

Young Jean Lee: Feminism Without Words

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Photo caption: Young Jean Lee dabbles in dance with “Untitled Feminist Show” playing at On the Boards for short run.

Following her 2009 production of “The Shipment,” New York playwright Young Jean Lee returns to On the Boards to present her latest piece, “Untitled Feminist Show.”

The piece’s title is both ironic and direct; the show is not exactly “untitled,” and it aims to explicitly call out feminism.

“There are still a shocking number of people who think of ‘feminist’ as a dirty word and don’t want to be associated with it,” Lee explains. “It was important for us to put ‘feminist’ in the title to show that we embraced that word.”

Embracing feminism onstage is a new venture for Lee.

“I’ve made a lot of shows about race to challenge myself,” Lee says. “Feminism seemed like the next logical thing to tackle.”

Lee’s new show has been through numerous transformations.

“We started in November 2010 with a residency at the New Museum (in New York City),” Lee says. “I wrote a script and after the showing, our audience did nothing but make academic arguments about feminism.”

As a playwright, Lee felt stymied. “I wanted to hit people on a more emotional, visceral level, so as we did more workshops, I kept cutting out more and more of the text until there was nothing left but movement, and the audience was forced to react emotionally.”

These changes took Lee into entirely different art forms.

“I tried hard to write words that could compete with the movement and dance, but I couldn’t,” she says. “We found that movement communicated what we wanted much more strongly than words did. Once we realized that, it became our biggest challenge, since I’m a playwright and not a choreographer.”

This led Lee to deeper collaborations with director Morgan Gould, choreographer Faye Driscoll and company performers.

“For me, the starting point of the show was the desire to see performers with a range of realistic female body types who were 100 percent confident, fierce and fabulous,” Lee says. “Women are trained to have so much shame about their bodies and looks, and I thought it would be amazing to see female-bodied people who didn’t seem to experience any of that without clothes or makeup.”

The challenges of this touring production have been great for all involved, including sheer exhaustion.

“The show is physically brutal, and not all of our cast members are trained dancers,” Lee says. “Even for the dancers, it is difficult because the show isn’t really a proper ‘dance piece’; it’s more of a theater piece with a lot of demanding movement.”

And then there’s the total nudity of the performers.

“I wanted the nudity to be the opposite of titillating and objectifying, with the performers seeming completely powerful and comfortable in their skins,” Lee says. But beyond the conceptual level, logistics difficulties repeatedly arose.

“There were so many little challenges we didn’t think of when I decided to make the show a show without clothing,” Lee says. “Room temperature, sweat making the floor slippery with no clothes to absorb it. ... If you drag someone across the floor while they are wearing sweatpants, it’s fine. Do it while they’re naked? Ouch.” So casting “Untitled Feminist Show” was both exciting and difficult for Lee and Gould.

“I knew that I wanted to show the most powerful, charismatic, interesting performers I could find, so I contacted the biggest stars I could find in the worlds of downtown cabaret, burlesque, dance and theater, and invited them to audition,” Lee says. “Everyone in the room was a huge presence. And out of all of those stars, these six were the most powerful combination. Anyone who’s seen Lady Rizo knows that she is a huge presence onstage.”

But feminist doesn’t mean only female. Lee reports that one cast member doesn’t identify as female.

“It was hard for that performer to not be able to speak and say, ‘I don’t identify as female’ in the show,” Lee says. “We put it in the program note, but critics kept referring to the cast as ‘women’ and ‘all-female,’ so we are still trying to figure out a way to solve that problem.”

Despite all the challenges, Lee is thrilled to return to Seattle.

“On the Boards has a special place in my heart because Artistic Director Lane Czaplinski is one of the first presenters to take me under his wing and support my work,” Lee says. “He’s someone who really cares about artists, which makes touring to On the Boards always a great experience.”

“Untitled Feminist Show” will run April 4 – 7 at On the Boards’ Merrill Wright Mainstage Theater on 100 West Roy Street in Seattle. Buy tickets or learn more at www.ontheboards.org/performances/untitled-feminist-show.