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AN INTERVIEW WITH YOUNG JEAN LEE

Identified by *Time Out New York* as "one of the best experimental playwrights in America" and hailed by the *New York Times* as "the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation," Young Jean Lee (Fig. 1) is actively shaping the future of the American theatre. In 2003, she founded Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, through which she has written and directed ten productions. Her full-length plays, including *The Shipment* and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, have been published in four collections and performed worldwide. In 2013, she released her first short film, *Here Come the Girls,* and her debut album, *We're Gonna Die*. In the following interview, Young Jean Lee reflects on the role of humor in her plays, discusses her collaborative process, and reveals the two rules that she would never break in the theatre.

In a 2010 article, writer and avant-garde artist Jessica Chalmers quotes you describing yourself as "something like a connoisseur of laughter."[1] *That's such a fascinating idea! I'd love to hear a little bit more about your thoughts on this connoisseurship and the ways you've acquired it, and your experience of it thus far.*

I would say that all of my plays use humor as a tool. They're very focused on guiding the audience through an experience. Of course everyone has a different experience, but it's almost like we're trying to design a roller-coaster ride. Everyone's going to respond differently—but we're designing the ride with specific moments in mind. Laughter is a big part of that. That's what gets people to stay on the ride.

I was actually criticized for talking about the way that I listen to audience laughter, because people thought that I was saying that audiences should only have the response that I want them to have. Which isn't quite what I meant. I think *The Shipment* is a relevant example. *The Shipment* was about black identity, and the first half was structured like a minstrel show. And when we were doing the workshops for it—when a largely white audience would completely howl with laughter at the stereotypes without any sort of discomfort or hesitation—we

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Figure 1.
Young Jean Lee. *Photo:* Blaine Davis.

weren't comfortable with that. We did not want to make a minstrel show for white audiences to laugh at, no holds barred. We knew some people were always going to do that, and we didn't want to control those people's responses, but there is a way to tweak things so that that isn't the overwhelming response. And so the show was very carefully developed to discourage a completely comfortable response of just laughing at stereotypes. I became really sensitive to the kinds of laughter in the room and how much of it there was and who was laughing. That

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was something I paid a lot of attention to and always pay attention to when I'm making the shows.

The Shipment *opens with a statement about your process. What were some of the reasons behind putting the statement about your collaboration with black actors into that piece?*

I think it was important for readers to know. There's so much appropriation of black culture by nonblack artists, and black people aren't present in the room. And for *The Shipment*, I feel like it made a big difference that black people were in the room collaborating and contributing, and in my case, they were calling the shots. I was leading the process, but nothing went in the show that they didn't want in the show. And I said on the first day of rehearsal, "If you end up onstage doing something that you don't feel good about, then that's on you because you didn't say anything. The second you say something, we'll change it." To me, that was a really important thing for readers to know about that process, that it wasn't just me coming up with stuff.

Does the fact that you worked with these collaborators expand the kinds of permission you have to make jokes or to laugh?

I think it all has to do with execution, you know? I do think it's okay for an artist to write a show with black characters even if you're not a black person. I don't know if an artist could have made *that particular* show without black people collaborating in the room. But it is possible. But if you don't want to simply perpetuate racist stereotypes, you have to be really, really careful about how you're doing it. You have to do a lot of research. And ultimately, honestly, I don't see how you could do it without consulting black readers or audience members or whatever. But again, it's all about execution.

Comedians are a great example! They can make jokes outside of their ethnicity and gender and sexual orientation and it can be illuminating and transformative, but it really just depends on how they do it, how it comes across. Sometimes it can be just a very subtle thing. Really, you have to care! You have to put a lot of thought and consideration into, "How is this going to be perceived by other people?"

In terms of my specific audience, and what they expect . . . I think what's difficult is that every show that I make is drastically different from the show before, but people grow to expect what I did in the last show. It's almost like going to see a show by a different artist, to some extent. Like, the difference between *Untitled Feminist Show* and *Straight White Men* was just so vast. We would go to festivals and there would be people who just loved *Untitled Feminist Show*, and suddenly they're sitting in this straight play of *Straight White Men* . . . the shows just couldn't be more opposite! And so I think for people who are familiar with my work over time, what they expect is a big genre shift. But I would say that my audiences are probably continually disappointed. Because whatever it was that they liked in the last thing is not necessarily present in the new thing.

