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# The Sun

BY HELEN SHAW

Lately there has been a veritable flood of religiously themed theater productions. Lear deBessonet pokes into the neurological burps that create religious fantasists in "TransFigures," and Mick Gordon's "On Religion" at Columbia University took the scholarly approach.

Now Young Jean Lee, as hip, interestingly perverse, and postpost-Existentialist as you could wish a downtown artist to be, has, after a lifetime of stonewalling her parents' intense evangelical faith, written a church service (called simply "Church") that takes as its mission the conversion of its author. Stripping all the "deal breaker" bits from Christianity – her preachers don't ask the audience to believe in the virgin birth, and they speak as liberal youth – she makes a thoroughly entertaining, uplifting, inescapable piece of art.

But Ms. Lee's work is also thoroughly unsettling. In some lights, her piece looks like a cold-eyed assassination of pious charisma. Walk in with a firm handle on your non-belief, and "Church" feels almost like a physical attack.

In darkness, enthusiastic choral music blasts the audience. Then, from somewhere among us, a preacher starts in. The crowd at P.S. 122 wants desperately to be in on the joke; there's a fair share of laughter while the minister berates us. But Ms. Lee keeps the lights off so that no one will notice us examining ourselves. The voice (Greg Hildreth) tells us about a young man who, rejecting God's call, says: "I am complicated, I am deep, I am a good person, I am sufficient."

Ms. Lee knows just where the P.S. 122 audience conceals its vulnerable spots. The group titters and shifts uneasily – the guy has our collective number. "Your spiritual bankruptcy is reflected in your endlessly repeating conversations about your struggles to quit smoking ... quit junk food ... and this is what you talk about when you are trying to be deep!" By the time the lights (and mood) have come up, Ms. Lee has staked us as efficiently as tethered goats.

The Reverend Jose ( Mr. Hildreth), Reverend Weena (Weena Pauly), Reverend Karinne ( Karinne Keithley), and Reverend Katie ( Katie Workum) take turns testifying and bearing simple, often appealing, witness. The women wear knee-length pastel dresses, ready for an Easter parade, and manage to seem completely sincere as they move among us. If legs are being pulled, Ms. Lee (who also directs) has hidden it well. This is a far cry from Les Freres Corbusier's "Hell House," which painstakingly recreated a carnival-of-evangelical-horrors, but could never quite conceal its fundamental sneer.

That being said, some of the testimonials go fascinatingly off the rails. Reverend Karinne narrates her conversion from a life so debauched she lined her aborted fetuses up on her bureau. Reverend Jose never mentions St. Paul, preferring unicorns as his spiritual guardians. But our pastoral team goes gently into the absurdities, using them to highlight the weirdness of our sacred texts.

The show simultaneously indicts and exploits the reverends' basic tools: charisma and cadence. After an hour with Mr. Hildreth's rousing, rhythmic oratorical style, you'll never trust eloquence again. By the time the reverends burst into a rambunctious explosion of Faye Driscoll's choreography, the whole theater has started to make its own, joyful noise. Ms. Lee's true conversion has been from thorny issue into crowning achievement. For a work so enjoyable, so intricate, and so thought provoking, it's only appropriate to give thanks and praise.