

A race riot in the theater

Young Jean Lee explodes American stereotypes in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*. By David Cote

If Young Jean Lee's aesthetic strategy could be summarized in a phrase, it might be: Perversity plus sincerity. The 32-year-old playwright forces herself to create plays she would hate to write. That includes an orientalist film-noir scenario (2003's *Metaphysic of Morals*); a period drama about the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge (2004's *The Appeal*); a self-help play about the secret to happiness (2005's *Pullman, WA*); and now, with *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, the ethnic-heritage tale.

Lee describes her compositional dialectic as "reversal and contradiction": any statement a character makes can be undermined or nullified immediately. This creates a jagged, fragmentary spontaneity to the work, as if we were watching the author's raw, unmediated id onstage: hesitant, playful, quirky, mortified and raging—especially raging. The writer is unequivocal about the anger she can muster, both toward racist whites and guilt-mongering minorities. "Oh, I hate everybody," Lee remarks brightly.

Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven is the dramatist's warped version of the identity-politics play. Call it postmodern minstrelsy. It starts with a character designated only as "Korean-American" mocking Asians as "monkeys," "retarded" and "too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status." Then she turns on the audience, taunting them as bigots and making threats to enslave whites under the Korean yoke. Three Korean women enter in traditional dress, essentially performing their "Asian-ness." They giggle, gossip, call each other faux-Asian names and adopt an openly hostile attitude toward the equally belligerent Korean-American. A vicious fight breaks out. The only other characters are known simply as White Person 1 and 2. Deracinated aliens to the weird rituals happening before them, they seem to have been imported from the standard bourgeois relationship drama. We jeer at their banal discussion of interpersonal problems. The joke, however, is on the Koreans: By the end, the whites—consumed with the minutia of their emotional lives—will take over the action.

"I wanted a dysfunctional couple to fuck up the identity-politics play," Lee explains. "I always knew that White Person 1 and 2 would eat the play the minute they showed up. Some white spectators hated it. They thought that the couple was supposed to be typically white—which they're not. You could switch them with any ethnicity and it would make just as much sense."

Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven was developed in the summer of 2006, with Lee rehearsing scenes as she wrote, working on movement and choreography with Dean Moss and consulting with set designer Eric Dyer (a member of the Brooklyn performance group Radiohole). While she is technically an auteur, Lee credits her collaborators for helping

flesh out her vision. She also describes the creative process as agonizingly stressful. “Professionally, I’m the most confident person you’ll ever meet,” she says. “I’ve never had a moment of doubt about my career. But personally and artistically, it’s the reverse. Making a show is almost torture. You need such a high level of belief in yourself. So for me, it’s a constant struggle to not give up.”

Lee expresses both professional pride and personal ambivalence about the reception to *Songs* in the United States. On the one hand, the work has attracted attention from the European festival circuit and she is, for the moment, being paid to write. But Lee says that her peers in the downtown theater world have been openly envious—even contemptuous. “I’ve had people tell me to my face that the only reason I’m getting this attention is because I’m Asian,” Lee says. “Artists make a distinction between themselves and yuppies; they think they have a kind of racial immunity...that they’re coming from a place of moral and political purity. Actually, I just think they’re a bunch of racists.”

Like the Wooster Group, the Builders Association, Radiohole, Richard Foreman, Richard Maxwell and, naturally, Robert Wilson, Lee is the latest in a line of American avant-gardists whose work is partly made possible by the money and attention of European presenters. It’s a dirty little secret of American theater that its most daring artists are subsidized by the E.U.

Even in New York City, cultural commissars are hostile to experimentation, especially work as likely to provoke as *Songs*. The nonprofit theater is deeply conservative and afraid to alienate its audience. And funding for the theatrical avant-garde is practically nonexistent. Lee is perfectly aware of these limitations. “If you want to have a play produced professionally, you need to write something that’s basically at the same level as a TV movie,” Lee says. “But then, you have to cover it in what I call a special sauce of pretension. The pretension comes from heightened language, or maybe an abstract set.”

Ironically, if Lee’s success continues, we may lose her articulate fury and heartbreaking ambivalence to the very media that have corrupted American theater: Film and television offers have started coming her way.

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