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CHAPTER 5

YOUNG JEAN LEE

I'm getting tired of this demand from theaters that we entertain their audience for an hour.

Young Jean Lee¹

Destroy the audience.

Motto of Young Jean Lee Theater Company

There can seem something essentially reassuring about realism. There are explanations for behaviour. Even the irrational is constrained by form as language is presumed to be fully transitive, itself evidence of a structure to experience, a level of shared perception. It tends to deal in completed actions, resolutions. But, as a character in Young Jean Lee's *Lear* remarks: 'you think you are creating reality through the words you use and the stories you tell but you are not creating realities, you have no idea what the fuck is going on.'²

There was a time when painting was admired for its verisimilitude, music for its harmonies. Yet there has always been a current flowing in the other direction, from the novel's very beginnings, with Lawrence Sterne and Miguel de Cervantes, through to Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett and Robert Coover. The fairy tale takes leave of the familiar, disavows the seeming solidities of the quotidian, disappearing down the rabbit hole into a world liberated from logic. Artists are drawn to exploring colour, shape, the human form shattered into so many fractured planes, a smear of paint, disavowing the gravitational pull of surface. Hieronymus Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' anticipates the surrealists. Guillaume Apollinaire not only wrote a surrealist play, *The Breasts of Tiresias*, but was a supporter of Cubism and the author of concrete poetry. Composers experiment with silence, chance, resist aesthetic conventions. Alfred Jarry, whose pataphysics was, he explained, concerned with studying a universe beyond the one we know, wrote *Ubu Roi*, whose first word was an expletive and which, like Young Jean Lee's later play, was in part a parody of *King Lear* though largely of *Macbeth*.

Experimental theatre, then, did not spring into existence in the 1960s (Beckett, after all, mocked the desire for plot, character, detailed setting, language shrinking down or exploding into often baffling arias), nor even in America, but there is a sense in which the modern American theatre was born in experiment, in the work of Gertrude Stein, with its non-sequiturs and language spills, in Wallace Stevens's *Three Travelers Watch the Sunrise*, and in the Provincetown Players, whose work included Susan Glaspell's *The Verge* and E.E. Cummings's *him*. For Cummings, 'the productions of the conventional theatre, like academic sculpture and painting and music, are thoroughly dead.' 'All genuine theatre,' he insisted, 'is a verb and not a noun.'³ Even Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* would, in 1993, seventy-three years after its first production, be staged by the Wooster Group, recognizing its radical nature. These were playwrights who would restlessly try out different styles, disassemble character, play with words, challenge audiences with works disturbing conventional notions of dramaturgy.

Nonetheless, the 1960s did see a focus on the experimental, sparked in part by the impact of Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated into English and published in 1958, if also by the fact that this was a period of radical politics, in which institutions, language, authority were distrusted. In terms of what presented itself as being a self-consciously experimental theatre the distinction between character and actor, performers and audience, different art forms was explored or even rejected. The Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Performance Group examined the significance of the body, of space, sounds which did not necessarily cohere into speech. Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Lee Breuer became key figures. The Off Broadway company La MaMa included the word 'experimental' in its title, though unlike some of the other groups focussed on the work of the playwright.

This was very much a New York-centred phenomenon and by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century had in a sense become an institution. The Living Theatre was established in 1947 and, like La MaMa, founded in 1961, has survived, as does Mabou Mines which began at La MaMa. The Open Theatre, founded in 1963, lasted a decade, the director Joseph Chaikin moving from the Living Theatre to the Open Theatre and thence to the Public Theatre. The Performance Group, founded by Richard Schechner in 1967, later transmuted into the Wooster Group under Elizabeth LeCompte. In other words, though such groups sprang out of a particular social, political, aesthetic moment, experimental theatre remains a present fact in the American theatre, still with the power to challenge audiences and daunt critics, even as after half a century and more it lacks the context which made it seem part of the revolutionary ethos of 1960s America.

Young Jean Lee was belatedly attracted to theatre but not that of a familiar dramatic mode, even as she was aware that experimentation had its own tradition. For her,

contemporary American theater is very aesthetically conservative . . . It isn't adventurous or challenging enough—I'm thinking of mainstream commercial theater where everything has a linear plot line and there's very little formal experimentation. I think the New York experimental theater/performance scene is still exciting. The stronger artists tend to have longer developmental processes. The performers have a lot of charisma and intelligence. There's a lot of collaboration. On the other hand, I think a danger with experimental theater is when it gets locked into its own kind of tradition and you just see a bunch of experimental-theater clichés being played out.⁴

The world of experimental theatre is by definition one which addresses a particular audience. For Lee, those involved in what she called cutting-edge work addressed those from a specific world consisting, in her case, of liberal, college-educated, arts-centre people, a theatre in which there was no overwhelming commercial imperative and a general receptiveness to, and support of, the new, the edgy, the challenging. When she stepped outside of that world, as she did with a production of *Church*, she realized how privileged she was working in such a context, though with *Straight White Men* she would step even further as she became the first Asian-American female playwright to be produced on Broadway.

For her, theatre was,

an attempt to do something I've never done before, that I have no idea how to do . . . I tend to pick things that would be my worst nightmare to try, because they take me out of

my comfort zone . . . All of my plays are experiments involving the audience, which means I have to know my audience really well. . . My goal is never to realize my 'singular artistic vision.' Instead, I'm trying to find ways to get past my audience's defences against uncomfortable subjects and open people up to difficult questions by keeping them disoriented and laughing.⁵

All theatre is collaborative but, in her case, that frequently involved extensive consultations, in a 2012 interview explaining her approach:

I would never be able to write one of my plays alone. I have a dramaturge who I've been working with for nine years and I'm on the phone to him constantly. I get so much feedback from audiences, from my actors, from my associate director. Anybody who looks at my body of work is basically looking at the work of all the people who supported me and contributed . . . It's almost like I'm the captain of a ship. If I were just standing on the ship as a captain, the boat wouldn't go anywhere.⁶

