

Living for Them, Living for Me: A Readers Theatre of Asian-Canadian Youth Navigating Post-Pandemic Precarity and Parental Pressures

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Abstract: We are a group of Asian-Canadian youth who collaborated on this Readers Theatre (RT) script to explore our shared experiences navigating early adulthood during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our topic centered on the uncertainties of life nearing graduation, the difficulties of finding a career, family expectations and relations, and fading friendships during the years of the pandemic. We arrived at this topic through group discussions about how the pandemic altered not only our academic plans but our relationships with our identities, family and friends.

Key words: Readers Theatre, youth, identity, arts-based research.

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Introduction

We are a group of Asian-Canadian youth who collaborated on this Readers Theatre (RT) script to explore our shared experiences navigating early adulthood during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our topic centered on the uncertainties of life nearing graduation, the difficulties of finding a career, family expectations and relations, and fading friendships during the years of the pandemic. We arrived at this topic through group discussions about how the pandemic altered not only our academic plans but our relationships with our identities, family and friends.

These topics are important to our identity as Asian-Canadian youth in the context of COVID-19 as I [Christopher] have the feeling that young people, especially Asians have a sort of introversion, or as someone once said to me [Christopher] ““young people, and perhaps especially Asians, needs to learn to advocate for themselves better.” Even without a global pandemic to serve as a reason to isolate oneself, youth, and perhaps Asian-Canadian youth, in particular have a culture of keeping to themselves, just as their elder counterparts.

The tension between familial expectations and personal realities is something, I [Queenie] have experienced growing up in an Asian immigrant household. My parents were never able to pursue post-secondary education in their home country of Vietnam, and after immigrating to Canada, their dreams for me became closely tied to the opportunities they never had. In a way, I believe they had hoped to live vicariously through my accomplishments, or what they deem as “successful.” At times, I find myself questioning whether the goals I’m striving towards are truly my own, or if they’re shaped by what my parents want for me. I also am in constant worry if what I am doing is even enough, given the constant comparison of myself by my parents to other relatives or classmates. This internal debate between honouring their sacrifices and discovering my own path is a constant undercurrent in my life. The pandemic only intensified this uncertainty, putting many of our lives on hold and complicating what “success” even means in the contemporary world. Even post-pandemic, youth are

still navigating a difficult landscape marked by a poor job market, inflation and an overwhelming cost of living, challenges that our parents may not fully grasp. The gap between their expectations and our lived experiences continues to grow. Love and expectation often blur the lines between support and pressure within many Asian immigrant households.

The settings of the RT script take place over a couple of years in post-pandemic Toronto. The story includes 4 scenes across York University campus buildings, reflective moments in Jim’s room, and the family dining room and an employment center.

Characters and Roles

Narrator: Not a character, but someone in charge of setting the scenes.

- **Jim:** A recent biology graduate struggling with unemployment, loneliness and pressure to succeed. He’s had previous episodes of depression, and he generally keeps to himself and has no strong friendships.
- **Nico:** Jim’s friend from university, who stays in touch but becomes distant over time.
- **Amy:** Jim’s high-achieving older sister who works in graphic design. She earns a good salary and receives more attention from their parents compared to her younger brother.
- **Ms. Lu:** Jim’s traditional and hardworking mother who pushes him to work harder so he is able to succeed but over time has softened with understanding.
- **Ann:** A strict but supportive employment advisor who helps Jim improve his job search efforts.

The Context

The ambience of the scenes is underscored by emotional background music that supports the melancholic and bittersweet tone of the story. A subtle yet significant element throughout the script is the use of weather to reflect Jim’s emotional journey. In the first scene, the weather is cloudy and windy, mirroring Jim being “blown around” without

direction. In the fourth scene, it is snowing, symbolizing deeper isolation. In the last scene, the sun comes out and the snow has melted, representing Jim's shift toward self-acceptance and emotional thaw.

On another note, the change of season is also used to show that the main character realizes that he has not been productive over the course of the year, as time moves forward and changes, he feels trapped in a limbo-like state, unable to make significant life changes to his situation. As the season turns into spring, the snow melts and the trees turn green again, the main character Jim can look towards a fresh start with a positive outlook.