Do you ever find regional differences in how audiences respond to your work?

Well, there are certain jokes that don't translate when we go out of the U.S. For example, in *Straight White Men*, the characters sing this ironically racist version of the theme song to *Oklahoma*. We just did the show in Athens, Greece,

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where nobody knew the song or the musical, so that got no response at all. But things like that are pretty rare. It's usually just cultural references that people don't understand. And when we did *Church* in Colorado Springs, people got really offended by that show. They thought it was sacrilegious.

Really?

Well, Colorado Springs is very intensely Christian and conservative.

Yes, but Church *seems to me to be a very loving portrayal of church services.*

I think most people take it that way. But not deeply conservative Christians in Colorado Springs. I don't think it's a play for a conservative audience.

Yes . . . most of your work, I think, might not be ideal for a conservative audience as they are stereotyped in my head. Earlier you remarked that humor is a tool in your plays. Can you say more about that?

The one thing all my plays have in common is that I'm always trying to get the audience to contend with some kind of difficult idea. I want them to engage with and think about something difficult or unpleasant. And so humor is the bait that I use to lure people into thinking about things.

How does humor work as "bait"?

Oh, because once the audience is laughing, they're completely with you! If you can get an audience laughing, you can take them almost anywhere you want to go in terms of ideas or challenges or confrontations. People just love to laugh. If they're laughing, their defenses are down and they're going to go along with you.

Have you ever experienced laughter that was defensive?

Well, there are people who would laugh very loudly just to show that they weren't being affected by what was happening. That's actually proof that they *are* being affected by it. That's why the quality of the laughter is important. You have to balance it. With *Straight White Men*, when we did it in Ohio for the first time, it was so funny and enjoyable that the audience said afterwards that they just ignored all the political content, because they were having too good a time. So the good times have to stop at some point. You have to balance it.

Do you have go-to techniques for stopping laughter?

Yeah—if something completely unexpected or sad or inexplicable happens, then an audience will stop laughing.

Right! Like in the passage about mermaids at the end of Pullman, WA*!*

Mm-hmm.

I'd love to come back to the topic of different permissions. The standard explanation is that if you are a member of a marginalized group, you have permission to write about that group. Others say that if you are part of one marginalized group, you can write about others because it's a parallel experience. . . . I know that this is something that has come up in your work a lot because you write about people who are not just Asian American women. What kind of role, if any, do you think these "permissions" play?

It's weird to think of it in terms of permission, because it's really given after the fact. The fact that I'm Korean or the fact that I collaborated with a black cast—all these things were true when we were working on early workshops that really, really offended people in a bad way. And so I don't think that that gave us permission to make a messed-up show that allows white audiences to laugh uncritically at

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stereotypes. I really think it has to do with how it turns out. Did you succeed or did you not succeed at conveying what you wanted?

Was there a moment when you felt like, "Okay, this is succeeding!"?

Yeah. . . . We had done two workshops with a cast of dancers—it was sort of a hip-hop show. And after the second workshop, I said, "This isn't going to work with dancers—I need actors who are older." And so I recast the show, and we did our first out-of-town premiere in Ohio, and that was when I felt like, "Okay, now it's working."

That's surprising to me, because so many of your plays— Church, Straight White Men, Pullman, WA, The Shipment, We're Gonna Die, Untitled Feminist Project*—the list goes on—use dance numbers. It's interesting that taking the dance out in* The Shipment *was a turning point. What is the role of choreography in your dramaturgy?*

We did leave one dance in *The Shipment.* Dance is like humor for me, or like music. Music, singing, dancing, it's all part of the entertainment—the thing that makes it fun and watchable. The thing that sucks people in.

More bait?

More bait. My collaborators and I always talk about the shows as traps. We want to get the audience trapped somewhere, and so all this terminology like "bait" and "luring people in"—that is really how we think about it: we're building a trap for the audience.