She is not, she claims,

an auteur in the sense that I have this great . . . vision in my head of how I want things to be and then everybody helps me achieve that vision . . . my vision is much more . . . nebulous . . . so much of my work comes from the performers and . . . from whoever happens to be in the room at the time. It's really not the case that I'm the puppet master just sitting and having people do what I want. I think you have to be a certain kind of genius for things to work that way.⁷

Indeed, she was suspicious of the very concept of a solitary playwright, requiring nothing in the way of such collaboration, in her case taking advantage of social media when working on a play. Remaining open to the opinion and suggestions of others is important to her, not quite in the sense of democratizing art but from an awareness that they might have something valuable to offer, a different perspective, information, questions. Aware of her own limitations when it comes to experiencing the world, she is open to the opinions and feelings of others. The advice to young writers that they should write what they know is, to her, to accept limitations. It is not that there is no value in writing out of that self but that she wishes to explore unknown territory hence, among other things, her resistance to being typed as an Asian-American playwright as if that involved conforming to a familiar model.

Her collaborative approach is both a method and a conviction. When she began touring her work, in the United States and Europe, she would effect changes, sometimes radical depending on responses. If her audiences are disturbed, sometimes confused or provoked, that is part of her strategy which is to involve, sometimes directly address, those who she is not willing to regard as passive consumers. In different works she deploys music and dance, explores caricatures, different performance styles, generates visual images. She thrives on abrupt changes of direction, on contradictions, resisting resolutions. She is anxious to disturb presumptions, while resisting polemic. As she has said, 'I avoid any form of preachiness. If the audience sits there and is, like, "I understand the message" or "I understand what she's trying to do here," then it doesn't work. Instead, the whole thing becomes a process of trying to keep everyone

disconcerted and on their toes. Not knowing exactly what's going to happen next. By the end there are no solutions or morals provided, so you're left with your own thoughts and embarrassments.⁸

Her own self-doubts, though, echo through her work. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* a Korean-America, like herself apparently involved in developing a play, confesses, as she herself would in interviews, that 'I walk around all day feeling like I have no idea what I'm doing and am messing everything up,' adding, 'You think you can work hard and be an artist and that you can create something good and new but, in reality, all is vanity because everything we try has already been done . . . The first step of my theory is that I don't know what I am doing. The next step is that I am scared.'⁹

Young Jean Lee's parents, James and Inn-Soo Lee (original name Sohn), left their native Korea in 1976, taking with them their two-year-old daughter. James, himself born in Seoul in 1946, had received his Master's degree there, but travelled to America to study for his doctorate at the University of Kentucky before, in 1983, moving to teach chemical engineering at Washington State University where, a non-smoker, he used tobacco leaves to research a protein to be used in cancer treatment (himself dying of cancer in 2010).

Washington State is situated in Pullman, a small town, currently of 30,000, in south-eastern Washington, some 280 miles from Seattle. It is named for George Pullman, the engineer who designed and manufactured the sleeping car, though he never lived there and had no real connection with it. Today, it is 79 per cent white, with 11 per cent Asian, though when Young Jean Lee was there the figure was 8.4 per cent and her experience was of being the only Asian, let alone Korean, girl in her school. The percentage of Native Americans was less than 1 per cent but among their number was the writer Sherman Alexie. As one of his characters in his short story 'The Search Engine' remarked, exoticism was hard to find in Pullman.

Lee was not happy there: 'the town I lived in was predominantly white, and I had a really hard time fitting in.' The highlight for her was not the annual National Lentil Festival but being taken to summer stock. However, as she explained, 'when I tried to join my school's drama club, I talked to the drama teacher about it and he said, "Well, we're doing Oklahoma! And there are no Asians in Oklahoma!"'¹⁰ 'When you talk to young people now, they can't conceive the level of racism I experienced . . . I almost wasn't considered human. I didn't get to be in that category . . . I didn't know what was going on. I thought something was really wrong with me.'¹¹ If she was to deal with the question of identity when she finally turned to the theatre, albeit acknowledging its problematics, there was a clear reason for it. Who exactly was she in the world? Her family chose to hide aspects of their culture, including the food they ate.

She was, she explained, lonely, shy, with few friends, frequently playing on her own, experiencing what she would call total social isolation. Her parents were Christians, requiring her to attend church every Sunday: 'I would just sit there and look around at the people and hate them . . . just think how awful they were.'¹² She lost what faith she had by the age of seven or eight.

Coming from an Asian background, she has said, her parents wanted her to be a lawyer or go into business, but she was determined to leave Pullman and secured a place at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied as an undergraduate from 1992 to 1996, majoring in English. Here, everything changed. The distance between Pullman and Berkeley turned out to be more than the fourteen plus hours it would take to drive the 860 miles. Here, Asians were everywhere and race and racial identity on the agenda. Today the campus is only 21 per cent

white. She has described her undergraduate experience as perfect even as she would accuse herself of becoming militantly anti-Christian, absorbing the prevailing mood of the campus as opposed to that of her home, and that tension would later surface, ambiguously, in her work.

Though she majored in English she did not turn to theatre but at graduate school launched on a dissertation about *King Lear* intended to explore the differences between Shakespeare's play and its source. In contrast to her undergraduate experience, graduate school was 'hell'.¹³ Returning to the campus in 2009, she explained that though her father was dying at the time, graduate school was worse, the various deadlines being as stressful as later putting together a play. Her father, she explained, still had nightmares about being in boot camp in Korea while she still had nightmares about grad school: 'I hated it so much I have a hard time even fathoming now hating [my] life as much as I hated my life when I was in academia.'¹⁴ It was while she was in graduate school, though, that she joined a playwriting class organized by Korean-American Julia Cho, writing a one-act play.

