THEATER

Yearning to Breathe Free

By JEREMY McCARTER

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Either you find it funny when famous Romantic poets call each other "f—face" or you don't. Young Jean Lee's new play is a string of giddily imagined scenes about Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, and his sister Dorothy. Sometimes they feud; frequently, they drink; doing either, they are a welcome sight for anyone who enjoys watching the deflation of geniuses. "The Appeal" is the happiest literary desecration since Amy Freed's "The Beard of Avon," in which Shakespeare declared, "I have great ... thought-like things within my head."

The action unfolds, unpredictably, on a cramped, nearly bare stage at Soho Rep. Loud, nervous music accompanies the first blackout. Only when the lights come up to reveal Wordsworth scribbling away do we grasp what the music, by the experimental duo Matmos, might mean: I think it's the sound of inspiration, of the Muse zinging away. Wordsworth puts down his pen and addresses us. "Ah, my poem is finished," he says.

Ms. Lee has written a play about the English Romantics, all right: The poets spout about their styles and contemporaries and wallow in narcissism. But at some points, Ms. Lee seems to be sending up the idea of a play about the English Romantics. For instance, any such play would have to include a scene in which the poets talk about being a poet. Ms. Lee has Wordsworth begin his first scene with Coleridge by asking, "What is a poet?" A dozen loopy lines later, they've descended to calling each other stupid.

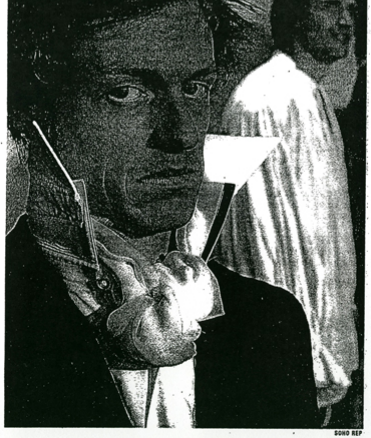
The show flatlines here and there, but Ms. Lee directs with confidence and style. You'll catch echoes of Richard Foreman's abstraction, Wes Anderson's fixed adolescence, the extreme flatness of Richard Maxwell. The last of these — the static staging and uninflected deliveries — can be distracting. Or does Ms. Lee borrow from Maxwell on purpose, in order to send him up? It's one or the other — unless it's both.

One particularly clever exchange between Wordsworth and his sister consists entirely of plot outline, with improbably funny results:

"Hi, Wordsworth."
"Hi Dorothy my sister."
"Wordsworth, are you and Coleridge still in a fight?"
"Yes, Dorothy."
"Will the problem be fixed, or will it not be fixed?"
"I don't know, my sister."
"Well, Coleridge is outside right now, so why don't we bring him inside and then you two can make up?"
"Okay."

Ms. Lee draws winning, assured work from Michael Portnoy as Coleridge, James Stanley as the late-arriving Byron, and Maggie Hoffman as Dorothy. Inspiration alights on Pete Simpson in particular. He gives Wordsworth vacant eyes, slack jaws, and odd pauses: In short, he's baked. Hilarity ensues every time he uses his rival's name as a taunt — "Hi, Coleridge." As with so many giddy moments in this play, I'm at a loss to tell you precisely why. To paraphrase the poets' contemporary, "The Appeal" can be short on sense, but abounds in sensibility.

"The Appeal" at the SoHo Rep (86 Walker Street, between Broadway and Church, 212-868-4444).



SOHO REP

LAKE IT OR NOT Michael Portnoy and Pete Simpson in 'The Appeal' at the SoHo Rep.