

October 6, 2006



## *Scorching Dragons*

**In Young Jean Lee's *Dragons*, race goes to the funniest**

**BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI**

Sax Rohmer, the creator of the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu, described his villain as "tall, lean, and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare, a face like Satan . . . and long magnetic eyes of the true cat-green." By contrast, the character who plots the destruction of the white races in Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons* Flying up to Heaven is a pretty Korean American woman (Becky Yamamoto) sporting a pink shirt with a picture of a giraffe on it. Looking out from beneath her long bangs, shuffling her Vans-clad feet, she threatens, "Minorities have all the power. We can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them and there's nothing you can do to stop us. . . . The wiliness of the Korean is beyond anything. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke."

Many of Young Jean Lee's previous works are predicated on avoiding writing the play that she wants to write. Of *The Appeal*, she has said that she set out to write the worst possible play. Of *Pullman, WA*, she claims, "I had horrible writer's block. What came out was this." So it isn't such a surprise that when Lee set out to write a play examining Asian American culture and minority politics, it would produce a perverse, provocative, and very funny festival of racism. The opening lines: "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." *Songs of the Dragons* apparently grew out of a dread Lee had of writing "a predictable, confessional, Korean American identity play with a flowery Asian-sounding title." But Lee won't content herself with mere parody. Confessions and identity do feature, but they're subsumed by a relationship drama featuring two white people and Lee's relentless self-inquiry.

Lee is a queen of unease; chuckles never come unaccompanied by squirms. She's a distressingly self-aware writer who will play with theatrical forms and then have one or two characters speak about how she's playing with theatrical forms and whether that was really such a good idea. *Songs* offers not only chauvinistic monologues and ass-slapping Korean dances, but also a rigorous exploration of art-making and its associated terrors. In a smash speech, spoken in unison by the Korean American and three traditionally dressed Korean schoolgirls, Lee explains, defends, and apologizes for nearly every aspect of the show. "I wasn't interested in any wonderful message about racism and identity," shout the four women. "It was an exercise in ego-inflation. . . . I apologize for bringing shame upon my country." For work this troubling and dense and droll, there's no apology necessary.