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Hell Is For Bohos

In her new show *Church*, Young-Jean Lee make a none-too-joyful noise

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

Playwright Young Jean Lee gave up caffeine two years ago, but this renunciation hasn't exactly mellowed her. Over a glass of cranberry juice, in the innocuous surroundings of an Au Bon Pain, she can summon startling rage, inveighing against her hipster peers. Lee on smugness: "How can you be so complacent and so fucked-up and so sure that you're right about everything?" On self-interest: "It's morally wrong to be this selfish and this spoiled." On whining: "This constant depression and anxiety is taken completely dead seriously when we live in almost unbelievable privilege." But she saves her harshest words for herself. "That's totally me," she sighs. "I am so typical."

As a playwright, Lee isn't typical at all. Since the debut of *The Appeal* at Soho Rep in 2004, she's been a fixture downtown, crafting scurrilous, severe, discomfiting plays on subjects ranging from the friendship of Wordsworth and Coleridge to

how to make stuffed tofu. The play featuring that recipe, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, a devastating and very funny attack on racism, earned raves during its fall run at Here Arts Center. Vallejo Gantner, the artistic director of P.S.122, which hosted Lee's *Pullman*, WA, says she has "the sharpest knife in the business. She cuts right through the bone."



Beginning April 26, P.S.122 will host Lee's *Church*, a play in the form of a church service. In this one-act piece, a preacher and three female reverends want to make the downtown audience squirm: "Your spiritual bankruptcy is reflected in your endlessly repeating conversations about your struggles to quit smoking, quit drinking, quit junk food, quit caffeine, quit unsatisfying jobs and relationships—and this is what you talk about when you are trying to be deep!"

Though somewhat enlivened by rousing music and dance, *Church* makes a none-too-joyful noise. Neither an invitation to bask in God's love nor a parody of religious practice, this thorny play, says Lee, is designed "to target myself and my own demographic. If the preacher were to rail against homosexuality, everyone would just laugh, but if he rails against spending too much money on eating out, then everyone is guilty."

Lee doesn't look like a Jeremiah. She's an attractive, thirtyish Korean-American, with a penchant for red lipstick. She certainly never expected to write a church service. Though Lee's parents, faithful adherents to the Evangelical Free sect, ensured she spent every Sunday in church, Lee despised it. "I would just sit there and look around at the people and hate them . . . just think how awful they were."

As she prepared to leave for college, she told her parents she'd no longer attend. "I said you can't force this on me anymore." During her undergraduate years at Berkeley, Lee came out as an atheist. But just as she'd questioned her parents' beliefs, she questioned the views of her fellow unbelievers. "Their attitude toward Christians seemed very ill-informed . . . it was like Christians are evil morons who are ruining our country." Recently Lee wondered if she could write a play that would challenge that position, that could make Christianity seem attractive, accessible, useful to her audience. Could she preach to the unconverted?

The resulting piece is spikier than the one she first conceived. Sweetness and light give way to reproach and censure. "You are obsessed with your special uniqueness and individuality," Lee's preacher rails, "but in fact you are incredibly similar to all the people sitting around you right now! If you were truly unique, then your life wouldn't be such an endlessly disappointing failure!" Lee confesses she's made the play so severe as an attempt at self-betterment. She prays that repeated exposures will purge her of her own failings. "I'm preaching to myself," she says. "It's not really working so far, so I keep pushing the text and pushing the performance. I'll know I've succeeded once I see a behavioral shift."

With the help of *Church*, Lee hopes to one day go forth and whine no more.