In 2000 she married and followed her new husband to Yale, he having dropped out of his own PhD in order to go to law school in New Haven. For two further years she continued to work on her dissertation but, three thousand miles away from Berkeley, finally abandoned it having, as she explained, spent ten years of her life with the goal of becoming a professor specializing in Shakespeare before deciding, finally, that she hated the academic world 'passionately'. But she had another interest. As she has explained, on consulting a therapist she was asked what she really wished to do and found herself saying she wanted to be a playwright, something she had never previously considered. She was familiar with no playwrights beyond Beckett.

With the help of Google, she discovered a playwriting group operating in a small town, even as the works they were producing were, in her view, the worst plays conceivable. They responded in kind, evicting her as 'too weird'.

Her next step was to read plays by those on the faculty of the Yale School of Drama. She was especially drawn to the work of Jeffrey M. Jones (to whom she would later dedicate her play *Yaggo*), who had been a manager of the Wooster Group and whose own works were anything but conventional. He read one of her plays and provided her with a list of those who might interest her. These included the experimental playwright and director Richard Maxwell (his play *Drummer Wanted* being the first she saw in New York) and Richard Foreman. By now divorced, she moved to New York, and contacted a number of them, interning with some of their companies, impressed, in particular, with one modestly called The National Theatre of the United States of America (founded in 2000) and their production of a work called *Placebo Sunrise*.¹⁵ Through them she became involved in another company, Radiohole, working with them for a year.

Hers was effectively a crash course in experimental theatre in which actors in collectives wrote and directed their own work, providing her with a model when it came to making her own theatre. Those she met were all influenced by Richard Foreman and the Wooster Group. As she told Richard Maxwell in 2008,

my first year when I was in New York when I was trying to write my first show I was surrounded by all these downtown artists who I was so in awe of. All I wanted to do was imitate you ... I had a few scripts of yours that I would pore over. I would pore over Foreman's ... published scripts. I would pore over Radiohole's scripts. I wanted to do

something that was cool so badly ... And ... it was weird because all these companies were doing such different work. It was like I was trying to write something that would fit my idea of what a really cool downtown theatre artist would make. As opposed to just making something that I wanted to make.¹⁶

In an interview with *The Believer* she explained that,

Before I came to New York, I'd never had the feeling of belonging anywhere in my entire life ... I never had a group of friends that I fit in with ... I literally just never had the experience of feeling like I belonged where I was ... The second I was involved in any aspect of theatre I was instantly flooded with this feeling – like a fish in water: I can breathe! I know what I am doing! All my instincts are valued here! It was the first place I'd ever been where everything I was, was valued ... Prior to that, it was just a lifetime of desperation, a lifetime of never being able to do anything that I was really good at that I enjoyed.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Jones had recommended Mac Wellman's programme at Brooklyn College, his own plays abandoning plot and character, drawing attention to their theatricality (in 2006, he and Lee would co-edit *New Downtown Now: An Anthology of New Theater from Downtown New York*, a volume which included her own *The Appeal*, along with Will Eno's *Tragedy: A Tragedy* and a further eight plays). When she entered the programme she struggled, uncertain of herself. Her first efforts were, she confessed, derivative as she tried to write something which might impress those she had met in the downtown theatre scene. His response was to ask her to write the worst play she could. Her solution was to write a play which she thought would attract the contempt of those she admired and hence produced an historical play about the Romantic poets, writing it, she explained, as badly as she could. To her surprise, her group liked it. That play was *The Appeal* (2004), which showed evidence of her time as an English major, featuring the Romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, even as she turned literary history into comedy.

Before that, however, she had a brief sketch, *Yaggo* (2003), performed at the Little Theater at Tonic in New York, itself co-created by Jeffrey M. Jones.¹⁸ In a monologue, a figure called Whaler refers to a Captain Hakluyt, somewhat unbelievably in the context of a rambling confession of self-doubt and alienation, a real figure, though that fact is both invisible to the audience and scarcely relevant, though it would be a game she also played in *The Appeal* which is seeded with unattributed quotations and references.

A month later came *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, a thirty-five minute piece staged at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater (founded by Richard Foreman in 1968, later moving to St. Marks until 2010), whose title mirrored that of a book by Immanuel Kant though in fact a take on the 1932 film *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. This was a bizarre, violent and essentially racist story based on the novels of Sax Rohmer, a one-time British civil servant whose real name was Arthur Ward and who had no knowledge of the China he was happy to invoke.

Lee herself donated \$300 towards the production while cast and crew worked free, Soho Rep providing free rehearsal space. The play begins with an empty stage, the actors being gathered behind a screen and carrying on the minimal props when required. It unwinds in a series of brief scenes in which characters offer details of the plot, perform parodic dances, wear

masks, make stylized gestures in performances which are sometimes naturalistic and sometimes not, language occasionally devolving into nonsensical sounds, while music makes seemingly irrelevant interjections. The characters' names are those used in the film, the plot of the original accelerated in a series of fragmentary moments, except that here Fu Manchu, given to singing in mock Chinese ('Bong chong ding dong bing bang bong dang dong' which he explains means 'The little Chinese men work in the rice paddy')¹⁹ is black, wears clothes which fail to fit him and is an unlikely enthusiast for rap. The question of identity is raised but initially by the two white characters, one, Terrence, asking, 'When I look in the mirror, am I really seeing myself, or a representation of myself?' (162) while Sheila utters familiar pieties: 'I don't like to think in terms of race. I like to see people as individuals ... I'm going to show everyone ... that I can succeed without these complaints of racism bringing me down ... I want everything to be fair and non-discriminatory and based on knowledge,' (173) and this is in a story in which Asians and whites set about annihilating each other.

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals is not primarily a parody of *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, making a good job of that itself. It is a parody of plot, character, language, apparently the component elements of drama. The speeches about identity are an ironic take on presumptions about the supposed subjects to be embraced by Asian playwrights as the pretentious statements made by her characters are undercut by humour. If the audience is likely to be unsettled by a work which seems to revel in what appears a hopelessly amateur presentation, unsettling the audience would become a central objective of a playwright suspicious of theatre's capacity to console with form, invite a specious and reassuring empathy.

