



THE BLOG

## THE Q&A: YOUNG JEAN LEE, PLAYWRIGHT, PROVOCATEUR

I saw Young Jean Lee's "The Shipment" at the Kitchen in New York City in January, three days after Barack Obama was inaugurated. I went to bed thinking about it, woke up thinking about it. The play, a variety show of sorts, probes at the blister of race relations through multiple theatrical constructs: a stand-up comedy act, a song and dance number, a cartoonish rags to riches story and a naturalistic drawing room number with an uncomfortable punchline. Lee, a Korean-American writer, is quite the puppeteer, and she uses an extremely talented cast to assault us, making us laugh (sometimes complicitly, sometimes not), then wince, and recognise our own racist tendencies.

Here Lee talks about taking the show to Europe (its just completed the first leg of a European tour in Brussels), asking the right questions, and white guilt.

### **More Intelligent Life: Have you made any changes to the play for a new audience? Are you worried about a cultural divide?**

Young Jean Lee: The only changes we're making so far is changing "New York mothafuckin' City" to "Brussels mothafuckin' Belgium" in the stand-up comic's intro and stuff like that. Our cast is the same except we brought back our original cast member (who performed in our premiere at the Wexner) whom we had to replace for the New York production. This will be our first European tour of the show, so I'm not sure how people will respond, but if it's anything like my show "Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven", they'll probably respond pretty similarly to American audiences.

### **MIL: The lens you apply to black and white relations feels singularly American. Is this play about America, or about people all over the world?**

YJL: I typically think I'm writing about America, but the themes I'm interested in end up being pretty universal and not super-specific to the US. I've found that people outside the US identify really readily with my work, since it's less about cultural specificity and more about a certain sensibility and sense of humour.

### **MIL: So abroad, the play can do the same work?**

YJL: I hope the play can do the same work abroad, which is to keep raising question after question after question about race in an entertaining way until we've formed a complicated mass of contradictions in the audience member's head that sticks with them for a long time afterwards. We're not trying to push any particular message, just trying to get people to recognise the thorniness of the issue and struggle with it for themselves.

**MIL: I saw your play because I read a great review in the New York Times, ate some tapas and then went to the Kitchen for a night of theatre. This is something I could easily see your yuppie characters doing in the second act of the play. How do you feel about your audience?**

YJL: My audiences tend to be somewhat homogeneous no matter where I go in the world, in the sense that they are mostly college-educated, city-dwelling, art-loving types. Basically, a bunch of people who are like me. I would like to get “The Shipment” in front of different types of audiences. We have a couple gigs in the south coming up this year, which should be really interesting, but I’m not sure how much more heterogeneous the audiences will be. There will definitely be way more black people at our gig in Austin, which will be great. We had a lot of black audience members at our premiere at the Wexner, and that was fantastic. They were so enthusiastic and had such smart things to say after the show.

**MIL: The show was great, and the reviews were great. Do you think everyone got it? It is different seeing a show that you are primed to think is “good”, but is perhaps still confusing and assaulting?**

YJL: I think ultimately it doesn’t matter that much, since people end up getting kind of stumped by the show regardless of what they read in the press. Everyone has a totally unique reaction.

**MIL: How important was the idea of a minstrel show to you when you formulated the play? You’ve said you don’t really do naturalistic theatre—but the second act is very convincing. Why the mix of different theatrical constructs?**

YJL: The cast really wanted to address some of the stereotypes that they’re repeatedly asked to play in auditions, and the minstrel show was the best way we could think of to do that. We were really careful not to simply recreate a minstrel show and call it a critique without doing anything to it (I hate that!). We tried to make everything off-kilter and unrecognisable so the audience got really nervous and wasn’t sure how to react. The thing about naturalistic theatre is that it’s so identifiable and familiar that you kind of know how you’re supposed to respond to it.

**MIL: As an Asian-American, is your authority on the subject of blackness ever questioned? Would these critiques be valid?**

YJL: I think those are valid questions, but surprisingly they rarely came up. I think if you see the show, it’s pretty clear that it’s not about some Asian-American mouthing off about black people—I was basically just trying to express things my cast members had talked about. There were a couple of people who said in blog comments that I was exploiting black people, but there was no explanation of why. I think the whole point of the show is to get people to start asking these kinds of questions and then questioning their own questions.

**MIL: I suspect that there is a connection between my self-identification as “other” (I’m vaguely non-white) and my vested interest in blackness in America, in clearly delineated forms of racism. But it is not as though race universally defines experience, or vice-versa (something you’ve considered on your blog). Are non-whites in America fixated on blacks?**

YJL: I agree that all people of the same race don’t have the same experience, and I think it’s pretty common for people of colour who aren’t black to fixate on black people. I’ve always done it, and think it’s totally weird and sketchy, but also kind of understandable. For Asians in particular, we occupy this kind of nebulous area where our families came here by choice and we’re considered to be “honorary white people” in certain segments of society, but we still experience all kinds of racism within that sphere of relative privilege. So I think there’s this uneasy mixture of “white guilt” combined with a desire to acknowledge the racism we experience, and black people can sometimes become the targets of our fascination because their fight against oppression is so extreme. The crazy thing is that even black people are constantly asked to prove that racism exists. People want to think we are post-race because we have a black president, but that is still so far from being the case. When you kidnap people as slaves and then leave them to fend for themselves for generations without much help, the repercussions are going to last a long time.

~ ARIEL RAMCHANDANI

Picture Credit: Paula Court