story about Desmond Chiam would not be complete without referencing his boyhood connection to the fanciful character known as Captain America…

As a child growing up in Melbourne, Desmond would often draw inspiration from Captain America; largely because of the character's bravery and pursuit of justice for everyone. So, in 2019, when the official announcement came down that he would be joining the all-star cast of The Falcon and the Winter Soldier—it was a full circle moment for the lifelong Marvel fan. Desmond was cast in the role of Dovich. A masked antagonist from a group of super soldiers on the hit series by Disney+. The first episode of the brand-new series aired on March 24th (2021) and in less than four months it has already become the most watched show in the history of Disney's streaming service. In a virtual interview with Good Morning America, Desmond spoke candidly about the emotional moment, behind the scenes, when he held Captain America's shield the very first time. For him, it was a cathartic milestone culminated by a risky decision to forgo his law degree from the University of Melbourne in lieu of a new acting career in Los Angeles, California. It also provided him with a sense of affirmation, because about one year prior to being cast as a Flag-Smasher on Marvel's live action series, the first show that he ever anchored as the lead actor (Reef Break) was cancelled after just one season on ABC.

Desmond Chiam's portrayal of a musclebound nemesis on a fictional television series is the antithesis of the person who he is off camera. Because underneath the soft-spoken demeanor of this Aussie lies an LA transplant who has taken an active role in publicly supporting the AAPI community in matters regarding social justice and the entertainment industry. In addition to being a part of the new legacy of Asian actors/actresses in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, one of Desmond's long-term goals is to blaze a trail in Hollywood as a screenwriter—in the hope that his original scripts will create even more opportunities for performers of Asian descent.

We spoke to Desmond Chiam about his breakout role on The Shannara Chronicles and the experience of being a part of the history-making television series, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier. Also, in honor of AAPI history month, the action film star shared his thoughts with us about the recent success of Asian entertainers on Oscar night and the legislative changes that he would like to see put in place, in wake of the rising hate crimes against the AAPI community.

Desmond wears Iceberg.

MOOD: You got your big break as an actor during season two of The Shannara Chronicles, where you played General Riga. You received quite a bit of recognition for playing this role. What was your experience like working on the set of this Fantasy TV show in Auckland, New Zealand?

Desmond Chiam: It was one of the best introductions to this whole career you can imagine. On one hand we had an amazing cast, extremely welcoming people, one of whom was an old friend going way back - so the tone on set was easy and friendly. On the other hand, we had a crew, a lot of whom were ex "Lord of the Rings" (staff members), building our sets and props and doing our makeup - and if that isn't just cool as hell, I don't know what is. Then finally, set the whole thing in New Zealand which is - and I'm being a bad Aussie here - just the best of the Antipodes. Within a half an hour of Auckland, you can find any sort of landscape you want - desert, jungle, forest, plains, waterfalls, hidden beaches. You name it, you can find it.

MOOD: Walk our readers through your audition process for the role of Dovich in The Falcon and the Winter Soldier. Being that you grew up a fan of Captain America, how excited were you to read for a key role in a spin-off of Marvel's legendary franchise?

Desmond Chiam: It was pretty easy, and that's a testament to Jason Stamey and Sarah Finn (the show's casting directors) to be frank. They run a room where the space is yours and they're happy to let you take the time you need to make sure you do everything you want to do as an actor. It helped because the nerves were high, obviously. We had a pretty rough guess that this was for the new Marvel streaming series set in the Captain America corner of the MCU - and you know that feeling you get when you're starstruck? Knowing that gave me similar butterflies. I can't oversell how excited I was.

MOOD: Back in 2020, this production was shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic—right before it's completion. How concerned were you, last year, that your new series could be delayed for a very long time?

