

Race and Reaction

Arts: Volume 36, No. 18

By Roxanne Ray
IE Contributor

Exploring race onstage can be complicated: That's what Young Jean Lee found during the creation of her latest work, "The Shipment," a play that explores African American stereotypes and experience.

"I was really annoyed by the way that non-black people responded to the subject of racism against black people in the U.S.," Lee says.

"I thought people were defensive, condescending, and dismissive in a really ugly way whenever confronted with the issue and I wanted to find a way to challenge that without making people even more defensive, condescending, and dismissive," she says. So she turned to theater.

"I think the reason why I had an easier time with the subject was that I wasn't implicated in the same way, being Asian American," Lee says. "It's very easy for me to admit to my own latent racism, since I'm also the target of it."

But the creation of "The Shipment" wasn't as easy.

Lee began the process with a workshop in April 2008, and then another one in June 2008, using mostly hip-hop dancers. "The workshops were both a disaster," Lee says.

"I ended up recasting everyone but Mikeah (Ernest Jennings), with actors this time, and starting over from scratch."

For Lee, this was a valuable learning experience. "The biggest challenge for me was dealing with failure on such a massive scale and figuring out how to salvage the show, which in this case required starting over from nothing."

Other unpleasant surprises arose during the workshops.

"During one of the 'Shipment' workshops, the cast members were ironically doing all of these really stereotypical dances onstage and started encouraging the

audience to come up and dance with them,” Lee says.

“We didn’t think anyone would actually do it, but all these people jumped onstage and started dancing with them, thinking it was a genuine moment.” The audience didn’t distinguish stereotypes from authentic culture as Lee had hoped.

Lee concludes, “I felt bad for everyone involved.”

But this discomfort seems to be exactly the kind of experience that Lee seeks to explore.

“I’d always considered myself to be a somewhat apolitical and self-absorbed person, so initially it seemed important to push myself into areas that were uncomfortable and challenging.”

This personal journey began when Lee dropped out of the University of California Ph.D. program in English, while working on a dissertation on Shakespeare’s “King Lear.” Without warning, she moved to New York to become a playwright.

“I didn’t have any theater experience or connections or anything. It was an act of utter insanity that was somehow the right decision from day one,” Lee says.

“I think I went into academia because I loved theater so much and it never occurred to me that I could be an artist myself,” Lee says. “It ended up helping me in the sense that I did nothing but read literature for ten years, which is the best training you can have as a writer, really. Other than writing itself.”

As a playwright in New York, Lee did more than write. She started a theater company called “Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company,” and began recruiting other artists to work with her.

“I have an amazing producing director, Caleb Hammons, who shoulders most of the production needs that I used to carry (in addition to the artistic pressure), and I have a really strong staff and crew behind every production.”

But retaining such talent has been difficult. “The company’s process is really demanding and challenging, so basically the only assistant directors left standing at the end are the superstar demigods, and the company starts paying them, and they eventually become big-shot directors and leave us,” Lee says.

It can also be challenging to recruit artists who are willing to tour extensively, which Lee's company does regularly. With her upcoming performance at On the Boards, she now brings "The Shipment" to Washington state, after growing up in Pullman, and more recently, spending time with her parents there, with her relatives in Seattle, and with other writers at Whidbey Island writers' retreat Hedgebrook.

In the future, Lee plans to return to her work on "King Lear," this time from an artistic rather than academic perspective. She hopes to explore tragedy and the release of crying, yet another provocation of her audiences.

For now, with "The Shipment," Lee hopes to raise the specter of racism in the U.S. with a multi-cultural audience in Seattle: "I think if you're white, it's more dangerous to admit to your own racism."

"The Shipment" runs on October 1-4, 2009, at On the Boards, at 100 West Roy St, Seattle.