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Photo: Blaine Davis

Radical Shakespeare

A young playwright exiles King Lear from his own play.

By K. Leander Williams

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A *King Lear* without Lear, you say? What would be the point? For playwright Young Jean Lee, it is to experience the Bard's great tragedy in the most thrilling and freewheeling fashion—which is the only way Lee can approach a subject, as anyone who saw last winter's acclaimed *The Shipment* can attest. Yet for someone whose plays have garnered so many accolades, Lee talks a lot about failure. One might say she's made it part of her process. "Here's how it goes," she told me last fall, following the second workshop performance of her *Lear*, opening shortly at Soho Repertory Theatre. "I start with something that doesn't work, and then I fail, fail, and fail again, until it comes together. What you just saw? I'm not happy with much of it. And it's completely different than the first workshop a few months ago. That may seem nerve-racking, but it's the only way I know how to do this."

Theatergoers witnessed Lee, 35, perform a similar bit of anxiety transferal with her experimental *The Shipment*, which dared the audience to laugh at racial tropes and stereotypes through a succession of satiric tableaux, by turns probing, discomfiting, and hilarious. "I was disturbed by several things at the earliest stages of that work, too," Lee says. "At previews, people got that it was humorous, but they were laughing in the wrong places, or not where I'd imagined they would. The response kinda horrified me."

Her *Lear* is proof that just about anything can happen when Lee goes back to the drawing board. At a rehearsal in December, she shows off images of the production's period costumes and Elizabethan-style proscenium, and also unveils a new script, the one that has boldly banished the characters of King Lear and Gloucester. In one fell swoop, the play shifts into a subversive and often funny discourse on the aftermath of the king's death. No character, not even sweet Cordelia, is spared bouts of self-absorption. "I realized that since the Lear character is so central," Lee explains later, "I kept giving him more and more dialogue. I conceived this work at a time when my dad and friends' parents were starting to battle illnesses, so it seemed to make sense that this would be more about how the children—Cordelia, Goneril, Edmund, etc.—deal with mortality. Dialogue from the point of view of someone so much older than myself felt dishonest."

In some ways, taking such liberties has given Lee an opportunity to rewrite her own history. The University of California, Berkeley alumna (raised in Washington State) never finished her dissertation on *King Lear* over a decade ago, preferring to ensconce herself in New York's radical-theater scene. "I guess Shakespeare is trying to defeat me, to kick me in the ass again," laughs Lee. Her frustration with the process is alluded to later, as she addresses the actors after a dramatically different run-through: "I don't want this to turn into the kind of theater that generally drives me insane, where people are just moved around the stage speaking poetic language."

Amelia Workman, a veteran of *The Shipment*, plays Cordelia. She thrives on the improvisational nature of Lee's writing process, which includes intense collaboration with the actors. "Most of the time, you walk into a production and know if your character's going to get killed off. Here you have to understand how to articulate what's happening with your character, which can lead [Lee] to amazing places. It's much more open." She pauses, then adds, "I mean, there's still a chance Cordelia could die, though as of now that's a last-week idea."