The Appeal, with which she had had genuine doubts, was staged the following year by Soho Rep with Lee directing. To produce it, she hired actors from the companies she had admired: 'there was Pete Simpson, who was in [Maxwell's] *Drummer Wanted*, there was James Stanley from National Theatre of the United States of America, there was Maggie Hoffman from Radiohole, and there was Michael Portnoy [the performance artist] from Soy Bomb [not a company but the word he had written across his chest when he intervened in Bob Dylan's performance at the 1998 Grammy Awards].'²⁰

Her aim, then and thereafter, was to disturb audiences by addressing issues which equally disturbed her. As she explained, 'I've found that the best way to make theatre that unsettles and challenges my audience is to do things that make me uncomfortable ... My work is about struggling to achieve something in the face of failure and incompetence and not-knowing. The discomfort and awkwardness involved in watching this struggle reflects the truth of my experience.'²¹

The Appeal was, on the face of it an odd play for her to write, not least because:

I never really liked the Romantic poets, except for Blake—they were all really annoying to me. So, I thought, 'What would be more annoying than a historical-period drama of the English Romantic poets, talking about life and art in a cottage?' That sounded uncool and horrible on every level. I wrote that play, and it was like a kid playing really sadistically with Barbie dolls. You stick their heads in the toilet, you throw them out the window. The characters were really annoying, and I wrote as badly as I could. When I got bored, I'd restart the scene in the middle without throwing anything away, like a video-game reset. I just did whatever I wanted and followed every impulse, and then the play was done. I was scared to bring it into class, but when we read it, everyone was just hysterical. It

turned out to be funny and interesting, because Mac had found a way to tap into my actual creative impulses.²²

The Appeal features Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, Coleridge and Byron, though not quite as they are remembered, high-fiving one another, their language owing something to contemporary America ('By-bye, Fuckface,' says Wordsworth to Coleridge), their identities being obligingly identified – 'Hi, Dorothy my sister.'²³ Dorothy, anticipating Franklin Roosevelt, announces, 'There is nothing to fear but fear itself,' (116) as Wordsworth echoes the title of Bruce Springsteen's 1999 song 'Shut Out the Light', (117) while Coleridge renames Dorothy 'Honora', which may be a reference to the adopted foster sister of Romantic poet Anna Seward. Since he also calls her Honus, it is tempting to see this as a reference to a famous baseball player Honus Wagner, but in the context of free-associating characters any association may be as misleading as any other. In scene six she goes a step further as the three of them take drugs and masturbate, Dorothy spanking herself with her diary.

Wordsworth then recites a poem, though since this is from Ezra Pound's Canto XVI this is a case of advance plagiarism, Pound, incidentally, being one of Lee's favourite authors. He develops a habit of speaking of himself and his contemporaries in the past tense as if lecturing to a future audience, in fact the present audience: 'I almost forgot to tell you about Byron. He was considered as a rock musician in our time' (124). At this point Coleridge enters as Byron even as the 'real' Byron himself appears in the second act, though given to unaccountably dancing while reciting his little-known poem:

Ching Chong Chinaman
Chinkety-Ching
Wing Wong Wang Wung
Bing Bang Bing (130)

The joke, perhaps, is that, in fact, Byron confessed to inadvertently plagiarizing Coleridge's 'Christabel' while Byron and Wordsworth were not friends. Thus, Lee has Byron praise Wordsworth's poems, while in fact, as Lee would have known, he referred to him as Turdsworth. It was he who wrote:

Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,
That mild apostate from poetic rule,
The simple WORDSWORTH.
...
Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose;
Convincing all, by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;²⁴

Lee takes pleasure in misquoting, misrepresenting, misleading her audience to the point that, short of annotation, it is impossible to know what to make of references buried in a flurry of language. The characters free associate, quote without acknowledging, including from Elizabeth Barrett Browning ('Let me list all the ways.' [135]) Wordsworth quotes (136), again without

acknowledgement, from an entry in Sir Richard Steele's *The Tatler: or Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.*, Bickerstaff being a pseudonym adopted by Jonathan Swift, and the quote an April Fool's day joke by Swift, which perhaps hints at Lee's motive for its inclusion, while Wordsworth and Coleridge recall smoking an 1881 L Flor de La Isabela cigar, the cigar being real enough but Wordsworth was thirty-one years dead by 1881 and Coleridge forty-seven years.

The Appeal is a play which largely baffled the *CurtainUp* reviewer who found it an 'obscure and obscurely titled' play, adding, 'it's not clear what Lee, who also directs, wants the play to be,' its appeal remaining elusive.²⁵ For *Time Out*, however, Lee's was 'a brainy absurdism' with language which was energetic and muscular.²⁶ Alexis Soloski, in *The Village Voice*, while finding it 'slight and somewhat jejune,' thought it 'an amiable burlesque,' 'unexpectedly refreshing' and signalling 'delightful things to come.'²⁷

It is not clear that the word 'delightful' quite captures what Lee's work is about but already, with this play, she was creating something of a template for work which would be threaded through with humour, ironies, provocations.

Her next play, staged at Performance Space 122, located in an abandoned public-school building at 150 First Avenue in the East Village, and with a declared mission to challenge the boundaries of live performance, was *Pullman*, WA, a play she wrote following a period of writer's block. On the stage, bare but for two chairs, with no lighting or sound changes, three characters, wearing ordinary street clothes, address the audience, the house lights remaining on throughout, an indication that those watching are a to be a part of what ensues.