The Script

SCENE 1: York University Campus *(the script refers to several buildings at York University).*

The song "You Were Here" by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: It's early April, and students are attending their last classes of the semester before exam week starts. Jim and his friend Nico are walking around university campus discussing their future goals.

[The door of Victor Philip Dahdaleh building is pushed outward. Jim and Nico, walk out onto the street. It is cloudy and windy outside. They begin walking side by side.]

Jim: "Anything else you have to do today?"

Nico: "Just one last class, it's starting in ten minutes. What about you?"

Jim: "Nothing else for today. I'll head to the gym later for some exercise before going home. I'll walk you to your class."

Nico: "Okay. We're almost going to graduate soon. Do you have any plans for the summer? Are you going to apply for a master's degree?"

Jim: "I don't have any big goals after graduation. I guess the only thing I really want to do is to pay my student loans. After that is settled and I have some extra money saved up, I'll look into my options. I thought about it though, but there are some things I need to take care of first."

[Both characters enter the Lassonde building]

Nico: "Well, let's keep in touch. Maybe we can help each other out in finding our first jobs. My class is right here. See you, Jim."

Jim: "Bye." *[Jim exits the Lassonde building and walks toward Tait McKenzie gym]*

SCENE 2: Jim's Bedroom

The song "Buddy" by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: A couple of months have passed since Jim and Nico's graduation. Not much has happened. Jim has been relaxing and has treated the time since convocation as a summer vacation. Both our characters have graduated with a Bachelor of Science majoring in biology. They get together over a video call to discuss what is happening in their lives.

[The room is quiet, there is a slight hum from the laptop's fan. Jim leans over to turn on the lamp in preparation of the Zoom call. He adjusts the angle of the laptop's built-in camera. The time is 8:03 pm, Nico is three minutes late. Jim drinks from a cup and waits for a while]

Nico: "Hey, Jim. Sorry for being a little late and for not writing back to you. How are things?"

Jim: "Hi Nico, it is good to hear from you. I haven't spoken to anyone in a while. Things have been pretty boring since graduation; I'm having trouble looking for work. What has been keeping you busy?"

Nico: "I started a master's program at UTSC (University of Toronto, Scarborough campus) It has been super busy, but I'll be finished by next August. Rebecca got herself a boyfriend and is also doing a master's at Ryerson University [now known as Toronto Metropolitan University] as well. Anyways, I hope you find something soon."

Jim: "Thanks. Everything feels strange now. I really don't have anything to do these days. Besides visiting the gym, I don't have any reason to be on campus. I did send in an application to the military but no response from them yet. I suppose the best thing for me is to visit the career advisor."

Nico: “I went to career advising before and they were very helpful. Stay positive, Jim, and let me know how things go with the military.”

Jim: “I will and keep me updated with whatever’s going on in school. I’m really interested to hear what you do over there.”

Nico: “See you, Jim. Good luck.”

Jim: “Bye, Nico.”

[Jim clicks on the “end meeting” function and gets up from his seat and leaves the room]

SCENE 3: Dining Table at Jim’s House

The song “Looking for Something” by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: Some months have passed, and Jim is still unemployed. The six-month interest free grace period for the student loan repayment is ending. He’s feeling unenthused to apply for jobs after getting a rejection email from an overseas job in Asia. None of his job applications are getting any responses, even the entry-level ones. In contrast, his sister is going steady at her graphic design company, and her performance review is coming up. His mom is very proud of her and wishes her son could be as successful. An argument emerges at the dining table one evening.

Amy: *[Jumps up from chair with phone in hand]* “Yay! I just got an email that I have been appointed to Director of Advertisement!”

Ms. Lu: “My daughter, I am so proud of you! That sounds like a big role... and big fortune for our family.” *[Laughs with food in her mouth]*

Amy: *[Sits back down and resumes eating dinner]* “Yeah, I am so happy! I can’t wait to tell all my friends about it.”

Ms. Lu: “How about you, my son? Have you heard back from anybody yet?”

