Writer and producer Maurissa Tancharoen has experienced many sides of the industry, beginning in performance and working her way to showrunning. Tancharoen has written for series including *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008), and *Spartacus* (2010-2013, with Tancharoen serving as a producer from 2011-2012).

She has worked heavily in seemingly contrasting areas: musicals and science fiction — yet all of her experience has converged in this very moment in time. Tancharoen currently showruns ABC’s *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020) in collaboration with her husband, Jed Whedon; right now, she is further in the spotlight with undisclosed new projects on the docket and having contributed to Whedon’s newest album, *Pulse* (2020). By viewer data, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* — which will finish its run with a 13-episode Season 7 premiering in May 2020 — is Marvel’s strongest television brand, even surpassing all former Netflix series.

As she completes production on the show, Tancharoen reflects on the experience and discusses going beyond being the forefront of a popular network television show, what her life as a showrunner is really like, and what inspires her personally and creatively.

**OP:** With your show, I think it’s safe to say that you are at the epicenter of television right now. What landed you right here, right now?

**MT:** There are many reasons why I ended up here, I think. I was an only child for the first eight years of my life. During my childhood, screen time wasn’t really an issue — that’s my disclaimer before I say that I watched a ton of television growing up. This is no plight on my parents — now being a parent, I understand how television can sometimes be useful or screen time can be useful, you know, if you have your hands full! [Laughs.] I consumed a lot of TV — and now I’m going to date myself — everything from *Three’s Company, Laverne & Shirley, Gilligan’s Island, Happy Days.* Also, I was a huge *I Love Lucy* fan.

**OP:** I know you had some industry exposure while growing up. Looking back now, were you informed at all by what was happening around you?

**MT:** I was very influenced by my father’s work because he was working on TV sets at the time as well. He was a driver — his first job as a driver was on *Charlie’s Angels,* so when I’d go to visit him, I started seeing production at a very early age. And I think now, it was sort of all meant to be that I ended up in this line of work.

**OP:** You work a lot with music, and you were in a band at a young age. Did those interests start emerging when you were little?

**MT:** With movies, it was all musicals. I think I knew *The Wizard of Oz* backwards and forwards at the age of five, and I could recite the whole thing. I had a little stuffed animal dog, and that would be my Toto, and I had my basket and pretended that I had a yellow brick road, and I would recite the whole thing from start to finish. That, and *The Sound of Music,* and *The King and I* — and so, I guess it’s pretty obvious that I was definitely an avid viewer. Because of that, I had a wild imagination, and because of that, I liked to perform, and then somehow that’s how I started working in the industry — kind of as a showbiz kid.

**OP:** Having done musical content in the past, do you see yourself continuing with that in the future?

**MT:** Jed and I come from a musical background. He was in a band, I was in a band — *Pretty in Pink* — from the ages of 13 to 16. Music is definitely a part of our lives. Have you seen *Dr. Horrible* (*Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*)?

**OP:** Naturally! It’s a classic.
MT: All we want to do is write the sequel, and I know we’ve been saying that for 10 years now, and that’s something we definitely want to do. Beyond that, yeah, absolutely — we want to write musicals. I love nothing more than seeing musicals, so that is definitely one of our bucket list things to write — whether it’s a feature or live show. That is something that we will do.

OP: I see a lot of the same thematic material and genres in your work, like science fiction. What do you find creatively rewarding about this genre?

MT: For Jed and I, I think we’ve landed in this genre of science fiction because you can take a relatable human relationship or moment and amplify it with the world coming to an end or the girl who doesn’t feel seen actually being invisible. The way we can play with metaphor in this genre is something that we like to watch as viewers. As a storyteller, it’s more freeing, and you can go to the extreme while also grounding it in the heart of the thing that everyone can relate to.

OP: Obviously, the personal must somehow seep into every creator’s work. For you, what is that? What are those themes or areas of exploration?

MT: For most of my life, I’ve experienced a lot of identity issues as an Asian American woman. I know for the longest time I wanted to be blonde; I wanted to be white. I didn’t understand why I wasn’t or couldn’t be, and a lot of that was influenced by the faces I saw and the media that I was consuming. I’m very fortunate to be working on a show

Fig. 1 | Maurissa Tancharoen (far left) and family on the set of Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Photo courtesy of Maurissa Tancharoen.
where my partners — including my husband, and specifically my husband — are all advocates for diversity and presenting the world in which we actually live.

**OP:** Do you see diversity and inclusion as a core tenet of your work? What about it is important to you as a writer and creator of these stories?

