

January 27, 2009

An Evening in Black and White From a Playwright Who Is Neither

By Patrick Healy



Photo by Ruby Washington

Many playwrights dread sitting among their audiences: Nothing is quite as soul-killing as overhearing people savage your work in midperformance. But not Young Jean Lee.

Night after night this month at the Kitchen, the downtown Manhattan theater, she has gritted her teeth and felt her skin crawl at times while white and black audience members have audibly reacted — often along racial lines — to her new play, “The Shipment.”

Not that Ms. Lee is a masochist. She is, rather, a Korean-American writer who set out to challenge theatergoers over their own racial biases (conscious and otherwise) by working with black actors to create a play that explores African-American stereotypes, experiences, and their history as minstrel players. The title is based on a rap song that is about a shipment of drugs but that Ms. Lee said she felt also evoked the African slave trade.

One scene features a black stand-up comic unleashing profane, mostly unpublishable material about what the races think of each other. Another set piece uses highly stylized acting as the cast portrays characters who are more stereotypes than flesh and blood to tell a parable about a black youngster who wants to rap but ends up selling drugs. The final scene is a cocktail party in which the five black actors seem to act, well, white.

In Ms. Lee’s hands, it’s combustible material, and her main measure of success or failure is how audiences react.

“I’m obsessed with listening to them — obsessed,” she nearly shouted during a recent interview over lunch. “Sometimes there are white people laughing in exactly the wrong places. Sometimes there is no reaction. Sometimes it’s only the black audience members I see reacting to a moment in the play. Watching and listening to it all, it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

A rising star of the downtown theater scene, Ms. Lee, 34, is preparing to take “The Shipment” on tour to theaters in the United States this year and eventually to Europe, and she is hoping for a return engagement someday in New York. She says she is particularly excited to take the show on the road in the early months of the Obama administration; given President Obama’s campaign talk about a new, postracial America, Ms. Lee is curious to take the temperature of audiences on the question of identity politics.

“I got an e-mail from someone who basically wrote, ‘Now in the age of Obama, do we really need to talk about this “race stuff” anymore?’, and that statement really blew me away,” Ms. Lee said.

“For centuries, from minstrel shows to stand-up comics, white Americans expected black people to entertain them,” Ms. Lee said. But, continuing a little tongue in cheek, she added: “Now that the president is black, are some people thinking in the back of their minds, ‘Oh, there’s this black guy on television every day, why isn’t he singing and dancing for me?’ ”

Critics have lavished praise on “The Shipment,” which Ms. Lee also directed and whose run has been extended until Saturday. In his review in *The New York Times*, Charles Isherwood called the play “a subversive, seriously funny new theater piece.” *The New Yorker* also gave “The Shipment” a warm and lengthy review — an unusual laurel for a young, relatively unknown writer.

Ms. Lee, who speaks quickly and seemingly with exclamation points to punctuate her strongly held beliefs, is something of an accidental playwright. She grew up in eastern Washington State and planned to pursue an academic career. But she dropped out of her Ph.D. program in English at the University of California, Berkeley, in her late 20s as her dissertation on “King Lear” was stalling and her marriage was crumbling.

“I was having a nervous breakdown because I was so unhappy, and I went to a therapist who asked me very directly, ‘What do you want to do with your life?’ ” Ms. Lee recalled. “And I said, ‘I want to be a playwright.’ It literally came out of nowhere. I’d never written a play. It was like saying I wanted to be an astronaut.”

Soon after, Ms. Lee moved to New York and enrolled in the master’s-in-playwriting program at Brooklyn College. She took inspiration from Beckett and Pinter, as well as contemporary experimental writers like John Jesurun and Mac Wellman, one of her teachers. Ms. Lee, who lives in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens in Brooklyn, began collaborating with actors to thrash out ideas that formed the basis for previous satirical works: “Church,” about contemporary Christianity, and “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,” about Asian-Americans.

Preparing for “The Shipment,” Ms. Lee spent months auditioning black actors before she had even finished a script. After settling on five cast members, Ms. Lee worked with them on an early version that was sharply aggressive and argumentative — so much so that in postperformance feedback some audience members signaled that they had shrugged off the material as angry identity-politics fare. Ms. Lee judged that version a failure, and the script and all but one of the actors, Mikeah Ernest Jennings, were jettisoned.

“What we found was that it was impossible to create this piece solely from a point of anger/frustration,” Mr. Jennings recalled. “This was too similar to the stereotype of ‘bad’ blackness, the angry blackness — it weakened the performance and message because, intellectually, anger is the last vestige of a dying argument.”

Ms. Lee recruited four new actors to join Mr. Jennings and re-opened discussion with the cast about which aspects of black life and race relations were not only most salient today but also most potentially provocative for audience members.

Amelia Workman, a member of the current cast and its only woman, said she pressed to broaden the stand-up comedy beyond commenting on white racism by acknowledging “that there are racist black people, racist Hispanic people — that racism crosses lines.”

“Being biracial myself, it was important to me that if we were going to do this right and stir up the pot, I wanted to be equal opportunity offenders,” said Ms. Workman, who described herself as “Irish-Italian, French-German, and black and Native American.”

While Ms. Lee has begun turning to her next piece, “a very loose adaptation of ‘King Lear’ ” for Soho Rep, she is also refining “The Shipment” in small ways, based on her nightly impressions at the Kitchen. She has resisted making major changes to the script, she said, hopeful that the play is having her intended effect — even though she still has doubts at times.

“Audiences have been laughing more enthusiastically since the positive reviews have been published, and it’s so painful sometimes,” she said. “I know that’s unfair of me because I wrote it to be funny, and the performers are funny, but I feel there is so much in there that people should not laugh at. Part of me would rather have them sit there in silent uneasiness.”