



# Faith Confronted, and Defended, Downtown

by ERIK PIEPENBURG

PERFORMANCE SPACE 122, the East Village center known for telling heart-on-its-sleeve theater to take a hike, is undergoing a religious conversion of sorts, with two new shows on Christian themes. "Church," written and directed by Young Jean Lee, is being performed until next Saturday. It's an unorthodox contemporary worship service, complete with sermon, praise dancing and a gospel choir. The playwright and director Lear DeBessonnet upends Brecht's "St. Joan of

the Stockyards" in a revival that begins June 15, transplanting the dark Joan of Arc story to 1920s Chicago, with bluegrass music by the singer Kelley McRae and handouts of warm bread.

Ms. Lee, 32, and Ms. DeBessonnet, 26, sat with Erik Piepenburg to discuss how Christian fundamentalism influenced their plays; what it means to lose, gain and question faith; and how downtown theater mistreats the evangelical mind. Here are excerpts of their conversation; extended audio excerpts and more photographs can be found at [nytimes.com/theater](http://nytimes.com/theater).

## Growing Up Christian

LEAR DEBESSONNET I'm from Baton Rouge and grew up in a Christianized culture. My family was nominally Christian but has actually become more involved in the church than they've ever been in my past. I had a very intense conversion experience when I was 10 and became passionately dedicated to Christianity. I had a bit of a Joan of Arc complex. I wasn't Catholic, so I wasn't planning to be a nun, but I certainly planned to dedicate my life to God. I never thought I would get married or have children. I felt I had a sort of calling. A lot of my work stems out of trying to sort through that as an adult.

YOUNG JEAN LEE My parents were converted to evangelical Christianity when they were living in Korea by an American missionary, and he helped bring them over to the United States. As soon as I was born, they both directed all of their energy into making me a Christian. I converted when I was 5, but by the time I was 8, I sort of didn't believe anymore. I always hated church. I was not a religious person. I resisted and fought through my entire childhood and adolescence. When I went to college, I refused to go to church anymore, and there was a big battle between me and my parents. They realized they had to stop trying to force it on me.

MS. DEBESSONNET I find it so ironic that Young, who has been critical for her whole life of this faith, is making a play that's sincerely giving it a fair shot. I, who have cherished and protected this faith for most of my life, am making this show about someone losing their faith, that in some way denigrates it at the end, or calls into question the validity of it.

## Fear and Motivation

MS. LEE The premise that all of my shows begin with is, I ask myself the question, "What is the last show in the world that you would ever want to make?" Then I force myself to make that show. My whole aesthetic is about fighting complacency. So if I make a show that goes against my instincts of what I want to do, that creates a very tense and complicated dynamic.

For "Church" the last show in the world I would ever want to do was an evangelical Christian service that's sincerely trying to convert the audience to Christianity, and that's not ironic or a joke or making fun of Christianity at all. That just seemed like a real nightmare and a challenge for me, and it has been.

MS. DEBESSONNET Usually my questions have to do with God in some way, because that's what I think about, that's what keeps me up in the middle of the night. This play, about the problematic relationship between Christianity and social justice and idealism, is really upsetting to me. I don't know how to look at those questions honestly. I don't know how to make an honest piece of work without entering into that crisis on some level.

## On Evangelicals and Theater

MS. DEBESSONNET Evangelical Christians in America right now can be very easy to make fun of. There's a lot of good material there. But the problem is that it's not helping the dialogue around these issues. What we really need is to be generating conversation about it, not just affirming people in what they already think. I think it's very hard in the downtown theater world to address faith sincerely. Sometimes it's perceived as being ironic, even if you're meaning it to be sincere.

MS. LEE Most of what I've seen up until this point has been critiques and making fun. Christians are just not taken seriously at all, which is what my show came out of. But I have a feeling there's going to be a big wave of theatrical stuff dealing with evangelical Christians over the next year.

MS. DEBESSONNET I think the downtown artistic community is realizing we don't really have the option of dismissing [evangelical Christianity] anymore. This is a force in our world. There are so many millions of people that do believe this, and for us not to even attempt to engage them or understand what's driving them seems irresponsible artistically.