



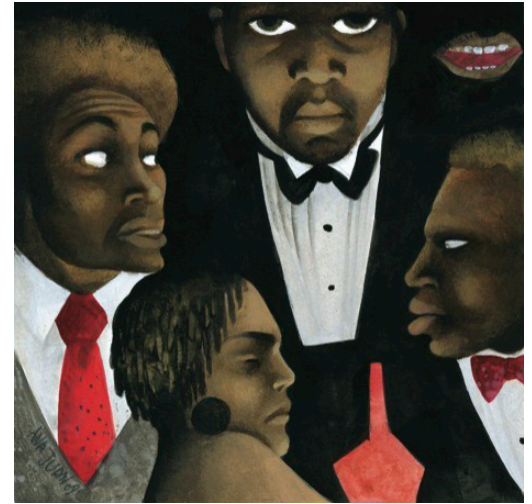
The Theatre

By the Skin of Our Teeth

Young Jean Lee's irreverent take on racial politics.

by Hilton Als

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One generally hesitates before identifying a new trend in the American theatre, largely because language has a tendency to fix and limit the joy one feels at witnessing the stops and starts, the moments of grace, and the moments of awkwardness in the work of a fledgling director, performer, or playwright. One senses, however, that the thirty-four-year-old playwright and director Young Jean Lee wouldn't be content with inchoate praise for her work—work that is both explicitly political in content and often mundane in tone. Like her contemporaries the up-and-coming playwrights David Adjmi and Thomas Bradshaw (Bradshaw performed in one of Lee's early pieces), Lee is a facetious provocateur; that is, she does whatever she can to get under our skin—with laughs and with raw, brutal talk that at times feels gratuitous, and is meant to.

Beneath the surface, Lee seems to say in her work, most people are cauldrons of awfulness. Political correctness is a front—and, by now, a tattered one. Any talk of race in our post-“Raisin in the Sun” world seems like a tired joke. In a 2007 interview in *American Theatre*, Lee said of her 2005 play, “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven”—a powerful, humorous, and startling work about the author's violence toward herself and, subsequently, toward her female Asian characters—“For this project, I decided the worst thing I could possibly do was to make an Asian-American identity-politics show, because it can be a very formulaic, very clichéd genre, and very assimilated into white American culture. It's almost become part of the dominant white power structure to have identity-politics plays about how screwed-over minorities are. It's such a familiar, soothing pattern. . . . It's become the status quo.”

Lee knows something about the tensions of trying to assimilate. When she was two, her family emigrated from Korea to Pullman, Washington. After finishing high school there, she earned a B.A. at the University of California at Berkeley, in 1996, and was accepted into the university's Ph.D. program in English. Six years later, she abandoned academia and came to New York to pursue a career in theatre. By then, she was already a presence on the downtown scene, staging work that often featured a female character who was the target of some form of abuse. In her 1995 piece, “Pullman, WA,” a young woman named Tory berates the audience and herself in the second person—“You have taken on way more responsibility than you can handle. . . . Your feelings of anxiety are fucking up your focus and productivity”—while a man named Pete goads her into further self-abnegation. The world Lee represents here is fuguelike and small, a culture in which men prey on the standard female anxieties. Tory is convinced that she's not doing enough in the world, for the world, and that she needs a man to remind her of her deficiencies; Pete's criticism provides her with a dreadful form of sustenance.

By the time Lee wrote “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,” she had learned how to pull more of the world into her dramaturgical constructions. A young woman called simply “Korean-American” says to the audience near the start of the play:

Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents? It's like being raised by monkeys—these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status. . . . Asian people from Asia are even more brain-damaged, but in a different way, because they are the original monkey. . . . I am so mad about all of the racist things against me in this country, which is America. Like the fact that the reason why so many white men date Asian women is that they can get better-looking Asian women than they can get white women because we . . . have lower self-esteem. It's like going with an inferior brand so that you can afford more luxury features.

