



I saw you in the audience the other night taking notes. Are you still making changes?

Yeah, I continue working on shows until the end. I even work on them when we go on tour.

How long have you been working on *The Shipment*? About two years.

And what was the initial inspiration for the play? I start out all of my shows by asking, "What the last play in the world I would want to write?" The idea of doing identity politics has always been really problematic for me, so I did an Asian-American identity politics show called *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, and then I decided that it would be even harder to do a black American identity politics show. The idea really terrified me, so I decided to just go for it.

Why did it terrify you? Well, first of all, because I think that dealing with race in art is already kind of impossible, and I think that people are already weirder and more defensive about racism against black people than they are about other kinds of racism. I thought it was going to be this huge issue that I wasn't black. But as far as reactions from other people, I expected much more hostility, and so far, knock on wood, there have been none.





When you say there's more weirdness from people when it comes to black identity politics, what do you mean by that? I think people tend to get more defensive about it.

I was reading your blog before this interview, and there was a lot of heated discussion. Have you experienced reactions like that from audience members in person? We did talk-backs during workshops for the original production in Ohio after every show, but it didn't seem to spark the kind of debate that was on the blog, just because the talk-backs were about the show; people tend to talk about the show as an artistic object instead of arguing about the issues.

You've said you weren't happy with previous workshop productions. They were a complete disaster. For me, my worst nightmare for the show would be to do something that was offensive to black people, or that would help perpetuate the racism that already exists. That was my biggest fear, and I feel like the workshops did that a little bit. They allowed white people to be simultaneously dismissive and allowed them to sort of enjoy black stereotypes.

Does that tie in with what you were writing about on your blog about watching audience members during *Passing Strange* at the public? Yes. It's true that the laughter is much for ambiguous for this production of *The Shipment*, but it still makes me a little bit nervous. I always think about what Dave Chappelle said about why he quit his show, how he was always nervous about hearing the wrong kind of laughter. That's always something that I'm going to be nervous about every night we do the show.

Compared to those previous workshop productions, are you happy with this one at *The Kitchen*? Oh yeah. When we did it in Ohio, I was just amazed that we finally got it to work. I was starting to despair; I was starting to think that it was an impossible task that we were undertaking, but it worked really well in Ohio, I couldn't believe it. During the talk-backs we had after the show, the audience members were so excited about the show, so supportive, and then the white audience members were really thoughtful, and asked really smart questions, and weren't insensitive. It was just a really sensitive reaction from everybody, and I was worried that it would be different in New York, but it's been similar here.



Do you think there's been a sort of backlash to political correctness in which white people who feel that they're sort of beyond racism will make offensive comments in an ironic way, as if to say, "We're past this, we can make these jokes because we're so obviously not racist"? Oh, absolutely. That was actually one of the major things that the cast and I were trying to address, the fact that we're still not there yet.

Did the cast influence the play in terms of the script? The way I work on all of my shows is that I cast the show before I have a script, and then I write parts for all the actors. So I write scenes; I don't even know what the show is going to be, I just write scenes and bring them in, and just bounce the scenes off them, and they'll try them out. My casts always have a lot of freedom of input into what the outcome is, and in this process in particular, the cast had a lot more say in the direction they wanted the show to go in.

I don't usually write naturalistic plays; I've never actually done that before, and the reason why the second half of the play is like that, is naturalistic, is because I asked the cast on the first day of rehearsal—they were talking about all these stereotypical roles that they always have to play. So I asked them, if you could play any role you wanted, what type of role would you want to play, that you don't get to play normally, because you always have to play these stereotypes? So they each came up with a character, and I said, "I'm going to write a play with all these characters, what kind of a play do you want to be in?" And they said it has to be naturalistic, it has to have some serious dramatic arc there, it can't be all about our sexual dynamic.

So I went home and basically wrote this play according to their specifications. At a certain point, I asked, "Why don't we just do this as the show? Why can't the whole show just be this?" But they were really adamant that there still had to be the first part of the show, just to sort of address all these stereotypes that they're still dealing with.

Did Obama's victory affect your creative process? Totally. When I started writing it, the idea that we could have a black president was so far fetched to me, and then when he announced his candidacy, suddenly everyone was talking about race, which was crazy, because before, nobody wanted to talk about it. Suddenly people were really open to talking about it and it was obvious that it was an issue. It was great, I think it made things a lot easier for us, in terms of receptiveness from audiences, and the second version was more hopeful than the first version. It was kind of impossible not to feel hopeful.



What inspired the title, *The Shipment*? I actually got it from a song by the communist rap group called The Coup. They have a song called "The Shipment." I just thought it was very evocative; it was meant to be about a shipment of drugs, but for me it kind of evokes the idea of the African slave as a shipment in the way a box of books from Amazon is a shipment, and how that's sort of the root of all the problems.



