

Things I think about when I think about LEAR

by Helen Shaw

Young Jean Lee's LEAR is straight-up divisive. The people who love it, love it with passion, and those who hate it grudge it even its tiny running time. But while that sort of polarized response comes with the experimental territory, LEAR has *also* been dividing those who would normally pitch head-over-heels for an avant-garde take on Shakespeare. A quick peruse of the reviews (and canvassing other audience members) teaches us that while some feel that LEAR is lazy, underdone, or incomplete, some feel it is the ultimate example of craft.

Experimental work always divides its audience, but it usually does so on pre-dotted fault lines. Those who like narrative get itchier and itchier the farther work gets from a conventional structure; those who have a predilection for the Weird get annoyed the moment someone sits stage-center on a couch. We tend to cluster defensively around our chosen aesthetics. Craft, though, is meant to be somehow beyond these questions of taste—shouldn't we be able to agree on if something is “well done,” even if we rankle at its formal decisions? At LEAR, people disagree fundamentally on the care that Young Jean Lee has taken, and on whether the hipster diffidence displayed by Lee's performers reflects a deeper unconcern at the play's own heart. That's an extraordinary level of disconnect, and it may herald something radical and strange in Young Jean Lee's tactical repertoire.

Admittedly, there's a lot of paratheatrical material to take into account with LEAR: Young Jean Lee is a clever media navigator, and her seeming delight in self-promotion and level of control over her work (she always directs her pieces) have certain push-me-pull-you effects on those who watch her shows. She is also, frankly, coming off a wildly praised success, *The Shipment*. Again and again, expectations

turn into assumptions—Tennessee Williams, in dissecting the critical backlash to Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, talked about the inevitability of the “sophomore” review. We are dialectical creatures, and after enthusiasm we almost always swing back to disappointment.

But what about *LEAR* itself? We certainly can not say that its effect can simply be chalked up to our affinity for (or hatred of) bandwagons. What strategies does it use? Is it what it appears—a loosely slung web of narcissistic scenes, attached to Shakespeare by thin tendons of assumption and association? Or is it more focused than that, just with its danger hidden and its structure veiled?

My own belief is the latter. In an effort to understand my own, overwhelmed reaction to *LEAR*, I've picked through what I think of as Young Jean Lee's toolbox.

First, Young Jean Lee uses what I think of as the **Invisible Production** strategy. Jeffrey Jones calls *LEAR* Gauge Theater, in which a work deliberately uses the tension between itself and a referenced work, without turning the corner into deconstruction. Across town, Nature Theater of Oklahoma's hilarious *Romeo and Juliet*, in which actors repeated interviewees' confused accounts of the tragedy's plot, also played this game, as has a number of other pieces—Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* leap immediately to mind. Of course, in those earlier pieces, we are allowed “behind the curtain” peeps at what “really happened,” while still allowing the basic plot-outline of the originals to go unchallenged. Vogel and Stoppard let us hear alternate *interpretations*, rather than “deviations” from Shakespeare's series of events. Both the Nature Theater show and *LEAR* choose to explore “wrong” accounts: both toy with what we already know and pitch us little variations to see how we right our internal theatrical gyroscope. These treat Shakespeare as myth, in the same way that the Greek tragedians happily carved up their own religious canon to serve each new play's purpose.

LEAR, though, doesn't just monkey with our memory of the *text*, it also establishes a simultaneous Invisible Production. Think of the lavish attention paid to sets and costumes in this show. And, of course, think of the ramifications of the casting. Young Jean's piece is thoroughly haunted: there's an enormously personal wail of intergenerational grief here; there is Shakespeare's booming echo and there is the ghost of a production, one we can't quite see, that happens off in the wings of this one. In that phantom production, King Lear's daughters are black, and—dare we ask why?—his youngest and most beloved has the lightest skin of the three. What provocation is this? Which Lear is this?

Because Lee always directs her own pieces, the texts are not the robust things we expect from conventional playwrights. She does not expect or need them to stand without her. The play is as much her directorial choices--her phantom production--as it is the words the actors say. And so one of the reasons that I feel myself grateful for the conversational pauses, the lapses into banality (“You want to get some food?”), is that they give me time to situate that 'round-the-corner production of *King Lear*; to examine it and refine upon it, and then to allow its political insights to filter back into the work I am watching.

Alongside the Invisible Production, Young Jean Lee also employs the familiar technique of **collage**. By now, theater fans are sanguine about the use of excerpted materials—Charles Mee's oeuvre has so penetrated the theatrical landscape that a Schwitters-esque approach to text scarcely raises an eyebrow. Here, our playwright excerpts from two sources: a very special *Sesame Street* episode and *King Lear*. Why is it, then, that our minds automatically sort the Shakespeare into one bin and the television episode into another? We see the Mr. Hooper text as evidence of the play's postmodernism, and therefore an intentional interrupter of the play's reality, while the Lear quotes somehow feel like a *return* to an original reality. Of course, we know that Shakespeare himself presaged all the

heteroglossic tricks that the moderns believed they invented. Yet Shakespeare's merrily abrupt genre-shifts, not to mention the age-old convention of the soliloquy, have lost their dramaturgical excitement after generations of class-room worship. Lee makes Shakespeare strange to us again—it's one of the great boons of her play.

Young Jean Lee makes something else very old, very new here. In the theater, we are used to watching one actor play many roles. Since that first Pentheus re-entered wearing Agave's mask in *The Bacchae*, audiences have had to hold their ideas of the actor's single physical presence separate from the many presences he would play on stage. Indeed, in today's productions of Shakespeare, it seems downright wasteful if you don't cast Act I's noble lord as Act III's grumpy shepherd. The **disjunct character** does, though show up in film with a much headier result—think of Naomi Watts exchanging personalities halfway through David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Snatching back that sense of disorientation (one we haven't felt since before the 5th Century), Lee gives us Okwui Okpokwasili playing Lear himself, roaring from his seat with every implication that he has come alive again. And there, again, is that thready, keening sound of personal grief.

Lee's comic strategy of using an insistently (even rudely) contemporary vocabulary has, throughout the play, forced us to make common cause with Lear's harsh-minded daughters. They talk about their weight; they talk about being people-pleasers. We've allowed our own personalities to elide into them, sucked over the identity barrier by the familiar sounds of the 21st century American's self-loathing. And then, just as we've let ourselves imagine the weight of those jeweled costumes, Lee makes us face a father's death, beating at us with blows that seem gentler (the sweet tones of the *Sesame Street* sequence), but that are all we need to tip over into the prepared trap of grief.