Jim: *[Looks down on plate of food, lacking appetite]* “Umm, I haven’t.”

Ms. Lu: “Aiya! You know... we both are getting old. I am almost retiring, and you still haven’t found a job.”

Jim: “Ma, it’s not that easy. You don’t understand that things are different now and-”

Ms. Lu: *[Slams fist on table and points finger at Jim]* “Why can you not be like your sister? You just bring shame to our family.”

Amy: *[Puts hand on mom’s shoulder]* “Okay, let’s calm down.”

Jim: “No, you guys don’t ever let me talk! Every day, it’s all about Amy.”

Ms. Lu: “Because your sister is successful.”

Jim: *[Abruptly gets up from chair and picks up plate]* “Never mind, I shouldn’t even talk in the first place.”

Narrator: An eventful night, indeed.

SCENE 4: Jim’s Bedroom

The song “Good Night, Boy” by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: No news for Jim, in what once was an email inbox full of eClass updates from multiple professors is now an email address with barely any new messages. OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) repayments are getting really close. Jim decides to write to his friend, Nico.

[Jim is sitting with his laptop in front of him, he is tapping at the keyboard writing an email. He faces the backyard window, filled with a blanket of undisturbed snow]

Jim: “Dear, Nico. You must be busy, and I wanted to check in and ask if anything has happened of late. I’ve been checking job postings for places like the zoo and the aquarium, something fitting for a biology graduate. But there seems to be no open positions or anything for recent grads. My military application has been processed but since my eyesight is not so good, my options are limited to support roles that have been already filled. It’s been kind of boring, nothing new to really share with you. How have you been doing? It must be more exciting than what I’ve been doing. I haven’t heard from you in a while. Let’s try to talk more often. See you. Jim.”

[Jim checks his composition before sending the email]

Narrator: Weeks passed. Months passed. Jim gets no reply to his email. He realizes he now does not have anyone, he can call a friend. Nico must be going places and must think Jim's a total loser.

SCENE 5: Career Centre

The song "Dream... come true" by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: Jim visits an employment center for advice on his job search. He feels the main thing preventing him from getting job interviews is his poor-quality resume. He hopes the advisors will give good advice that will give positive results.

[Jim enters the office of Ann, an employment advisor. He sits down in the seat in front of her desk]

Jim: "Thank you for taking the time to help me."

Ann: "Don't thank me, this is my job. So, I looked at the resume you sent me and to be frank, on a scale from one to ten, what you sent me is like a 3, it's too elementary. As an adult, you need to produce a targeted resume to each job you apply to. I think what you did is create a general job resume that you plan to send in mass to multiple listings. I'll create a new resume for you to give you an idea. First, let me ask you some questions."

Jim: "Okay."

Ann: "So, you graduated from York University with a science degree. Is that something you like and really wanted to pursue?"

Jim: "Sort of, I guess. It was actually my mom's dream for me to do a science-related degree but I do find the subject to be interesting. It's just that... looking into the opportunities here in Toronto, I think I made a mistake in choosing my program. There does not seem to be many options for someone that just graduated with a bachelor's in biology. I tried looking up the careers section of many companies, but most jobs are asking for a business degree or a computer science background. I just can't seem to find something with my background."

Ann: "Are you interested in working in a lab or hospital?"

Jim: "Not really. Never really liked doing labs in school. I really did well in courses such as anatomy, botany, and fish biology. I really liked marine science, but it seems like most opportunities are in either British Columbia or the Maritime provinces. My mom wants me to work in a hospital though but it's not really my thing."

Ann: "Have you looked up the zoo or the aquarium?"

Jim: "I did. Not many postings and ones I did send in get no responses. You know I thought the job search would be easier after graduation as I don't have to worry about balancing work and school, but it seems it's easier to find work as a student. Some job listings seem to cater to inexperienced students. I'm being outcompeted by experienced candidates."

Ann: "Any internships or co-op experience? Oh wait, you must have spent two years in online schooling due to the pandemic, so you probably did not get to have those chances, am I right?"

