



## *Confronting Questions of Faith With a Few New Responses*

by JASON ZINOMAN

People of faith are often treated as either jokes or villains in the downtown theater scene, but that may be starting to change. Les Freres Corbusier was evenhanded in "Hell House," and the Civilians, a company not known for being dogmatic, is working on a new docudrama about evangelicals.

Still, most seasoned audiences would expect that a drama by an experimental playwright at Performance Space 122 featuring four ministers discussing God's glory is inviting smirks. But Young Jean Lee, who wrote and directed "Church," isn't joking — or if she is, the joke is on us. Her slyly subversive drama ambushes its audience with an earnest and surprisingly moving Christian church service that might be the most unlikely provocation produced in years.

With a cast of speakers, Ms. Lee, described in the press materials as a nonbelieving daughter of Korean-American evangelicals, portrays the kind of Christians secular downtown hipsters may find hard to dismiss: open-minded, liberal, tolerant.

"I don't know that God exists any more than I know that God doesn't exist," says José (Greg Hildreth), a cerebral minister who mocks the arm-flailing brand of preacher sent up by the performance artist Reverend Billy. "The truth is that the world is a mystery."

When I saw the show, the audience at first nervously chuckled, but gradually calmed and listened intently to the kind of pleas found in church. But the point here is not to convert so much as to confront. Ms. Lee has a talent for evocative and sometimes grotesque imagery, and on the attack she is at the height of her powers.

The play begins with the lights off, and José, from the back of the room, laying into the ticket-buyers for their petty concerns, their mediocrity and delusions of nonconformity. "You are incredibly similar to all the people sitting around you right now," José says. "The vast majority of them are doomed to a life of disappointing mediocrity just like yours."

"Church" is as much about the art of persuasion as it is about religion. It's organized like an excellent and occasionally angry argument, starting by attacking the opponent's ideas and finishing by proposing new ones. But who is Ms. Lee arguing with? The supposedly godless denizens of the theater world? Or is she confronting her own lack of faith?

Ms. Lee is most convincing when her characters stop talking and begin singing and dancing. The female ministers — wonderfully underplayed by Karinne Keithley, Weena Pauly and Katie Workum — show some joyous moves, and the play ends with a rousing spiritual.

On the way out, a theatergoer, perhaps still waiting for the teasing wink, shook her head and said, "That really freaked me out!"