

SOMA

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PROVOCATEUR
PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR YOUNG JEAN LEE
Text by Matthew Keuter—Photography by Blaine Davis

Perhaps one measure of art lies in its ability to speak truth to the human condition. For the 35-year-old New York-based playwright, Young Jean Lee is not necessarily holding a mirror up to our darker nature as she's shattering it over our heads.

Lee has been a fixture of New York City's vibrant experimental theater scene since 2003. Her downtown premiere at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, took its name from an Immanuel Kant essay and spun a tale of Fu Manchu's attempt to steal the mask of Genghis Khan in order to unite the armies of Asian nations and destroy the Western World. It was also a comedy.

Lee's approach to a blank page is equally imaginative, and she works closely with her actors, discovering the talking points of a nascent work with her respective ensembles. "I'm not working from my point of view, I'm working from my actors points of view. I talk with them about what they want to say, and how they feel. Then write a reflection on that."

Reflection is a gentle word to apply to *The Shipment*. The performance opens with a neo-minstrel song-and-dance number and is followed by a stand-up routine that would make devotees of the Kings of Comedy collective jaws drop. A black teen aspires to become a famous rapper, is arrested on trumped-up drug charges, earns the necessary street credential in jail, gets rich, and acquires requisite drug and womanizing habits. The final act is a living room drama centered around five whiny white kids suffering from existential angst. *The Shipment* is discomfiting to say the least, and that is just the way Lee wants it. "I pick something I think the audience is going to resist and then try to figure out how to get past all their defenses. For *The Shipment*, it was black-identity," she says. Lee continues to premiere new works every year with growing critical success. Currently she's collaborating with another maverick political writer—William Shakespeare. Her adaptation of *King Lear* is scheduled to open at SoHo Rep in January of 2010. SOMA briefly spoke with Lee about politics in theater, the possibility of failure, and why she was drawn to the "Bard of Avon."

What are some of the risks of writing the script with your cast as you prepare for an opening night? It seems like a treacherous way to approach the stage. I always do workshop performances, practice runs before the final

production. We did a workshop in New York for *The Shipment* that was a horrible failure. Black audience members walked out, white audience members laughed uproariously through the whole show, and then were really dismissive at the end. I had to recast and start over from scratch. It's a very painful trial and error. I always feel lost. There's a lot of failing and hitting your head against the wall. It doesn't help to have made a show before, because I purposely pick things that are entirely different. It's terrifying, you never know if you're going to succeed, and if you do fail, it's going to be on a big scale.

Do you consider yourself a political artist? Someone who works in the tradition of, say, Agitprop Theater?

Actually, no. The idea for me was to make a show that completely destroyed everyone's idea about what a political show was. That was sort of the aim. That's kind of what I do with every show. I take a subject matter that people think they know how their going to respond to and present it in such a disorienting way they don't even recognize it. Surrounding Obama's election there was a new willingness to discuss race; I feel that's dissipated again. I don't think America really wants to talk about issues surrounding race because it's so horrible. It's still a problem and nobody knows what to do. And it's just so...shameful.

Has there been a marked difference in the way *The Shipment* has been received abroad, as opposed to say, a New York audience.

You know it was really interesting. In Brussels, that was our first European tour, we did the show and audiences loved it. They interpreted the show as making fun of how stupid America is about race, and they felt very superior and above it. So in the stand-up routine, I added a long paragraph specifically for European audiences, calling them out, in a very direct and aggressive way. After that, the European audiences responded pretty similarly to the New York audiences (laughs).

Will you speak a little about using *Lear* as a jumping off point?

The thing about Shakespeare is that he's considered the ultimate traditional playwright now. Shakespeare took the story line and completely blew it apart. It's completely exploded, sprawling and messy and crazy. And he loved to just go nuts with the language. For me he's a total renegade.



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