**MT:** One of my first jobs was a feature that centred around two Asian American characters. When I was working over at Fox, a pilot I had in development was about an Asian American family. So it’s always been my focus to sort of push our narrative forward. I do think it’s a prominent characteristic of our work, or at least the work that we’ve established on the show. Now, being in charge, being one of the creators and showrunners of a series that’s been on the air, and now going into our seventh year, we are all very proud of the fact that we have a show that does feature women of colour, people of colour. They’re just people who are working together — their differences aren’t highlighted. For me, I think that’s super important for any generation to witness, especially for my little one.

**OP:** Can you elaborate on that? What about crafting stories for your daughter drives you as a creator and artist?

**MT:** As far as my artistic and creative endeavors, I am even more focused on generating content that will speak to my daughter’s life and will speak to other children like her who are biracial or who are in the minority and who will have to navigate the crazy world and being a young woman in it. I already see how much she’s influenced by media. It’s very interesting — this has definitely been on my brain, so it’s good to talk about this! Any sort of character that we see, anything that she’s drawn to, she’ll go to the blonde one first. Like, “I want to dress her! I want to braid her hair!” And I blame that on Elsa! [Laughs.] And Elsa specifically is not to blame, obviously, but Frozen is such a phenomenon, Elsa is the main character. Elsa has a fabulous song and fabulous dress, and all of it, and so that character stands out for her. But that has definitely influenced what she’s drawn to. So I started thinking the other day — man, I just need to make an animated feature that features a young Asian girl or something. It’s interesting and it’s so clear already — she’s four — how much that makes a difference. What you see is what then becomes programmed in the brain, and whether it’s conscious or not, you relate to that. If you don’t see it, you don’t know it.

**OP:** With so many moving parts, how has motherhood changed you in terms of your personal and professional lives?

**MT:** I’m not going to generalize about all working mothers. But for me, in becoming a mother, while running a show, it’s very hard to feel like you’re ever doing any of it right. You always feel like you could be more over here and more over there. Obviously, as soon as my daughter arrived in this world, I prioritized her and being her mother and being available to her. So that has shifted my work life. But because I’m very fortunate to have my partnership with my husband, we’ve been able to figure out a way to navigate all of it and to make everything work as ideally as we possibly can. And now there’s another aspect to my life as a working mother, which is my health. I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but she was born very early because I have lupus, and things got very complicated during my pregnancy. I’ve had lupus for as long as I can remember, I was diagnosed at 15 — it only got life-threatening toward my 30s. But in having life-threatening flares, I still wouldn’t prioritize taking care of myself. I would prioritize work. But since having my daughter, I understand that my role is different now. Everything has shifted to where I have to place my health first, because without being healthy, I’m not going to be available to anybody. So that’s part of my new way of being a working person and mother.

**OP:** And I’m sure the show takes so much of your time, not to mention mental and physical energy.

**MT:** Making this show — it’s insane. We try to accomplish so much within an eight-day schedule. We sort of cover all the bases in one episode — there’s action, there’s crazy visual effects, there’s also the drama, there’s the funny. We try to pack it all in one episode, and we were doing that for 22 episodes a season.

**OP:** There’s some sort of frenetic motivation to people who work in television. But it’s a collaborative process, right?

**MT:** I can’t imagine how some people do it alone. Thankfully, I have my husband alongside me, as well as our producing partner, Jeff Bell, and we divide and conquer as much as we possibly can. The amount you have to churn out just from start to finish — meaning breaking an episode to wrapping the episode and then going into post. Sometimes when we’re in the middle of a season, we’re juggling three to four episodes at the same time — one being broken, one being
written, one being shot, one being in post, one being finalized. It’s rigorous, for sure. Are we exhausted? Absolutely. Do we think there is ever a better life outside of television? [Laughs.] There might be one that allows you more sleep — and try adding being a parent to that. At the end of the day, it’s all worth it, once it’s out there and we see how the audience reacts. But while you’re in the process, you do feel like you’re kind of a hamster on a wheel, you’re going, going, going, without seeing anything outside of it. There are many analogies like that. [Laughs.] We sometimes say that it’s like manning a sinking ship — sometimes you’re just plugging holes to stay afloat.

**OP:** There’s that one expression...like trying to drink from a fire hose.

**MT:** But it’s so much fun. It keeps you on your toes. The end product is always worth it. You know how much of your blood, sweat, and tears has gone into it. And not just yours — your entire cast and crew and your whole writing staff. The people that we see in the writers’ room we’ve seen every day for the past seven years of our lives! [Laughs.] They’re all so talented and wonderful, and we know each other so well at this point. Especially in a network television show — there are other kinds of schedules for cable and streaming platforms, there might be more time. But for our show, at least for the first five years, it was kind of around the clock. In between seasons, Jeff and I would maybe have two and a half, three weeks off, that by the time the finale was doing its final mix, two weeks after that, we’re starting up the [writers’] room again.

