

By: Kai Wright | February 4, 2009

There's already a dangerously thin line between parody and minstrelsy; just ask Dave Chappelle. But Young Jean Lee isn't afraid to walk it. The brilliant, young director and playwright has taken great pleasure in obscuring the line further—and she's winning critical acclaim for doing so.

Lee just closed a wildly successful New York City run of her sketch comedy, "The Shipment." The show, which first opened in Columbus, Ohio, grabbed the January spotlight in New York's theater scene by exploring just how much skin color continues to frame the way we see each other—even in a post-race, Barack Obama-electing America. It's an early example of what will hopefully be an avalanche of smart, fearless work that brings the same fresh feel to the artistic conversation about race that is said to imbue today's politics.

"The Shipment" is best described bluntly: It's a hilarious, racial mind-fuck. "For the whole first half of the show," Lee explains, "the whole point of it is to induce as much racial paranoia and self-consciousness in the audience as possible." And she largely succeeds.

Lee structured the first half as a minstrel, America's oldest art form. Nineteenth-century minstrels stuck to a formula, typically including a dance number, followed by a slapstick comedy bit and then a send-up of a popular drama—all performed by buffoons wallowing in racist stereotypes, of course. Lee recreates this setup, but relentlessly denies the audience its punch lines.

The show opens with an eerily elegant dance duet, in which two young men mirror one another in a mélange of stereotyped black dances—everything from the old-school shuffle to more contemporary ass drops. A brash, foul-mouth stand-up comic follows, seemingly lost on his way to Def Comedy Jam. Then there's a painfully familiar after-school special set in the 'hood, complete with a long-suffering mom, an aspiring rapper who gets sucked into the drug trade, a gangsta-rap record exec who scoops him up and puts him in booty videos—you get the idea.

But all of this is delivered off-key; nothing's quite right. The action all takes place on a stripped-down, black box stage. The actors are dressed in evening wear and are irresistibly attractive. The dramatic skit is performed with absurdly robotic motions and monotone voices. The stand-up comic is more combative than funny, and he opens the bit by name checking the most yuppie hood in Brooklyn—"I'm a Park Slope nigga, born-n-bred!" You don't quite know what to make of it all.

The device is in part a practical one: When casting for the play, Lee—who picks her cast first, then works with them to flesh out a script—asked actors to perform black stereotypes. She cringed at the way everyone in the room responded. "Whenever they just sank into the stereotype, we would all just burst out laughing with this kind of—relief," she recalls. "It was really gross. So we were like, OK, we can't ever let the actors do that. They can never fully sink into it."

Which puts an awkward undertow on what should be madcap comedy. That's Lee's broader goal: to scramble the audience's racial cues enough so that we're on edge, and perhaps a little too self-aware of how we're reacting to the stereotypes as they unfold. (Or even how we're reacting to what the lady sitting a couple seats over is doing.)

This vibe contrasts starkly, however, with that of the show's final, longest bit. After a slow, painstaking set change, the actors reappear as fully fleshed out, relatable characters. They attend a cocktail party with events that are more bizarre than anything that's come beforehand. But because the characters have been made whole, they remain human. Many of their flaws—which we're now free to laugh at in earnest—mirror behaviors that, in the first half of the show, felt more like pathologies. Their drug use, their self-defeating flashes of anger, their fatalism—suddenly these are all resonant life challenges, hilarious in their familiarity.

Meanwhile, Lee offers a host of cues that the all-black cast is now playing white characters—crack becomes coke; they're Ivy League grads—though she withholds confirming the fact until the scene's final lines. Whether you see it coming or not, the point is made compellingly: Race, and the way American society views it, remains as constructed today as it was during the days of unabashed minstrel.

It's notable that Lee is not black, but Korean American. A daughter of academia, she was on the road to becoming a scholar herself when she dropped her studies, moved to New York City and started writing plays. She's made previous splashes with works delving into religion and her own Asian-American identity. So where does she get off wading into black identity through a faux minstrel show? After all, even Spike Lee was considered daring when he went there.

"All the way through—from the workshops, to our opening in Ohio, to this entire New York run—there hasn't been a single person who's asked me that question," says Lee, who answers by saying she wanted an impossible challenge. "Which is shocking. Because when I started I was like, that's going to be the biggest problem."

Maybe edgy, cross-racial commentary seems normal in a world where a black man can be president. Perhaps we're all just that articulate about race these days. Could be. But a piece of feedback Lee says she has heard most often suggests otherwise.

"White people come to see the show and they say, 'Oh, I was disappointed because I wanted to leave the show feeling really bad about being white and the show didn't succeed in doing that,'" explains Lee, who remains baffled by the critique. "It's just yucky that they wanted that in the first place. And then that they projected that onto the show, that it was something the show was supposed to do?"

Icky, indeed. But that might be just what a post-race America looks like: White theatergoers turning to a Korean-American artist's black-identity farce in hopes of getting a guilt fix.