The characters are named for the actors performing the parts (in this case, Tom, Pete and Tory) hence changing with subsequent productions, gender being irrelevant. Seen as a parody of self-help promoters, those offering maxims for people who feel themselves failures, which, in part, it is, the title suggests a personal dimension. Lee, after all, raised in Pullman, had felt precisely the anxieties, self-doubts and despair identified by the character here named Pete. The image of social isolation which he offers echoes her own sense of being shunned by others. As she grew up in a place where she had felt alien she was aware of the difficulty of defining herself, in the words of the play of 'the distance between you and the thing you are supposed to be' (83). If his nostrums can seem, and are, banal they are not without an element of truth. She, too, after all, had discovered the truth of his insistence that 'it's important to develop whatever part of yourself you want to develop,' (84) that essentially being what her therapist had told her.

When Tory, who, together with Tom, in turn offers the mystical and religious consolations of a kind which Lee's parents had offered her, speaks of fears that 'You are incompetent. You have no idea what you are doing,' that 'People are trusting you to do a good job' but that 'The whole premise behind what you are doing sucks' and that 'You've made a series of incredibly bad decisions' so that 'Everybody is mad at you,' (89) this echoes Lee's own confessions about the stages she goes through in creating her own work.

Audience members are exhorted, insulted, – 'I can see you sitting out there with your little ... pinched-up prissy disapproving face going, "I don't like this."' (95) – dismissed as losers to be redeemed only by embracing that fact as a truth, along with the platitudinous injunction, 'Don't do bad things ... Eat healthy and exercise. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Get lots of sleep ... Don't use drugs ... Don't hurt anyone' (93–4). The dialogue gives way to chanting and the play ends with fantasies spun out by Tory.

Reviewers reacted with some uncertainty. For the reviewer of *Time Out*, responding to a later production, it was about failed communication, disorienting and funny, a 'perverse

theatrical prank,²⁸ while Jason Zinoman in *The New York Times*, while regarding 'the show often quite precious' and acknowledging that it would not 'win over many who are already sceptical about experimental theatre' nonetheless suggested that 'while this is not a major work, it is an honest one that takes itself seriously, and that is refreshing.'²⁹

Lee herself was not happy with these early works, confessing that 'I was really embarrassed by my first plays in New York. I wanted to do something really awesome and cool and so to make shows that had nothing to do with any of the aesthetics my peers had was hard.'³⁰

Given her background, she found herself under pressure to write an Asian-American play, not least because companies felt they could secure funding in a context in which identity had become a fashionable topic of discussion. It was a play she did not want to write but by now that was virtually an incentive to go ahead while subverting the usual tropes. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006), a deliberately exotic title (echoing the title of a fifteenth-century Korean poem, 'Yongbi och'on ka') as if such were de rigueur for Asian plays, she played with stereotypes, sometimes the Korean figures seemingly conforming to type, at others suddenly and unaccountably violent.

It begins by crushing the audience into what she calls 'an oppressively Asian space', before they are allowed in, only the beginning of her desire to disorient those who she wishes to confuse, discomfort, unsettle, unsure from moment to moment how to respond to the sudden and disturbing changes of direction in a play which at times is wilfully obscure, deploying foreign languages. She had even commissioned an illustration for a postcard to advertise the show which included every possible offensive Asian stereotype but presented as though for a children's book, while on the other side was a statement that, despite its title, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* was to be a show about white people in love.

The play begins in the dark with the sound of a figure rehearsing being slapped in the face. It is, a character later observes, practise for a play. Whose play? Seemingly Lee's, but, despite the fact that it was in fact Lee being hit, she insists that, 'One of the big identity politics clichés is that it's a confessional narrative about you . . . So . . . I make it seem as if the Korean-American character is an explicit stand-in for me, when really she's just this self-hating, racist freak who says a lot of crap I don't believe. I think that most people get that it's a joke, but occasionally someone will think that's she's really supposed to be me.' As it continues, so the audience becomes increasingly restive, by her own account half of them getting ready to leave. Why this scene? According to Lee, 'sometimes things just pop into my head. They don't really come out of any logic, and I make sense of them after the fact. The hitting video now makes sense to me, but when I first thought of it, it just popped into my head as the right way to begin the show . . . After the fact, when I was thinking about how it fit into the show, I felt it was really a play on Asian self-hatred . . . Which is a huge cliché – it's like bad '60s performance art.'³¹

The characters are identified only as Korean 1, 2, 3, Korean-American, White Person 1 and 2. In a note to the published version she explains that the Korean parts should be played by actresses who are one hundred per cent Korean, Chinese or Japanese who, when not speaking in English, should use their native languages, thus rendering them unintelligible at various moments in the play.

The audience are seemingly relieved when a video of the assault on Young Jean ends, only immediately to be discommoded as the Korean-American, smiling at the audience and seemingly inviting a degree of complicity, asks, 'Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents? It's like

being raised by monkeys – these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status,’ only to continue, ‘I am so mad about all the racist things against me in this country,’ before declaring that ‘minorities have all the power. We can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them . . . I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you.’³² It is a reversal that will typify many of Lee’s plays. As she has said, ‘The one thing that’s been consistent throughout all of my shows is that there’s not a single argument in them, ever. I’m not trying to make one point. I’m trying to lay out all of the conflict that I see, present it, and have you wrestle with it on your own.’³³

It is not always rewarding to look for a through-logic in her plays. There can be an arbitrariness to the contradictions, reversals, aporias. Perhaps alarmingly, she has confessed that, ‘When I’m writing, I get bored constantly, so a lot of those weird non-sequiturs come out of the fact that I just got bored with the conversation that the characters were having. In “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven,” the white couple are having this conversation, and then suddenly one of them says “Are you happy you’re white” and that was just because I was writing their conversation and got bored of what they were talking about.’³⁴

Beyond that, she is suspicious of plays which themselves do have a dramatic logic, as she is of characters who are psychologically complex and dramatically coherent. The seeming, and often deliberated, arbitrariness of her plays does indeed not serve a singular meaning. Actions, images, bursts of music, parodic presentations, fractured arias, simulated violence, bizarre dances, generate a field of meaning, disparate material brought together with metaphoric force. Provocations are designed to destabilize, prompt the active involvement of audiences required, moment by moment, to make provisional sense of a disjointed flow of language. She sets herself to obviate expectations, to create a sense of unease which reflects her own. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, the character called Korean-American taunts the audience: ‘I feel so much pity for you right now. You have no idea what’s going on. The wiliness of the Korean is beyond anything you could ever hope to imagine’ (41). In a stage note, Lee instructs that ‘the Koreans address each other by constantly changing fake-Asian names, so there’s no use trying to keep track,’ (43) a fact underlined by having two of them converse in Korean and the third in Cantonese even as a Ghost-Man’s voice is heard. The Korean-American, meanwhile ‘makes racist faces at the Koreans,’ (47) even as she complains about racism and expresses hatred for white people, as a white couple enter, bickering before being corralled into joining the Koreans in singing a Christian song.