**OP:** What else do you specifically find rewarding about showrunning?

**MT:** I remember the first day — I believe we were on the backlot at Universal, and it was just a giant day, where Michael Peterson (character on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, played by J. August Richards) was jumping from a building, and we were establishing Skye (character played by Chloe Bennet). It’s moments like this that never get old for us — the fact that we have an entire crew working to make a vision happen that you might have thought of a few nights before in like a fever dream, and now it’s actually happening. So I think, in a way, that it will never grow old for us.

But I think just to see how the show has grown, and like I was saying before, this cast of new characters, new to the Marvel universe now, has their own canon, has their own comic books. Just seeing the difference between the Season 1 visit to Comic-Con and going into Season 2, going back to Comic-Con — seeing the reception for characters that were new to people just a year ago was very special. Being a part of this family for seven years, everyone has seen each other go through ups and downs. There are so many *S.H.I.E.L.D.* babies from crew to us, and just to see everyone’s life change over the course of the show has been very special. Creatively, I do feel like we’re really proud of all of the actors and what they’ve brought to these characters, and to see how much our characters have grown as well.

**OP:** The series has expanded immensely within the last few years. What ran through your mind when you first began working on the show?

**MT:** When Jed and I first started this show, during Season 1, we remember our first day on set and just the enormity of all of it. We had been working in television for a while, and we’ve always been very active in the production aspect of everything that we’ve worked on. But this specifically, because we co-created it with Joss [Whedon], we knew going into this show that the expectations would be so high and that the legacy of Marvel was so vast, and at that point, almost 75 years’ worth of characters at our disposal. This show was based on entirely new characters, so those were all from our brains and our hearts. So it was essentially like birthing a child. [Laughs.]
Showrunning, Motherhood, and Character-driven Storytelling

**OP:** And these characters are very certainly beloved now — something about them really resonates for viewers. What about how they’re portrayed do you think has garnered positive attention?

**MT:** I think we can attribute a lot of it to our cast and their interaction with the fandom. They’re very active in that, and it’s very clear that all of us do genuinely love each other. I think that’s not only obvious onscreen, which is part one, but it goes beyond that. Part two is that the show is this family that has been created — [Coulson] recruiting Daisy, formerly Skye, who was lost in the world, and May, with whom he had a long-term friendship, and recruiting Fitz and Simmons, and eventually Yo-Yo and Mack, and now Deke. But it truly is, at the heart of the show, a family. Regardless of plot and what they’re up against and all of that, you just know that what grounds it is this nuclear family.

**OP:** For these characters, you’ve drawn from the comics, but a lot of content in the comics has also sprung from your show. It’s a symbiotic relationship.

**MT:** Right, and that’s something that we’re proud of. Initially, people expected us to be tied directly to the comics, and we spent a lot of time in the first season pulling things from the comics, but we always put our own spin on it. Of course, we’ve had notable characters like Talbot, and Maria Hill, and the Patriot — all these things that we pull from the comics we sort of ground in our version. But another thing that has grown over the years is just our own mythology. I would say from Season 3 and on, we were kind of just existing in our own universe that we had created within the Marvel universe. That has sustained us over the years. Going back to your question about why the fandom is so loyal and dedicated to the show, and passionate about it, I do think with each year we’ve been able to reinvent ourselves while expanding our own mythology. We kind of do a reset every year, and that keeps it fresh. And mind you, we’ve also backed ourselves into many corners! [Laughs.] Then we’ve had to dig ourselves out of it quite a few times. But I’m excited for you to see what’s coming up.

**OP:** We can see your work onscreen, but we don’t always get the whole picture of your intentions and motivations as a storyteller. What do you wish people asked or knew about you and your work?

**MT:** Oh, hm. That’s an interesting question. No one’s ever asked this before! So I’ve said this before several times about my process with Jed, and it’s that we value the joy of the process. I think together in our marriage, in dealing with my health and the challenges that we’ve faced together due to my health, it’s an instant reminder of mortality every day. If the process is no longer joyful, it’s no longer worth it because life is too short. I think we are constantly aware that life is too short. And I think because of that, when it comes to our stories and our characters, we try to infuse it with that bottom line that no matter what is happening, what the overall arcing story is — thematically, it’s important for us, for you to feel the heart of the thing.

No matter what, these people are about one another, and that’s all that matters. At the end of the day, those relationships are all that matter, because that’s who we are and that’s what we are aware of as people, as a couple, as a mother and father. Beyond right now, nothing matters. What I hope people who view the show or know of our work get, I hope they can sense that sort of inherent value system and belief in what life is truly all about. And I think that’s helped us in our actual work life because, yes, this can get so stressful. [Laughs.] But at the end of the day, what is the bigger picture? To constantly remind ourselves that this is small compared to what we’re actually going to remember before it’s all over.