Take “white” and “Asian” out of this speech, and you're left with the whiny lament of a discontented teen. Where does language take this character? What is she expressing, beyond a generalized self-loathing? And is what she has to say about race somehow validated by the fact that she herself is Asian? That is, do we accept what she has to say about Asians because she's speaking from the “inside”?

These kinds of questions come to the fore in Lee's most recent work. At the start of “The Shipment” (at the Kitchen, through January 24th) the stage is bare. We're looking at a brick wall. Suddenly, we hear a loud, rhythmically intense song. Two black men

(Prentice Onayemi and the outstandingly funny, high-haired Mikeah Ernest Jennings) are dressed in some version of black tie and sporting white shoes. The two actors sprint, wheel, and cavort soundlessly. As the music winds down, we hear a voice shout “New York City!,” and Douglas (the charismatic Douglas Scott Streater) enters. A little full of himself, he looks like a young Ivan Dixon. Holding his mike like a billy club, he’s a sort of street comedian, or a talkative thug, which, in Lee’s hands, comes down to the same thing:

DOUGLAS: Now, I know some a you thinkin’, Why do black comedians still do those “White people are like this, black people are like that” jokes? Well, I’ll tell you why. I don’t mind to be offensive by sayin’ this—but white people be evil. (Gives the audience a deadly serious look.) Naw, I’m just playin’ wit’ chall. Most white folks ain’t evil—they just stupid. . . . You think I ENJOY talkin’ ’bout race? I wanna talk about POOP, mothafucka!

Douglas talks shit. He also talks about defecation. Lee wants to remind us that this is all part of black parlance: Ain’t this some shit? But, more important, why do we listen? And what do we do with what we hear? Lee makes her audience walk a knife’s edge of race and meaning. How does blackness sound? And how have we been conditioned to hear black speech? After Douglas’s monologue, we’re treated to a series of verging-on-ridiculous short scenes that follow the rise and fall of a young rapper named Omar (Okieriete Onodowan). First, we see Omar being chastised by his mother (the lovely Amelia Workman), who is a parody of the struggling black matriarch.

MAMA: Omar, wake up! Wake up! You have to go to school so that you can be a doctor.

OMAR: I want to be a rap star!

MAMA: I worked three jobs and raised six children and ten grandchildren by myself so that you would be a doctor!

OMAR: But rapping is my dream.

Lee, directing her cast brilliantly—she’s very aware of what each performer can do—has the actors deliver their lines, in this section of the work, as mechanically as possible, perhaps in an effort to separate meaning from content, “staged” blackness from the “naturalistic” version. (The director and writer George C. Wolfe opened the door to this approach in his 1986 parodic sketch, “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play.”) As “The Shipment” goes on, Lee exploits every aspect of the racist view of a rapper’s life. Omar meets a “video ho,” who wants him to “do stuff” to her “booty,” encounters drug kingpins, witnesses drive-by shootings, and so on, to the point of absurdity. Finally, three of the cast members interrupt the narrative and break into song, a cappella and in all seriousness: “I might disintegrate into the thin air if you’d like / I’m not the dark center of the universe like you thought.” The actors disperse.

In semi-darkness, two stagehands start building a set. We find ourselves in the swank living room of Douglas, now called Thomas. He’s a trickster in a penthouse, and he’s hosting a party. All the actors have converged, but they speak differently now, more formally, and their language is more “dramatic.” There are antagonists and protagonists here, traditional theatrical distinctions that you couldn’t quite sort out in the more frenetic, visceral part of the evening. Thomas starts to reveal all sorts of awful secrets about his guests. But no one seems able to leave the room. The atmosphere is straight out of Luis Buñuel’s “Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,” which is the point that Lee is making onstage: the same actors are ostensibly playing the same roles, but they’re different to us now, transformed by the affluent setting and by their pinched diction. The setting has made them white—another social construct. This is so ingenious a twist, such a radical bit of theatrical smoke and mirrors, that, in rethinking everything that has come before—all that “black” language, all those “black” situations—we are forced to confront our own preconceived notions of race. And to agree with Lee that we may not live long enough to purge ourselves of them.

ILLUSTRATION: ANA JUAN