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Photo by Sara Krulwich

THEATER REVIEW | ‘THE SHIPMENT’
Off-Center Refractions of African-American Worlds

By **CHARLES ISHERWOOD**

Cultural images of black America are tweaked, pulled and twisted like Silly Putty in “The Shipment,” a subversive, seriously funny new theater piece by the adventurous playwright Young Jean Lee at the Kitchen.

Ms. Lee, who is Korean-American, consciously set herself the uncomfortable task of creating what she calls a “black identity-politics show,” having explored and lampooned the culture of Christian churches and Asian-Americans in her previous works “Church” and “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven.” (Clearly she likes a challenge.) Combing through the images of African-Americans that dominate the media, Ms. Lee wields sharp, offbeat humor to point up the clichés, distortions and absurdities, turning the wearily familiar — a foul-mouthed stand-up comic, a drug dealer, a would-be rapper — into loopy, arch cartoons.

Please don’t let the social-studies tag “identity-politics” put you off; “The Shipment,” performed by a diversely talented cast of five black actors, will bore or offend only the humorless. Ms. Lee’s method is not to wag a finger but to wink and smile, trusting that you’ll register the point after you’ve had a good laugh.

The show is provocative but never polemical, and it is pleasingly eclectic. There’s a little song and a little dance; straight-up comedy; sketches; and a short, essentially naturalistic play. But even in the lighter moments, Ms. Lee, who also directed the show, does not shy away from prodding the audience’s racial sensitivities — or insensitivities — in a style that is sometimes sly and subtle, sometimes as blunt as a poke in the eye.

Eye-poking comes first, after a brief, antic dance sets the playful tone. Douglas Scott Streater strides onstage in the guise of an abrasive, trash-mouthed comedian. The monologue he performs, full of blush-making sex jokes (including a pro-incest riff) and scatological reveries (he complains that he’d rather tell bathroom jokes than work over the black-white thing again), pays affectionate tribute to the transgressive spirit of great black comics, from Richard Pryor to Dave Chappelle.

Some of the stinging observations could easily have been pulled from a routine on “Original Kings of Comedy” on HBO. Annoyed by white people’s annoyance when black people point out they’ve experienced racial discrimination or oppression, Mr. Streater parodies their own fondness for complaint.

“You ever heard a white person whine?” he asks, then switches from street voice to the sound of a crisply enunciating nerd. “ ‘I don’t know what I’m doing with my life.’ ‘I hate feeling fat all the time.’ ”

But the heightened abrasiveness and the lurches into absurdity intimate that the posture of the angry, foul-mouthed black stand-up has become a constricting pose. The machinery of the entertainment industry keeps performers boxed in categories that challenge neither white nor black audiences. At one point the comic confesses that he doesn’t talk like this offstage but is too afraid of the reactions of his peers to drop the persona.



Photos by Sara Krulwich



The sketch that follows, the show's funniest segment, is a comic-strip odyssey about a young black man, Omar (Okieriete Onodowan), who aspires to rap stardom. Shortly after waking up one day and announcing his dream to his dubious mom, He is seduced into drug dealing and thrown in prison. There he meets a religious fanatic named Paul the Extremist and a record executive who eventually makes him a blinged-out star.

The style is deadpan surrealism. When a basketball-playing friend flops on the ground suddenly, Omar exclaims: "Oh no! A drive-by shooting!" The introductory monologue from the zombified drug kingpin (a hilarious Prentice Onayemi) is typical of the skit's chipper style.

"I'm going to rob people and shoot them and also sell drugs," he tells Omar blandly, arms waving slowly in hip-hop motion. "You should do it too." The weirdly innocuous tone, like that of a children's book, is presumably Ms. Lee's mordant commentary on the simplicity of the dominant narratives of black urban dysfunction and/or achievement prevalent in the cultural atmosphere.

A somewhat inscrutable song follows, performed a cappella by three of the cast members. But it provides a palate cleanser leading into the last and longest segment, on the surface a straight-up naturalistic comedy set at a cocktail party.

Even on its bantering surface, the play takes a few turns into the peculiar. After pouring drinks and making the usual welcoming chatter, the party's host, Thomas (Mr. Streater), eventually begins playing odd, antagonistic games, dredging up humiliating secrets to expose. Things get more macabre still when threats of murder and suicide are served up along with the crudités.

But both the play's surface realism and the lurid incidents Ms. Lee sprinkles across it are really just diversionary tactics meant to keep us guessing about the larger game she's playing. To say much more would be to spoil the sucker punch line, but as she does in the best of the material in "The Shipment," Ms. Lee sets you thinking about how we unconsciously process experience — at the theater, or in life — through the filter of racial perspective, and how hard it can be to see the world truly in something other than black and white.