Desmond Chiam: Not particularly. A production this big, in the Marvel family, you know you're coming back to it. It was actually a great lifeline - knowing I had something to come back to at some point when it could be made safely. In terms of a delay - I mean, that's small potatoes on the scale of what people around the world have and continue to go through. I knew we were going to finish, and patience is particularly a virtue when many people around you don't even have that privilege.

MOOD: Speaking of the Marvel family, Marvel Studios recently revealed its timeline for upcoming releases in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Eternals is being directed by Chloé Zhao, while Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings will feature a main cast that is predominantly Asian. Do you feel that Hollywood is doing enough to diversify itself and cast more actors/actresses of Asian descent in leading roles?

Desmond Chiam: No, and yes. It's hard because history has shown us how sparse it can be on the ground for us, and anything compared to that is a bounty. But there can always be more. And it can't just be actors - it has to happen at all levels too - behind the camera, in front of, in the writers' room, at the executive level. I think it's great that we're reaching a point that an Asian person can lead a tentpole film or series - that's very much the shotgun blast we need to get into the zeitgeist right now.

MOOD: Your most successful acting roles to date have been characters that you've played within the Fantasy and Live Action genres. Did you have any significant combat training prior to being cast in these roles?

Desmond Chiam: Not really. A tiny, tiny bit of Wushu. I could b-boy, I guess? So, maybe I could break dance fight like in Zoolander? In all seriousness - the dance background helped my body awareness which in turn helps with this combat stuff. Depending on the team, you have to adapt your style, but choreography is an interchangeable term for both dance and stunt coordinators. Some guys really operate heavily on a count system, which just brings it even closer to dance. But it's a super comfortable place for me to sit - I've done enough now to know what I'm doing.

MOOD: Back in 2018, you were the leading man in a very good crime drama series called Reef Break. But like so many other great shows, this one was cancelled way too soon. This was your first time experiencing the cancellation of a series as a recurring character on a major production. How disappointing was it to find out that the show was not going to be renewed for a second season? And what did you learn about the entertainment business from that experience?

Desmond Chiam: Not going to lie, it sucked - but I also knew coming off that, I was going to work. Not off the credit alone, but you learn so much about leading a series, keeping up with the schedule and putting the work in on very, very abridged timeframes. There were a lot of lines I had about thirty seconds with before I had to say them. So, it seasons you, and you come out with confidence like - yeah, I booked this gig when I was less well equipped. Now I just have more skills - so it's just a matter of time.

MOOD: What was your parents' reaction to finding out that you wanted to move to America in order to pursue a career in entertainment, after you had already earned a law degree from the University of Melbourne? Were they against the decision or supportive?

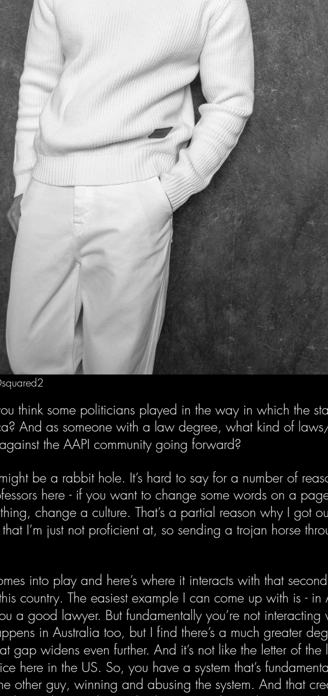
Desmond Chiam: A hybrid of both. I think whatever part of them wasn't supportive came from fear, and that's something both of my parents fortunately have a pretty good read on for themselves. My mum still worries, of course. But she's proud. My dad - it took a second, but to his credit, he's always been fully supportive even if he disapproved. From day one, all he said was, "I don't understand what you're doing. But whatever you're doing, just be the best at it." That's love from him.

MOOD: When you moved to Los Angeles, you attended USC for screenwriting. Please tell our readers about some of the biggest cultural differences between Americans and Australians that you noticed upon your arrival here. Did you experience culture shock when you moved to LA for the first time? And what are some of the biggest differences between America and Australia, socially?