Lee has spoken of making it impossible for those watching her work ‘to identify at any given point what it is they’re watching . . . the second they think they’ve identified it, it immediately shifts to something else so that they’re constantly . . . unstable and therefore open and vulnerable . . . I have a . . . combative relationship with my audience, but that’s because I am my audience.’³⁵ In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* the Koreans and Korean-American come together to confess that they ‘don’t know what the white people are doing in this show,’ that they ‘don’t even know what the Asian people are doing,’ echoing a familiar resistance to work which addresses race (‘I don’t think of people in terms of race. I find it more interesting to focus on our shared human experience . . . What about the fact that I’m a woman’), while reassuring those in the audience who might think that, ‘This is so much less complicated and interesting than all the other parts of the show that weren’t just about race . . . don’t worry. If enough white people hate it, I’ll cut it’ (66).

Ironically, the play ends on the white couple as they fantasize a life together, once they have consulted a therapist, seemingly appropriating the play. For Lee, ‘White people identify with

those characters, but they don't realize that they're identifying with them because they're in a relationship, and not because they're white. Ultimately, I'm interested in the homogeneity of a certain demographic, which is strikingly similar across racial lines: the college-educated, urbane, thirty-something navel-gazing American.³⁶ It is not clear, though, that this is evident from a play in which the ground shifts so frequently, attitudes are parodied, statements made and then contradicted. As Jiehae Park, who played the role of Korean-American in a Studio 2ndStage production, remarked, 'The play can be really confusing, and as a cast we still debate what this or that moment might mean.'³⁷

If her work had the capacity to divide audiences, the same could be true of critics though in this case critical response was favourable. Anita Gates, in *The New York Times*, found it 'hysterically funny',³⁸ while Peter Marks, in the *Washington Post* described it as a 'wildly sardonic performance piece,' a 'provocateur's funny, guns-blazing take on the utter banality of ethnic stereotypes and other cross-cultural outrages.'³⁹ In *The Village Voice*, Alexis Soloski thought it 'perverse, provocative and very funny,' a 'troubling and dense and droll festival of racism.'⁴⁰ In the other camp was the theatre critic of the *Seattle Times*, Misha Berson, who, in reviewing a later production, thought it 'archly tiresome ... neither fresh, funny nor varied enough to sustain its 80 minutes.'⁴¹

In her next play *Church*, first staged by her own company in 2007 and then subsequently at the Public Theatre the following year, she presented what was in effect an evangelical church service. As she explained, 'With all the George W. Bush stuff ... I was hearing more and more blanket beliefs that all Christians are evil morons' while her parents, 'really smart, really good people'⁴² were not. The play was thus to be targeted towards atheistic liberals such as herself. She wanted to make a show that would convert even her, and accordingly removed any reference to homophobia or right-wing politics. In the end, she explained, the Christians in the audience responded positively, even as they had been waiting for an attack which in her mind never came, even responding as it devolved, in her own words, into nonsense, seemingly aware that evangelical services were not without their wilder aspects. Meanwhile the liberals responded to the music.

A note on performance insists that 'The performers are natural and sincere at all times. They should come across as real Christians who are doing an actual church service. They are unpretentious and appealing and never seem fake ... we believe that they believe what they're saying, no matter how bizarre their language becomes' (6).

The audience enters, in silence, into what appears a simple church as a choir sings 'Sherburne' ('To God our voices let us raise/ And loudly chant the joyful strain/ That rock of strength oh let us praise!/ Whence free salvation we obtain'), before the Reverend José begins to preach from behind the audience who thereby become congregants, assailed as being 'stuffed fat with self-interest and anxiety' and invited to 'Let go' of 'superficial earthly ties and deliver yourself in humility to the Lord' (9). A burst of Mahalia Jackson singing 'Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho' hails the entrance of three women ministers, one of whom expresses pleasure in being in whatever the city and venue the play/service is taking place, inviting prayer requests. In the event that the audience do not reply, two of them confess to their own problems before a reading from Hebrews.

If the audience have begun to feel uneasy that sense is heightened as the Reverend José singles out individuals listing a series of catastrophes potentially awaiting them from contracting cancer, being paralysed in a traffic accident, being betrayed by a partner who may

be killed, having children tortured and kidnapped, to simply losing their looks and getting older: 'Your mind weakens, your body fails and you begin to long for death' (14). The accumulation of disasters is not without its humour in its sheer excess even as it is not remote from evangelical arias on sin with promised redemption.

The views of this cluster of preachers seem irreproachably liberal. They are against racial discrimination, homophobia, capital punishment, commercialism, war and self-absorption, while being for abortion, even as, balancing this, and again with what is clearly a risible catalogue, the Reverend Weena confesses to having accumulated an impressive array of vices from heavy drug taking and drink to resorting to prostitutes and extreme violence, waking one day 'in a hotel room with a swastika on my forehead, naked with one leg shaved' (17). As if this were not enough, she had sex with 'multiple partners in multiple configurations' with 'many unwanted pregnancies lined up in jars on our bureau tables' while also taking time to invade military bases. A sudden revelation of her sin, however, turns out not to have been either overwhelming or immediate since it has evidently taken her ten years to come to the reductive realization that, 'none of this stuff mattered at all, and that sin has nothing to do with being messed up. Amen' (17–18).