And do you think that some forms lend themselves more easily to that type of entrapment than others?

I think nonlinear, experimental plays make it way easier to do that than a straight play. I had a really hard time with *Straight White Men*. With a naturalistic three-act play, it's really hard to make a roller-coaster, because you can't just radically switch tactics. In a naturalistic three-act play, the main tool is usually identification with the characters. There's much less freedom; it was a lot harder.

In a naturalistic play, there are more rules, more conventions. Your work so often goes against that. Are there rules that you won't break, either in terms of social rules or theatrical conventions?

I mean, we can't kill anybody, we can't physically harm anybody. *(Pause.)* I'm not being sarcastic; those are the two rules—the only two rules that come into my head—that I would never be willing to break.

I'm trying to think of other standard theatre rules—what about the one where you can't just make art for yourself? The audience has to get something out of it?

I think a lot of artists *do* make art for themselves, though, and they don't care if the audience gets anything out of it or not. I've heard artists say, "If they like it, great, if they don't, I made it for myself." But for me. . . . I care a whole lot.

One of the things that is such a joy to read in your plays is the flouting of convention and rules. You described Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven *as a kid knocking down a Barbie Dream House, and that gleeful destructive energy comes through in your writing.*[2] *So I love that the only rules you can't break are "don't kill anyone" and "don't hurt anyone." . . . It leaves you pretty wide parameters!*

(Laughing) Yeah!

You've done so many interviews—what is the question that you have always wanted to be asked in an interview that has never been raised?

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I've done so many at this point that I don't think anything has ever not come up, but one of the questions that I don't get asked often enough, that I feel is important, is the role of my collaborators.

I'm like the captain steering the ship. I'm guiding things, but everyone in the room is always participating. Including assistants, interns, stage management—whoever is involved. Everyone has a voice in the room, and we're all working together. And in a lot of ways, I feel like I work the way people on television shows do, where all the writers are in the room brainstorming. And I work with my dramaturg every step of the way. I've had the same dramaturg my entire career—his name is Mike Farry, and he's worked on every show I've ever done. We work really, really closely together on every script. Every play has such a team behind it. And not just my immediate collaborators, but friends and people outside: test audiences, Facebook friends. . . . There's *so much* testing that happens, and so much asking people for their ideas and opinions. I see myself more as the catalyst for this giant experiment, rather than someone who is coming up with all the ideas and dictating what happens in the room.

The reason why it's important for me to talk about that is that normally the model is that the writer writes alone in a room and then the director and the collaborators come in. I really don't work that way! And just because of the way things are, people tend to assume that I've come up with everything myself.

Why is it important to you that people realize that that isn't the case?

Because it's not true! There are so many people—every show requires so much generosity from so many people. Nobody is just sticking to their roles. . . . Everyone is doing more than what would normally be expected of them.

Normally, a playwright does just sit down and write a play. So it would make sense that people would just assume that that's how it happens. It's a simpler idea . . . the myth of the solitary genius artist. Which has always been a myth! Because so many artists—especially writers—worked in collaboration. I heard about how Ezra Pound helped T. S. Eliot with *The Wasteland*. I don't know if that's true . . . but so few of these great works of art were *solely* created by one person without any external guidance or editing or help or influence.

We like the idea of The Genius. . . . It's sort of sexy . . . the person who is just special and does it all themselves. That's kind of a myth. Even with playwrights who sit alone and write in their rooms, once the play gets on its feet, the director and the actors usually do end up influencing the script a lot in collaboration once they see what people are doing. So there's a lot of collaboration involved in theatre at least, and writing in general, that doesn't always get acknowledged.

ENDNOTES

1. Jessica Peri Chalmers, "Young Jean Lee's Aversion Therapy Theater Provokes Weird Laughter," *Examiner.com*, 29 March 2010, *www.examiner.com/article/young-jean-lee-s-aversion-therapy-theater-provokes-weird-laughter*, accessed June 2015.

2. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Script Sabotage: An Interview with the Playwright," Theatre Communications Group, September 2007, *www.tcg.org/publications/at/playindex/?dragons*, accessed June 2015.

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