



Each week, Benjamin Law asks public figures to discuss the subjects we're told to keep private by getting them to roll a die. The numbers they land on are the topics they're given.



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DEATH

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MONEY

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SEX

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BODIES

Dicey Topics

Eddie Perfect

The 44-year-old actor, singer, composer and playwright is known for his role in *Offspring*, hosting *Play School* and creating *Shane Warne: The Musical*. He was Tony-nominated for his score for the musical *Beetlejuice*.

MONEY

You've said that a lot of your writing is about what it means to be middle-class. What, specifically, fascinates you about it?

I was born in [the Melbourne suburb of] Cheltenham, raised in [nearby] Mentone, and both my parents are high-school teachers. Life was very middle-class and very safe – riding bikes to school, walking the dog, going down the shops. But the middle class is never finished. It's a journey ever climbing upwards. No one's content. There's a struggle and tension about it: purchasing the house, renovating the house, sending your kids to school. Watching *The Block* and putting f...ing tiles in your house. It sort of defies romance. And that's what interests me, being able to find important aspects of life – love, risk, loss, grief and joy – in this homogenised little landscape. It's fun. You work as an actor, composer, singer and playwright. Have I missed anything?

They're the main ones. But I'd say that over the last five years my money has mostly been earned from writing. To be honest, I'm a better writer than I am a performer. It's hard to get passionate about performing when there are so many other people doing it so much better. But having said that, writing is a lonely discipline and it's a lot of uncertain, lonely hours. Writing does make me go a little crazy after a while so, every now and then, I have to stop and come back to performing. It's total playtime. Many critics detested *Beetlejuice*, but it had a huge box-office return. Does that make up for the brutal reviews? It kind of has to! [Laughs] What happened to *Beetlejuice* happened to other productions in the same season: critics were really unkind, which made it very popular with young audiences. But if it sucks commercially and it sucks critically, then you're left with a whole bunch of smashed eggs you've been putting in a basket for five years. It's brutal. All that work is gone and there's nothing to show for it. *Beetlejuice* was a dark comedy about our shared fear of death and what happens when we don't honestly discuss grief. For a while it seemed like that message wasn't connecting with anyone, but then it really started resonating with people. That's all you can ask: that people pay attention. The kindest thing anyone can do is turn up, watch, listen and react.

BODIES

You're in your 40s now. How's the body holding up? Oh god, I think I'm all right. But during Lockdown No.6 in Melbourne, I was like, "I'm not going to drink alcohol" – because my lockdown hobby had become drinking wine and beer. So I quit booze and am now getting myself back into some sort of shape for 9 to 5: *The Musical*. What effect did the lockdowns have on your physical and mental health?

We were all doing really well until Lockdown No.6. Usually, I'm pretty independent. When I'm writing,



I often get out of the house, go sit on a park bench and write outdoors. But in the last lockdown, the weather was terrible and we got on each other's nerves. I feel like I'm pretty robust, and with my mental health I'm pretty even-keeled, but I found myself getting really stressed, irritable and down.

In 2019, you had two musicals showing simultaneously on Broadway, *King Kong* and *Beetlejuice*. Have you multi-tasked to the point where it's affected your health?

It's hard to know whether it's affected my health, but it's something I would never want to do again. One musical is way more than any one person can manage. Two musicals was very *Sorcerer's Apprentice* – water sloshing everywhere, you can't control it. With Broadway, especially, if you're not in the room to advocate for your material, very bad things happen: things get cut or moved or changed. I went through some pretty bad experiences with *King Kong* especially – having material cut behind my back – and I stopped being able to sleep. I'd wake up anxious at about 2am, get up and wander around the Upper West Side, ruminating on all my mistakes. You're always trying to work out what hill is worth dying on and when to capitulate. You don't want to be a stonewall in a creative, flowing process but, at the same time, sometimes you find yourself chasing this need to please other people and you end up writing stuff that you don't believe in any more. The one time I met [American composer and lyricist Stephen] Sondheim, I had one burning question: when you're getting pulled in every direction and everyone has notes and ideas, who do you listen to? And he said, "You. You write for you." You write the show that, when you stand at the back of the theatre and look at it on stage, is the show you meant.

DEATH

What were you told about death growing up?

I was brought up a Catholic, so I was told that when we die, our body dies but our soul lives on, either in Heaven or in Hell. Now I probably believe that when you die, you die – and that's it. That's the end of consciousness. And if there is any kind of residual you-ness in the world, that's something you've cultivated while you've been alive – through relationships or the impact of your work, the things you create and the things you leave behind. Nominate a song you want played at your funeral. I have a running joke. Whenever there's like a really bad, obtrusive song being played in public that's obnoxious, repetitive and terrible, I always say, "I want this at my funeral." So Y.M.C.A. when the coffin goes out. ■

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Eddie Perfect is in 9 to 5: *The Musical* at Sydney's Capitol Theatre from February 16, with a national tour to follow.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Simon Schluter

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