When the Reverend José stands to deliver a sermon, a stage direction insists that '*he preaches with total conviction and is never cartoonish or silly*,' (18) while what follows is, in fact, increasingly bizarre as he explains that he lives on a mountainside where his best friend is a goat and that Jesus 'had five favorite child molesters'. The sermon then recounts a story about mummies which 'eat cotton balls and excrete them on the sidewalk to serve as an affliction to all who walk there,' suggesting that the audience/congregants are themselves mummies and as such Satan's minions who can 'drink human blood that is infected with the AIDS virus' (20). The sermon is indeed preached with total conviction but the idea that he never becomes cartoonish is hard to accept as it continues with ever stranger injunctions, analogies, surreal images.

The Reverend Karinne's sermon is hardly more coherent as she describes escaping from a blond seductress 'knowing my mind could bend reality and using my will to make it happen,' before a 'scary man' cornered her in the bathroom 'and I shoved my fingers down his throat as far as they would go and he started spewing out everything inside him, but it was represented as objects and not vomit' (23). She then takes a microphone and sings a cappella song accompanied by Reverend Katie and Reverend Weena (the names, incidentally, of the actresses in the inaugural production).

The audience, Lee explained, was never sure which way the play would go: 'They didn't know where it was going . . . they didn't know whether it was going to become creepily Christian or whether it was going to nail Christians . . . The thing is always just to keep people from shutting down because as soon as people can categorise something they are instantly gone . . . I also wanted to do a show that my mom could come and see because she had been begging me to write a show without sex and profanity.' *Church* was in part designed to acknowledge some of the virtues of the faith she had rejected. Her mother, however, must have been somewhat mystified given the impressive list of vices enumerated by the Reverend Weena while Lee had not lost her love of subversion in a play which offers evidence of her Rabelaisian instinct.

The Reverend Katie prepares to send the audience to their homes before joining with the other female ministers in an exuberant dance before the Reverend José joins them and they 'all jam together' (26). The play concludes as he offers an elaborate story which devolves into

fantasy as a woman enters singing 'Ain't Got Time to Die', followed by a sixty-person choir. The effect, a direction explains, 'should be akin to that of clowns emerging endlessly from a clown car.' The play concludes with 'clapping, dancing and "joyous abandon"' (29).

Critical responses were ambivalent. For Jason Zinoman, in *The New York Times*, it was 'slyly subversive' while presenting 'an earnest and surprisingly moving Christian church service,' though at its most convincing 'when her characters stop talking and begin dancing and singing.'⁴³ Don Aucoin, in the *Boston Globe*, found it 'alternately engrossing and irksome, insightful and wilfully opaque' while declaring that, 'Some parts are as rich and strange and moving as faith itself, touching on questions not just of who we are but why we are' while 'others reek of self-indulgence on the part of a playwright who allows a gift for poetic expression to take her, and us, up some blind alleys.'⁴⁴ By the same token, the *Denver Post* reviewer, responding to a production by TheatreWorks in Colorado Springs, home of megachurches, referred to a baffled audience while feeling that the idea of the revivalist service, 'doesn't fully hold together as a theatrical conceit.' Accepting that it served to jolt the audience out of passivity, it remained unclear precisely what force the ending was supposed to have: 'Wherever it was that TheatreWorks wanted to take us, we never quite get all the way there.'⁴⁵

A 2018 production by Crowded Fire Theatre at San Francisco's Potrero Stage prompted a review which found that the play consisted of 'bits and pieces rather than a unified narrative' and that there had not been 'any particular dramatic arc to the evening,'⁴⁶ but unified narratives and dramatic arcs are precisely what Lee has tended to eschew.

With her next play, *The Shipment* (2009), she entered dangerous territory, confronting the issue of race. As she explained, she wished to explore black identity, 'and you can immediately see a million ways in which I could get into trouble.'⁴⁷ It might be that racial prejudice is structured into human behaviour, but she was an Asian-American writing about the experiences of others. As she confessed,

Asians occupy this ... nebulous area ... our families came here by choice and we're considered to be 'honorary white people' in certain segments of society, but we still experience all kinds of racism within that sphere of relative privilege. So, I think there's this uneasy mixture of 'white guilt' combined with a desire to acknowledge the racism we experience, and black people can sometimes become the targets of our fascination because their fight against oppression is so extreme. The crazy thing is that even black people are constantly asked to prove that racism exists. People want to think we are post-race because we have a black president, but that is still so far from being the case.⁴⁸

It was two years in the writing and with a title, she explained, evocative of slavery, 'of people ... being kidnapped and brought over as a shipment.' It was 'an attempt to do a black identity show and doing a black identity show made the Asian identity play like a piece of cake ... We started it pre-Obama and people did not want to talk about racism against black people ... The whole process was me asking my cast what were the things that they wanted to say, what were the things that bothered them, what did they want to communicate through the show because I don't really have a lot to say ... That's where all the content of the show was.'

Early workshops proved problematic when invited audiences also saw it as simply a play about identity politics, an angry piece, but one which seemed not to disturb, a largely white audience invited to join those on stage willingly doing so. 'It was,' she said, 'one of the worst

artistic experiences of my life – seeing all the black people walk out and the white people happy, so happy.⁴⁹ As she remarked, ‘I’m obsessed with unsettling complacency – because I think that contradiction and uncertainty bring us closer to the truth than pat ideologies’⁵⁰ but ‘I was trying, as a Korean-American, to make a Black identity-politics show, and the results were as bad as one would expect. I ended up throwing out my entire script and recasting the show and starting over from scratch. I wanted to make a show that reflected my cast’s race-related concerns in an unexpected way that wouldn’t make the audience tune out, since a lot of people shut down when confronted with your garden-variety identity-politics,⁵¹ either that or readily accommodate it as a badge of their liberalism.