Desmond Chiam: The biggest culture shock was how much more urbanized Australia is than the US. It's so funny - when Americans think of the Aussie stereotype, they think Paul Hogan and all that. But - I looked this up at some point - something like 93% of the Australian population lives in cities, vs just 80% of Americans. And even then, that 93% live in proper, full on cities, whereas the American 80% actually accounts for a lot of small to midsize town populations, which are a completely different dynamic to an urban center with a Central Business District. The net result is, meeting kids who were just not used to living in cities, and everything that came with it. Struggling with Ethnic food choices. Navigating/driving around urban spaces. Gawking at displaced people - knowing that, you start to see where the gaps in society form. That was pretty shocking, the small-town mentality. It's pretty rare in Australia.

MOOD: In an Instagram post back in early April, you spoke out about the rising hate crimes against the AAPI community. As an Asian Australian actor who now resides in America, what was your initial reaction to all of the violence going on against the Asian community here? And what's the response been like back at home in Australia?

Desmond Chiam: I mean, see above. Those divisions happen to some degree because of the above. I had a chat with a friend recently, and she's of the opinion so much could be solved if people in America traveled more. I don't necessarily think it's a silver bullet, but it would help. How are you going to be anti-Asian in Australia when you're literally in Asia, and South-East Asia is a stones' throw and a $70 ticket away? Not saying it doesn't happen, but it's for sure worse here. I'm not surprised by the violence. It was inevitable because we've been losing this game since far before even Trump. Doesn't make it hit any less hard though - I'm still gutted for my people. For all people of color who have violence brought down on them - I'm gutted.



Desmond wears Dsquared2

MOOD: What kind of role do you think some politicians played in the way in which the staggering number of hate crimes have risen here in America? And as someone with a law degree, what kind of laws/bills would you like to see put in place to prevent violence against the AAPI community going forward?

Desmond Chiam: Oh man, this might be a rabbit hole. It's hard to say for a number of reasons, because - and I'm crimping from one of my old professors here - if you want to change some words on a page, change a law, but if you want that change to mean something, change a culture. That's a partial reason why I got out of law - it requires a much tougher level of advocacy that I'm just not proficient at, so sending a trojan horse through the zeitgeist is much more my speed.

Here's where the first question comes into play and here's where it interacts with that second question. It has to do with the nature of legal advocacy in this country. The easiest example I can come up with is - in America, finding loopholes and grey areas is what makes you a good lawyer. But fundamentally you're not interacting with the legislation in good faith if that's the case. Sure, it happens in Australia too, but I find there's a much greater degree of good faith. Or compare it to Singapore, and that gap widens even further. And it's not like the letter of the law is significantly different - it's a cultural difference in practice here in the US. So, you have a system that's fundamentally - not in letter, but in execution - based on screwing the other guy, winning and abusing the system. And that creates division. And in those spaces, you'll have canny personalities who can then stoke that gap to their advantage. There's so much more I could get into here. The jurisprudence could fill a thesis. But that's my broad strokes opinion.

MOOD: In response to the rising hate crimes against the AAPI community, several prominent Asian American public figures like, Awkwafina, Randall Park, Jeremy Lin, Kelly Marie Tran and Andrew Yang have spoken out against the violence. While organizations like Hate Is A Virus have also come to the forefront in defense of the AAPI community. How did it make you feel to see Asian communities from all over the world rally together to raise awareness about your community here?

Desmond Chiam: Incredible, especially because solidarity is something that has been extremely hard won in our community. I want to shout out Goldhouse, CAPE, and stopaapihate.org too because they've been doing so much of the work to bring us together, to create the foundation activism can then work from. We didn't have that in Australia growing up. And while I wish it were happening under better circumstances, it is heartening to see.

MOOD: Speaking of Asian public figures, history was made at the Oscars this year. What did it mean to you, on a personal level, to see people like Yuh-jung Youn (winner of the award for best actress in a supporting role) and Chloé Zhao (winner of the award for best director) win big at this year's award ceremony? Especially given the climate that we're living in, socially.

