

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Playwright Young Jean Lee on Singing, Feminism, and Writing for Brad Pitt

By Gwen Orel

If there's one thing constant about playwright Young Jean Lee, it's that her work constantly turns itself inside out.

It's also constantly fascinating.

With each new project, Lee continues to challenge herself, producing shows that range from an adaptation of "King Lear" in which the titular king never appears, to *The Shipment*, a show that looks at black identity -- from her perspective as a Korean-American.

Lee's newest project stars herself as performer. She's formed a band with British singer-songwriter Tim Simmonds called "Future Wife," and has released the first single "I'm Spending Christmas Alone." (Both the original and a "mother friendly" version of the song can be downloaded at her Web site.) It's the first of several songs she will release through April, when when she will perform her songs as part of an as-yet-unnamed show at Joe's Pub, for an 11-show run.

Meanwhile, her work-in-progress *Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show (UFMTS)* will have its first brief run at the New Museum in Brooklyn, running today through Sunday (details at www.newmuseum.org).

Speakeasy caught up with her earlier this week.

You sound great when you sing! Not at all like someone who's never sung before...

I sang when I was younger, in choirs and things like that. In college I sang in a band for a year. I didn't like performing in the band... I'm just not a performer. It was really funny working on the song, because I kept wanting to fire myself. If I'm directing somebody and they don't sound the way I want them to sound I can direct them and they can do it. In singing it's all about breath support, athleticism. I was howling with frustration.

How did you end up in a band if you hate performing?

When I joined the band, I liked the idea of myself as a rock star. We even won our campus (Berkeley) Battle of the Bands, even though we were terrible, because the songs were catchy. It's not that I'm not egotistical and want to be the center of attention.

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A lot of people who do behind the scenes stuff, writers and stuff where you spend a lot of time alone in your room, I think there is this secret part of us. A lot of writers join bands. The way I think of talent is a willingness to work hard on something. I can sit in rehearsal and direct for 8 hours straight and not take a break. With a song, by the second time, I'm done. I just want to stop.

Haven't you also said you hate writing?

The thing I hate about writing is very specific. In the beginning stages of writing everything that you write is bad. It's excruciating torture for me. I will do anything in my power to avoid starting to write. Then I love writing and can write for 8 hours straight.

I don't want to be horrible and show everybody a horrible time. I think I'm going to start taking voice lessons, and accept the fact that I'm dealing with somebody who doesn't have skills in that area.

Are you nervous about it?

I'm not shy about performing. I'm super flamboyant at Karaoke, I roll around on the floor. And I'll do interpretive dance. But even while I'm doing it, I kind of know that it's bad. I dread it, not because I'm shy or self-conscious, I just hate being bad.

The song is great, catchy and funny. Did you write it?

I wrote the lyrics and a very crude melody, then Tim helped refine the melody and come up with the background music. Colin Stetson (Laurie Anderson, Arcade Fire) threw in the horns. I was reading *Songwriting for Dummies*, and they have categories of songs. One of them was the Christmas song, that's a whole category!

I'm in the middle of rehearsals for this Feminist workshop so I had to crank it out as quickly as as possible.

Obviously this song isn't really about "you"—(the character's parents are ashamed of her and she works in a dead end job)—is this song going to reflect a future character in the play?

I haven't decided yet. I'm working on a movie for Paramount; this song was written from the perspective of the main characters. The movie idea is about a couple of social outcasts who go to a self-help guru, where they're told to perform in a production of Oklahoma.

Brad Pitt's production company, Plan B, approached me after seeing The Shipment. I have gotten contacted by lots of studios; this is the first time they actually offered me money to write it.

The next song will be a kind of universal first person song called "I'm Gonna Die."

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Does this relate to Untitled Feminist Multimedia Show?

We're doing our first workshop presentation Thursday. All month I worked on the musical numbers. Over the weekend I basically wrote a script, a placeholder to give the dances context. It's very different from anything else I've ever worked on. It's not really a sendup. It's much closer to actually being a Feminist show. In my other work there's a certain amount of distance, even when it's super personal. With this show, there's not that much distance.

The show is wrestling with what Feminism is now perceived to be. I am obviously in that I care about women's rights. But in terms of how Feminism is defined, culturally, I wouldn't be able to say that I necessarily fit that. I don't know Feminist theory or history. I do a lot of stuff that is not very empowered.

There's a line in the show that says I'm a closet doormat. That's how I think of myself. I'm not a super political person. I'm very much a typical stupid American. I'm making these shows trying to be a little bit less stupid.

You didn't read about it? You're a Berkeley grad!

Somebody sent me a link to a Wikipedia entry on radical Feminism. I tried to read it and couldn't get through it. I haven't read any Feminist theories in theatre, nothing, zero. I talk to other women about their experiences, feelings and opinions... that may prove to be inadequate, but it's my first step.

If I'm trying to understand a subject, I have to go read a children's book. It's the only thing written clearly enough to follow it. That's my alternative to the patriarchal structure. It's the excuse I've given myself.

I absorb what people tell me. I'm like a sponge. I get feedback from super-smart people.

How do you feel about being tapped by American Theatres one of the 25 artists who will shape American Theatre in the next 25 years?

I hope that's true. I hope I have a long career and am influential in a good way. There's a lot of diversity in my casts and subject matters. I feel like my work is a little more out there; it would be nice if I got wider audiences.

The way I would like to change American Theatre is to have more people see my work.