



Young Jean Lee's Theater Company
STRAIGHT WHITE MEN

Wednesday, December 2, 2015
Kirk Douglas Theatre, Culver City

YOUNG JEAN LEE

"When starting a play, I ask myself, 'What's the last show in the world I would ever want to make?' Then I force myself to make it," says writer, director, and filmmaker Young Jean Lee. She told *The New Yorker*, "I've found that the only way to make theatre that gets the audience thinking is when I feel uncomfortable making it."

Lee's creative process is based in the idea that there is value in discomfort and discovery. She uses humor and elements of surprise to keep audiences engaged even when her plays challenge them to confront difficult questions about topics such as race, foreignness, and patriarchy.

Lee's plays also explore ideas about theatre itself. She studied Shakespeare in UC Berkeley's PhD program in English before leaving academia to become a playwright in New York. She holds an MFA from Brooklyn College, where she studied with the experimental playwright Mac Wellman. And she counts among her influences Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett—two (white male) playwrights who pushed at the boundaries of theatre. Lee's extensive education in both classic and avant-garde theatre informs her writing of plays that engage critically and subversively with the history and theory of her medium. She is an important figure in New York's downtown theatre scene, which is often associated with experimentation and challenging convention in terms of both form and subject matter.

In writing plays, Lee draws from both her own experience and, in plays like *The Shipment*—which looks at minstrelsy and stereotypes about African Americans—the experiences of the actors with whom she collaborates.

Lee was born in South Korea and moved to the United States when she was two years old. Now based in New York, she has been commissioned to create plays by Lincoln Center Theater and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She has written and directed ten plays as well as a short film. Lee is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two OBIE Awards, a literature prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and many other honors.

STRAIGHT WHITE MEN

Young Jean Lee has said that the question at the heart of *Straight White Men* is "To what extent are we, meaning everybody, implicit in the continuation of certain unjust circumstances?" While Lee's prior plays explored racism from the perspective of people of color, in *Straight White Men* Lee has attempted to represent various white male answers to that question.

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Straight White Men is the first play that Young Jean Lee has written with a linear narrative, in a style that can be considered fairly conventional naturalism. She is known for more collage-like or hybrid forms (*The Shipment* was composed of several sketches; *We're Gonna Die* was structured as a rock cabaret).

Straight White Men is also Lee's first play with an all-white, all-male cast. Lee added a role for a pre-show announcer who is ideally played by a trans person of color, and also indicated that the pre-show music would be hip hop by black female artists. Not only does this give roles to people of color in the production—a significant move in a theatre world where there are still more jobs for white people than people of color—it also makes clear that although the play is *about* white men, it is not written from the perspective of a white man. “The purpose is to make it clear that this is a world that has been created and is being controlled and manipulated by people who are not straight white men,” Lee said in an interview with Center Theatre Group.

The play looks at white men who have an awareness of privilege and power dynamics within their society. How did they become aware of these issues? How have they integrated this awareness into the ways they live? How might the play be different if the characters did not believe in the idea of “privilege” or believed that we live in an equal, “colorblind” society?

IDENTITY POLITICS

“Identity politics” is typically defined as a political philosophy rooted in lived experiences based on gender, race, or another aspect of identity, as opposed to politics rooted in a belief system, party affiliation, or the like. For instance, the movement for LGBT equality might be considered an identity-based movement, while a leftist campaign rooted in Marxism would be an ideological movement.

However, it is a lot more complicated than that. “[W]e’re living in a world that basically relies on social injustice and really vast class discrepancies,” Lee said in an interview with Center Theatre Group, pointing out that in hotels all over the world, most of the housekeepers and laborers are women and men of color—which highlights how race and gender identity is connected to class hierarchy. Yet Lee does not want “a world in which it’s the exact same power structure, but just minority females are on top.” This points to the fact that while identity matters, social justice is not simply about identity, but about changing the way society functions to be more just for everyone. And yet, the way society is currently organized is largely based on identity, and shapes all of our identities.

In writing *Straight White Men*, Lee reflected, “Thinking of straight white maleness as an ethnic identity is a relatively new thing.”

Do you think “straight white maleness” is an ethnic identity? How do you describe your own identity? How do you think your identity informs your life experience or your worldview?

KIRK DOUGLAS THEATRE

The Kirk Douglas Theatre is the most intimate of the three venues of Center Theatre Group, a nonprofit that is L.A.’s preeminent theatre company. (The other two venues are the Ahmanson Theatre and the Mark Taper Forum at the Music Center.)

Built in 1946 as a movie theatre called The Culver, the building exemplifies the Streamline Moderne architectural style, a late Art Deco style that features ship-like curving lines. At the time, Culver City was a thriving hub of the film industry.

Today, the renamed and renovated Kirk Douglas Theatre is known for high-quality productions of new and edgy works for the stage.