

THE CHURCH OF YOUNG JEAN LEE

Young Jean Lee didn't always imagine herself a playwright. In fact, it was pretty far off her radar until five years ago when she had a bit of a quarter life crisis. Her therapist asked her what she would be if she could do anything in life. "And I blurted out 'playwright,'" confesses Lee, who at the time was getting her Ph.D. in literature (with a focus on Shakespeare) from UC Berkeley. "It was like me saying I wanted to be a race car driver or a nun," the playwright/director says with wily amusement. "It was totally out of left field and embarrassing. In academia, there is so much contempt for those who try to have an artistic side."

What universities lost, theater has gained. Lee's presence in the field has not gone unnoticed. The Village Voice has lauded her as one of the city's finest up-and-coming playwrights, and her most recent play, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* was included in Time Out NY's list of the top ten plays of 2006. Critics have written that she has a "jittery, jagged body of work that resists pat definition" and that she is not only "a queen of unease" but "a distressingly self-aware writer." In the coming year *Songs* has been invited to tour to more than 20 venues. Her latest play, *Church*, is playing at P.S. 122 April 26-May 13.

Lee followed the same mantra for *Church* that she has for all of her previous plays. It's a peculiar philosophy to abide by, which essentially boils down to writing the worst play possible. In developing her first play, Lee was overwhelmed. Hanging out with a hip downtown theater set during her first year in New York made Lee want to imitate the great work around her. But she knew imitation wasn't the right path. Fortunately her teacher Mac Wellman suggested, "Why don't you write the worst play possible?" And so she did just that. She explains, "Plot wasn't really so trendy so I started with the story line from this awful movie *The Mask of Fu Manchu*." Despite the overwhelmingly positive response she received, Lee claims, "I was really embarrassed by my first plays in New York. I wanted to do something really awesome and cool and so, to make shows that had nothing to do with any of the aesthetics my peers had was hard."

But the idea of penning the worst play possible continues to goad Lee into writing (which she claims is torture), and continues to make her voice unique and authentic. One of her worst nightmares was to write a predicable Korean-American identity-politics crisis play with a flowery title. And so *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* was born, which (un?)surprisingly turned expectation on its head. Wrote one Times critic, "Just when the largely Caucasian audience thought it had caught up to Ms. Lee's off-and-on ironic point of view, she called our bluff again. Whites are bigoted, everybody's bigoted."

Even with the success she has had in writing the worst play possible I have to ask the obvious question: "Aren't you ever afraid that you actually will write the worst play possible?" Lee is quick to remind me that she comes from a background in literary criticism and that her problems are her hyper-criticality and self-awareness. She explains, "In writing the worst play possible there are two steps: The first step is just getting it on the page. So you have to turn the critic off, or the critic will never let you write anything. Writing the worst play possible is getting over that. The second step is about writing the best play possible." So it's kind of like writing the best worst play possible. But, Lee warns, "When you're writing the worst play, you don't think, 'Ooh that's not bad enough, I have to make it worse!' Writing the worst play possible is just the thing that enables me to get stuff down on paper. It's more of a 'this is the worst stuff so it doesn't matter what I write.'"

The process behind her latest work, *Church*, is no exception. "With all the George W. Bush stuff," she says, "I was hearing more and more blanket beliefs that all Christians are evil morons." Lee herself is not religious but avows that growing up, her parents were evangelical Christians. When she arrived at Berkeley as an undergrad she was surrounded by politically left leaning atheists and has ran in such circles ever since. What kind of a play comes out of these facts? An exuberant church service in which the preacher tries to convert the audience, of course! Lee admits that she has an unsavory sentiment towards Christianity even saying, "I have always been really hostile to Christianity. But then," Lee pauses, "my parents aren't evil morons... they're really smart, really good people. How crazy it is to say that an entire group of people is evil and that they're morons? Blanket mentality is really dangerous even when applied to someone who you think deserves it."

For *Church*, Lee invented her own version of Christianity "because if I didn't actually believe what the preacher is saying then I wouldn't convert and I wouldn't be able to convert anyone else." Therefore, the preacher talks about believing in God but has no idea if God actually exists. "It's been an exercise in cutting away every audience defense. I had to come up with a system of morality that is something that I believe in but don't live by—any more than anyone I know lives by it."

Don't expect this church service to be done with a smirk. Lee insists it will not be ironic—subversive maybe, but one hundred percent sincere. She happily proclaims, "It's my first play with no swearing in it! And no profanity or sex. It's my first G-rated show that my parents can come to see."