Jim: "You're right. During the pandemic, it was hard to really go out and make connections with professors and get in touch with them to strike up a person-person connection to make a reference with them. To be honest, making friends was also difficult during that time. You just can't join a school club or anything like that."

Ann: "I see. I'm going to make you a resume and email it over to you. Use that as an example for future job applications."

Jim: "I will, thank you for your help."

[Jim leaves the office]

SCENE 6: Jim's Bedroom

The song "Circuit Wanderer" by Japanese jazz fusion musical band T-Square plays in the background.

Jim: *[Walks into his room, surprised by his mom]* "Uhhh, Ma. What are you doing in my room?"

Ms. Lu: *[Holding papers of resumes, cover letters and tuition bill statements]* "My son, I know we haven't talked in a while. I just want to say I am sorry."

Jim: *[Putting down his backpack]* “Why? What’s wrong?” *[Thinks to himself: Hmm, this is unlike of her to apologize].*

Ms. Lu: “I realize I was too harsh on you last time. It is unfair for me to compare you to your sister.”

Jim: “Yeah, it is a different time now. What are you doing with my papers?” *[Attempting to take the papers away from his mother’s hand]*

Ms. Lu: “I read through them. I never realized until now how much effort you put behind my back, I was never able to appreciate you.”

Jim: *[Displays sad but serious look, remaining silent]*

Ms. Lu: “I see how difficult it is to find a job nowadays. You know, I also hope you can understand I come from a different background. I came to Canada with limited English and I could not attend university like you. That is why I am so strict because I want you to be successful.”

Jim: “I know...”

Ms. Lu: “I hope you can forgive me. I will try to be more understanding of your situation. The pandemic is not your fault. You already have enough pressure! Right now, just focus on your health. Without your health, you cannot have success! Do not worry about your bills. I have some money saved up.” *[Laughs and pats Jim on the back]*

Jim: “Thank you, Ma.”

Amy: *[Yells from downstairs]* “Dinner is ready!”

Ms. Lu: “Will you come downstairs to eat with us tonight?”

Jim: “Yeah, let’s go.” *[Smiles]*

SCENE 7: Jim’s Bedroom

The song “Living Room” by Japanese musician Kensuke Ushio plays in the background.

Narrator: A few weeks have passed since. Not much has changed. However, Jim has taken a more positive approach to his career search and feels he is doing better than before. He has also rekindled his relationship with his mother. The pandemic may or may not have affected Jim’s social skills building and

his networking skills. If there was no pandemic, Jim could still be his loner self, not taking the opportunities presented to him and still be the same person today. Though he won’t think too much about this. He’s just going to keep moving forward.

[Jim writes an email to Ann updating her on his situation]

Jim: Dear Ann, thanks for all your help. I’m getting a little better at writing cover letters and resumes and while I am still not getting any responses as of yet, I think the results will show in time. My parents gave me something nice. They agreed to pay off all my students’ loans so that I won’t be burdened by interest fees. They want me to take my time to find the right career, and they don’t want me to rush myself to find something that I am not happy with. I’ll repay them someday. Anyways I’m still looking for work, but the mindset is a little better. I’ll write to you next week with another update. *[Jim sends in the email and looks out the window, appreciating the sunshine melting the snow away]*

Narrator: The world’s not hopeless after all and progress isn’t linear. It’s not over for the world yet... at least, Jim’s world. Today is just another day and sometimes that’s just enough. As long as you’re alive, something good is bound to happen. I’m sure of it.

End Scene

Conclusion

The main message of our RT script is that progress isn’t linear and it’s okay to move forward at your own pace because life still goes on. No matter how much things feel as though one has hit rock bottom, there is nowhere to go except forward. What’s important is that you still believe in yourself and your abilities without comparing yourself to others.

Reflection on the Readers Theatre Exercise

The RT process gave our group a creative outlet to express nuanced experiences that are often challenging to articulate in everyday conversation. I [Queenie] thought it was cathartic and validating to realize we were not alone in our feelings of familial pressure and expectations, and the cultural weight of

achievements, especially through the context of post-pandemic. It gave us a space to openly talk about mental health and empathy, which is often repressed within immigrant families.

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