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PEOPLE WHO NEED STEEPLE
HILDRETH STIRS UP THE FIRE AND BRIMSTONE



Photo: Ryan Jensen

P.S. 122. Written and directed by Young Jean Lee. With Greg Hildreth, Karinne Keithley, Weena Pauly, Katie Workum. 1hr 5mins. No intermission.

Scratch the surface of any bitterly atheist artist (or critic) and you may find a child sitting in a pew, bored stiff by the genuflection and talismanic monotony of religious observance. The child knows these prayers, responses and hymns by heart and finds them meaningless, but is still fascinated by the form. Writer-director Young Jean Lee makes no secret of how she loathed her parents' evangelical Christianity, but her latest work, *Church*, is no cheap satire of

piety. Instead, it is an earnestly warped attempt to explore what gives religion its insidious appeal.

Lee stages a Jesus-based nondenominational ritual, with a preacher (Hildreth), three female reverends (Keithley, Pauly, Workum), and a loose structure of homilies, readings, testimonials, hymns and celebratory dances set to Christian country-rock. The precise ideology being preached in this service is hard to, ahem, nail down. One minute, Pauly is saying that Jesus would stand against war, homophobia and commercialism; the next, Hildreth is having rapturous visions of mummies and unicorns. Lee's writing displays her customary surgical precision and menace, a rhetorically supple mix of invective and goofiness. And while she uses parable and drops the odd Biblical phrase ("sore afraid"), she seems more intent on roasting her audience's secular complacency than blaspheming or exposing the machinery of belief.

Of course, if artists (or scientists) could find out why some people can't do without supernatural bigotry, the world would be a better place. Since religion is bad theater for stupid people, I will happily worship in the house of Young Jean Lee. — David Cote