Desmond Chiam: Representation is such a hard thing to understand. I actually get why people don't understand why it's a big deal, I understand those comments being like, "well, I'm a man, and the main character was a woman, but I had no trouble putting myself in her shoes, use your imagination," because - well, I used to think that way too. I used to think it wasn't a big deal. But then I saw a Steven Chow film. And just seeing someone who looked like me on screen - I don't know how to put it into words and I wish I could. It's just special. I know that sounds dumb. But it just feels good. So, to see our people just absolutely slay at the Oscars this year - it's the same feeling. It's special.

MOOD: You earned your master's degree in screenwriting at USC. Does that mean that you're going to create your own productions someday? If so, what kind of scripts and stories would you like to present to the world in the future?

Desmond Chiam: Absolutely! We're working on some right now actually. I'm a genre guy - I love science fiction and fantasy, but I'll do family dramas in a pinch. Look at me sounding like I'm in a pitch meeting…I have some good ideas about a couple of Asian American bounty hunters back in the railroad building days that I'm wanting to get made now. It's a Western.

MOOD: That sounds like a great premise for a show! In a perfect world, who would be the director and leading actors/actresses for your project?

Desmond Chiam: It's such an idiosyncratic world and script that in this case…I'd love for an Asian person to direct it, but the closest comparison I can think of is an Edgar Wright type. This is also one of the rare scripts that I have in mind where I want to play in the lead pair - I don't want to give too much else away though!

MOOD: That's awesome! What's your dream role for "non-action" film as an actor?

Desmond Chiam: The Western! Cowboy! Ah, non-action - I want to do a road movie. I've always loved a road trip, and to make a movie around one would be amazing. There's something about the emotional pressure cooker that is a shared journey, in a small space, that I think really shows us as humans.

MOOD: Back in 2011, you won the CLEO Singapore Most Eligible Bachelor Award. How did you become a contestant and what kind of affect did winning have on your life back then?

Desmond Chiam: They literally picked me up at a club. And I have to hand it to them - they put on quite the production. I was at a point in my career where I was exploring show business options in Singapore and winning that kind of just gave me a little confidence boost. Before that, I was a gangly kid who didn't know what he was doing. After that - well, I was still a gangly kid. But at least I was a gangly kid in a magazine.

MOOD: What do you want your legacy to be on and off camera? Forty years from now, what do you want people to say about Desmond Chiam?

Desmond Chiam: That he did good and he was good. Merit and kindness - I'll proudly wear those two things on my tombstone.

MOOD: Looking towards the latter part of 2021 and beyond, what projects are you most excited about sharing with your supporters back in Australia, Singapore and here in the United States?

Desmond Chiam: Man, we have two in the barrel right now that I can't quite say anything about! But I'm super excited - I'll skirt as close as I can without revealing anything and say it's my first time working in the medium/genre, and I'm extremely excited to see what comes of it. The other one - it's a massive, massive shift from what I've just done. So next time they tell us Asian actors don't have range, we've got the ammo to back up statements to the contrary.

MOOD: Since we're talking about Australia, your native country is home to the most dangerous animals and insects in the world. I've heard horror stories about the huge spiders there. Do you have any personal accounts from your childhood that you can share with our readers?

Desmond Chiam: Definitely don't shut yourself in the bathroom with a Huntsman the size of your hand, and it's on the doorknob, and now you can't get out, and you have to wait an hour for your sister to get home so you can be saved. I would 0/10 recommend that experience. Even though the Huntsman is the most harmless spider we have. They're big. Too big. Why did God make spiders that big? It seems aggressive and unnecessary.

Desmond wears La Coste

Photography: Anthony Giovanni
Fashion: Edwin J. Ortega
Grooming: Diane Dusting
Words Miguel Costa

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