

“It’s OK to fail”

Renaissance man and refugee Anh Do is Australia’s most beloved multi-tasker. Now he shares why he is on a new mission to encourage kids to embrace their imperfections

Interview by ADRIENNE TAM

Anh Do happily admits he may be the worst boss ever. His “staff”, ranging in age from three to 14, are not paid a cent for the work they do for him - unless you count piggy-back rides - and he steals their best ideas.

But he values his little team of four, who are also his children, more than anything else in the world. Their important work consists of reading the first drafts of his kids’ books - “if there’s something they don’t like, it’s out” - and sharing all manner of stories and antics with him, which he quietly stores away in his brain for later use. “When they get older, they’re going to form a conglomerate and sue me,” Do tells *Stellar* with a laugh. “Sue me for back commission, you know.”


If they do, at least Do has a good chance of affording it. The 40-year-old comedian, television personality, actor, producer, artist and writer was only last month listed as Australia’s fourth favourite author by online bookstore Booktopia, beating an eclectic mix of writers such as Tim Winton, Shaun Tan, Helen Garner and Andy Griffiths.

His most successful children’s series, *WeirDo* (which documents the adventures of a boy who struggles to fit in), has sold more than 1.4 million copies, while his other titles have sold another 1.2 million combined.

Not that he writes for the money. The quietly spoken comedian, a self-confessed introvert, is keenly aware of the issues kids face. He’s always touched by feedback from parents who tell him how much the books have helped their children.

“They tell me that [the books are] great because ‘my kid knows it’s OK to be a bit different’. And to be honest with you, most kids feel like they’re not perfect,” Do tells *Stellar*. “One of the things I notice with my own children is that I keep having to remind them that it’s OK to fail. It’s OK to try something new and not get it the first time. But if you keep trying, you’ll get it. I think that is something that’s useful for kids to understand.”

His own parents always told Do to try - and fail. “When I was on *Dancing With The Stars* [in 2007], my goal was to not get kicked out the first week. My mum said to me, ‘Why don’t you have a go at winning the whole thing?’ And I said, ‘Mum, I can’t dance.’ And she



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said, ‘Yeah, but you got one shot, you may as well have a go at it.’”

Do made it to the grand final, going up against actor Bridie Carter and her professional dance partner Craig Monley. As his friends and family watched on, while cheering (and betting on Centrebet), he lost out to Carter. “Afterwards I caught up with my mum and I said, ‘Mum, I failed,’” Do recounts. “And she goes, ‘Anh, you did not fail, you went 10 times better than your original goal. You made us all very proud.’”

Do was only three years old when he and his family came to Australia from Vietnam by boat. As written in his best-selling autobiography, 2010’s



RENAISSANCE MAN

(clockwise from top right) Anh Do with his wife Suzanne at the Sydney Film Festival in 2009; after completing a law degree, Do decided to pursue a stand-up comedy career; meeting fans of his children's books at a primary school; preparing for the launch of his solo art exhibition, *Man*, at Olsen Gallery in 2015.



the first one in our family to do it. I mean, she was cheating, but that's the kind of grandma I have."

It's no wonder then that Do's new book series *Ninja Kid*, about a boy who discovers he possesses amazing ninja powers, features a hilariously cool

grandmother who invents gadgets at a pace that would make James Bond's Q proud. But out of everyone, it just might be his mum who has been the biggest influence in Do's life. She raised him and his siblings mostly alone (his father left when he was 13, although they have since reconnected) and has been his fiercest advocate. Without her, Do may well have had a very different life.

"I was at the end of my law degree - this was years ago - and I was getting job offers from

different big firms. I told my mum that I wanted to try this thing called stand-up comedy," Do says. "And she doesn't even know what this job is. In Vietnam, this job doesn't exist. There are comedy plays, but one guy up there with a microphone making people laugh doesn't exist. And yet

she is amazing enough to say, 'Son, you go for it. Give it a year and see if you can make something of it.'"

Do worked hard his first year of stand-up, and won an award for Sydney Comedian Of The Year. The rest, as they say, is history. "I constantly think to myself that I've got such amazing parents who have given me the freedom to choose what I want to do," Do says.

So with all that he has achieved in his 40 years of life, is there anything he would like to do before he reaches 50? Do considers the question carefully, pausing for a long time. "No... just keep living," he eventually replies. "If I wake up, I'm 90 per cent in front already." ★ *Ninja Kid* by Anh Do (Scholastic, \$14.99) is out now.

The Happiest Refugee, the boat they were travelling in was attacked by pirates twice and they ran out of food and water. They very nearly died.

"My parents still remind me we're lucky to be alive. I think that helps me to stay pretty thankful," Do tells *Stellar*. "They also taught me that sometimes things seem to go wrong, but you can always turn it into something OK. For instance, because my surname is Do, my friends thought they'd call me Weirdo, and because I wasn't offended - I thought it was pretty funny - it no longer became a thing that annoyed me. It was just a cool nickname. And then I grow up and I need to write a kids' book, and I know exactly what to call this kid..."

Besides his children, drawing from the cast of colourful characters in his life has given Do excellent material over the years. Take his grandmother, who would spend all day gardening - "she turned a suburban backyard into a Vietnamese farm" - and then come inside to crack open a VB and sing karaoke. "One night I woke up at about 2am to go to the bathroom, and there's my grandma sitting in front of the TV playing a hunting video game. And she's stacked Yellow Pages books right in front of the television, so that the electronic gun is literally touching the screen," Do recalls with a huge laugh. "So she just can't miss. I sat with her for another 20 minutes watching, and she completed the game. She was