And there's a riveting a capella rendition of the song "Dark Center Of The Universe."

Why Modest Mouse? One of the major issues that we were talking about is that you can be a black performer singing or dancing in front of a white audience, and while there shouldn't be anything wrong with that... Some of my cast members can dance and sing really well, and they love to do it, why should they have to feel weird about doing it in front of a white audience? I think the answer to that is sort of the history of exploitation of black performers, and how black performers were kind of consumed.

So there's all this baggage that sort of goes along with that, and we wanted to give them the opportunity to sing. The first half of the show is kind of structured like a minstrel show, and we didn't want anything to resemble anything that would actually be in a real minstrel show. For the song, we wanted to find a way to enable them to sing, and enjoy singing with their voices without any of the baggage or stereotypes that comes from the more dubious



consumption of black performers. The way they sing that song, and the song itself—some people hated the song, because it made them uncomfortable, because they couldn't categorize it, and say "Oh, I know what that is." So that's why it's kind of a weird moment; we just tried to strip it of any sort of black signifiers.

Did you have the house lights up during that? Yeah, because it always happens exactly after the stereotype section, and that's the section where I always worry about inappropriate audience laughter. The dance section and the stereotype section. So for the song immediately after I wanted the experience of... The audience is laughing at these stereotypes, and suddenly they see the performers as people, not stereotypes, and the performers are looking at them.

Why this particular song? I thought the lyrics were really evocative; they're really ambiguous: "Well, it took a lot of work to be the ass I am / And I'm real damn sure that anyone can, equally easily fuck you over." And also the line "I'm not the dark sun of the universe like you thought." None of us had any idea what the song meant, but that also seemed good. The biggest problem with doing an identity politics show is that the easiest escape and the easiest defense in identity politics is to say, "I know what that is, I've seen that before, that's a cliché." So if anything was too obvious, then the audience would immediately have that defense. The challenge was to continually try to make it not obvious.

How have you felt about the audience reaction to this run? It's a little bit hard to tell without the talk backs. I think everyone is taking away such different things from it. The thing I keep hearing over and over again... People are having really mixed responses to it. I think the one response that's always irritating is the one from people who are disappointed that the show didn't make them feel worse about being white. That's irritating because it's like, that so wasn't what we were trying to do. If you come to the show wanting to feel bad about being white, that may be what you want, but it wasn't our agenda. It just seems like a really weird, self-indulgent thing. That's one response that really irritated me, so we added a line to the stand-up where we say, "For all you self-hating crackers who feel disappointed I didn't sodomize you more than I did"; that was sort of a response to that. But the really good response that we've gotten over and over from people—there hasn't been anyone who hasn't said this—is that whether they loved it or hated it, they were still thinking about it long after the show was over. I feel really happy about that response.



In what way do you hope your play will affect a white audience member? Slightly enhanced paranoia... I say that a little bit tongue-in-cheek. I think one issue that came up again and again is that there's a lot of resentment from white people, who feel like they sort of have to tiptoe around black people and racial sensitivity, political correctness. People are just really defensive and upset about being accused. I feel like part of what the show is trying to do is highlight the necessity of a certain amount of carefulness. For example, when I was first working with the cast of this show, I was super, super careful for the first week or two of rehearsal. I just really watched myself. Most people don't really intend to say something insensitive or offensive, it's just that you don't really know, you're not thinking, so I was super paranoid and careful. Then after a couple of weeks had passed, I was able to relax and not really worry about it. Still, I feel that you need to have that initial carefulness.

So King Lear at Soho Rep is next? It's a loose adaptation. It's basically going to be about that moment in a person's life—first of all it's a tragedy, and I've always only done comedy. So that's going to be a really big challenge. It's going to be about that moment in a person's life when you realize that your parents are getting old, and are going to die. That someday they're going to become your responsibility, and that you are also going to get old, get sick, and die as well. It's just about the moment of realizing your own mortality in that particular context. So that's what the show's about.

Are you going to rewrite it, or are you going to deconstruct the actual text? At this point I don't really know. When I say "loose adaptation," I mean there might be barely anything from the actual play. That's sort of a jumping off point.

Will you blog about the writing process and dialogue with readers like you did for The Shipment? I think so. That was incredibly useful. The blog documents all the horrible days, and as soon as I had a good moment, I discontinued the blog so that I could just make the show. I think with The Shipment the process of trying initially to find my way and just failing was so difficult, it was nice to have the support of a blog community to help me figure stuff out.

Have you seen theater recently that you liked? I saw this Dutch company last night that I worship. They're name is Kassys. I saw that last night and just loved it.

At Under the Radar. Yeah, I saw that last night and I just loved it. And Tim Etchells did a piece at Under the Radar that was phenomenal.