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## 'Straight White Men' is Exactly What It Sounds Like

Young Jean Lee's challenging new play premieres at the Public.



At first glance, the Public Theater's newest play may seem no different than any other show running at any other off-Broadway theater in the city today, or any day in the past fifty years—the extremely detailed living room set, the family drama as the grown sons come home for Christmas, the all-white cast. But then you hear the pre-show music, heavy hip hop with more explicit lyrics than much of the theater's audience may be accustomed to hearing, and you realize what sort of show you are about to see.

Because Young Jean Lee is a game-changer in the world of theater, and she is confident enough to name her play exactly what it is: *Straight White Men*.



It's Christmas Eve, and Jake, the banker, and Drew, the author and college professor, have come home for the holidays. Matt, the oldest son, is already living at home with their widower father Ed, ostensibly to help pay back his loans from grad school, though it is unclear where the once brilliant big brother is going with his life. And for this ambitious and socially conscious family, that is unacceptable.

*Straight White Men* is a play for the liberals in the audience, portraying a family that was raised to be very aware of their own privilege as straight white men. From their high school musical protest of the all-white casting of *Oklahoma!* to "Privilege," the Monopoly parody their mother created for them when they were young, Young Jean Lee's play is not afraid to poke fun at the educated elite who believe themselves to be socially aware. It is not always clear, in fact, whether the acting is supposed to be naturalistic or a sort of heightened realism, a line that is toed with subtlety and humor.

The characters in this show are extraordinarily detailed creations, with a lifetime of childhood stories, behavioral quirks and inside jokes that all come out on stage, usually to hilarious effect. One of the highlights of the play, in fact, is the extended dance party scene on Christmas Day, as tensions are released through some of the most awkward dancing imaginable. It isn't just a play about "straight white men," but about one particular family encountering its own challenges, from divorce to unresolved anger to feelings of aimlessness.



Each of the four men has a distinct persona, melding together into an alluring and entertaining collective energy. Baby brother Drew is possibly the most sympathetic character, once an angry child who has grown into a successful novelist, and Pete Simpson plays the line between sarcasm and genuine concern for his brothers with grace. Gary Wilmes as Jake is active and energetic when it comes to teasing his brothers but reserved and uncomfortable when it comes to his recent divorce and his “betrayal” of his family's ideals by working at a bank and not fighting the status quo.

Father Ed (Austin Pendleton) is a bit forgettable, a quiet presence in a house full of boisterous boys, but this is really more a drama about the sons. And James Stanley as Matt is a fascinating character on stage, easily drawing attention despite his reserved demeanor and performing the 30-something's possible depression, or whatever else may be wrong, with a measured delicacy.

The ultimate question in *Straight White Men* is about complacency, and how awareness of one's privileged status in life doesn't necessarily lead to action, a concept that itself requires a certain level of privilege to even be relevant. The play keeps its references to “social justice” general rather than engaging with the actual issues of race or gender, in fact, focusing on the people rather than the causes they supposedly support.

So, what is the value of a straight white man in a privilege-conscious world, when every goal he achieves comes at the expense of someone less fortunate who did not have the same opportunities? Young Jean Lee poses this question throughout the play, leaving the conundrum open for audiences to consider long after it ends. For anyone who thinks they have a decent working knowledge of social justice issues today, *Straight White Men* is an eyeopener, a show that prods and puzzles as much as it entertains. A complex piece for an audience ready to be challenged.

*Straight White Men* plays at the Public Theater through December 7.