Aware of the risk of cultural appropriation, she asked her actors, ‘what kind of roles they would like to play since they were so often cast in stereotypical ways, what kind of play they would like it to be and they said they wanted it to be a totally straight naturalistic play, which I had never done before but the rule I had set myself was that I would do whatever they wanted so this was my first attempt at naturalism.’ The naturalism, however, would await the second half of the play. ‘The first half . . . was about how in the act of doing something you love it was somehow degrading so [it] was about the different stereotypes of black entertainment . . . we did everything really badly . . . there was no attempt at authenticity . . . the image that we used was that they were wearing the stereotypes like an ill-fitting paper doll costume.’⁵²

In an author’s note, Lee explained that,

The show is divided into two parts. The first is structured like a minstrel show – dance, stand-up routine, sketches, and a song – and I wrote it to address the stereotypes my cast felt they had to deal with as black performers. Our goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn’t sure what they were watching or how they were supposed to respond . . . The second half of the show is a relatively straight naturalistic comedy.⁵³

The play, for which the audience is likely to be largely white, accordingly begins with two dancers whose movements hint at minstrelsy, at which point a stand-up comedian enters and addresses the audience, naming the city and venue where the play is taking place, before segueing into a routine which begins with pornographic references seemingly testing the limits of their tolerance for what they perhaps assume is the norm for black comedy even as he attacks them before doing the same with his fellow blacks: ‘I been talkin’ shit ‘bout white folks for a while. Now it’s time for me to go after some niggas,’ (13) confessing that ‘I . . . been accused a playin’ a stereotype to cater to a white audience. Well, that’s true, but mostly I talk this way because I’m fuckin’ terrified a black people!’ (14) He proceeds to denounce whites for their crass insensitivity, confessing to having a white wife and interracial children, signing off with a sentimentality before a series of sketches about a would-be rapper, scenes which include a drive-by shooting, drug dealing, a crack-head, a whore, religion and would-be murderers, stereotypes fast accumulating. The rapper calls for the death of whitey in a way reminiscent of Amiri Baraka’s *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* of the late 1960s, before they transform into the figures called Singer 1 and Singer 2 performing a capella versions of ‘Dark Center of the Universe’ (Modest Mouse’s song which includes the lyrics ‘everyone’s life ends but nobody ever/ completes it’) before the stage is transformed for the naturalistic play, the actors from the first half now transformed.

The room, as it is now assembled, is, she directs, to be modern, expensive and male. There are four men and one woman. At first the conversation is inconsequential but what seems like a brittle fencing devolves into something else as their host, Thomas, announces that he has poisoned their drinks, only to declare it a joke and explain that he is suicidal. At this point, and somewhat oddly in the circumstance, they decide to play a game of Library in which the players have to write a sentence in the style of a book chosen from the bookshelves, the book turning out to be *Sexual Anorexia: Overcoming Sexual Self-Hatred*, obviously somewhat revealing given Thomas's state of mind. When that yields unsatisfactory results, Thomas himself chooses another which proves even more revealing containing, as it does, a chapter entitled 'Negro Superstitions'. The guests are required to complete a sentence beginning, 'The Negro believes ...'. The results are all pejorative. When one of the guests doubts they would have played the game had a black person been in the room he is told, in the play's final line, 'I guess that would depend in what kind of black person it was' (53).

The irony, of course, is that the audience finally realize that the black actors had been playing white people in a setting which at some level they might have assumed to be white, a sudden reversal exposing underlying racial stereotypes subtler than those with which the show had started.

Lee was surprised by the success of the play even as, sitting in the audience, as is her habit, she registered the differing responses of black and white audience members. Though one critic, Pamela Vesper, writing for *Triangle Arts and Entertainment*, walked out of a Common Ground Theatre production (this being an African-American company based in San Diego) nonetheless publishing a review in which she called it 'degrading, disgusting and ridiculous,' not art but 'elephant dung,'⁵⁴ responses were positive. For Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, it was 'provocative but never polemical ... pleasingly eclectic,' while Lee 'sets you thinking about how we unconsciously process experience—at the theater, or in life—through the filter of racial perspective, and how hard it can be to see the world truly in something other than black and white.'⁵⁵ For *Time Out* it was one of the best plays of 2009. For Lee herself, 'I think ultimately it doesn't matter that much, since people end up getting kind of stumped by the show regardless of what they read in the press ... We tried to make everything off-kilter and unrecognisable, so the audience got really nervous and wasn't sure how to react.'⁵⁶

Perhaps it takes a certain chutzpah for a Korean-American to attempt a riff on *King Lear* but, then, it was a play she had worked on for her doctoral thesis for six years. She returned to it now refracted through her experience of a very different kind of theatre. 'All of the things that I was trying to do in *Lear*' she explained, 'were reflective of my sense of what tragedy is, and what a big play is. It was an homage to the original – not trying to be as great as that play or anything – just trying to get into the spirit of complexity and madness and tragedy and the wrenching language of despair. My voice is mostly comic, and it was my first time working with tragedy.'

It was a challenge to the writer, audiences and, it turned out, critics. As she confessed, 'I do think my *Lear* ended up being by far my most challenging work. It was the first time I'd had really mixed audience responses. Even though it was more fun to have a show that people loved, like *The Shipment*, I feel ... there's a connection between longevity and something that you really have to wrestle with, and *Lear* is the play of mine that you have to wrestle with the most ... I would say that *Lear* is a play that's still over my head. I made the show, but when I watch it, I have the same experience that my audience has. I struggle with it. And that was sort of my goal—to write something that was big enough that I couldn't control it.'⁵⁷

The New York Times critic Charles Isherwood was inclined to agree. He found it an 'intermittently funny but mostly flailing attempt to excavate new meanings from the consideration of a celebrated text. From perhaps the most imposing something in the theatrical canon, Ms. Lee has constructed a big, fat nothing . . . a misfired play.'⁵⁸ For *The New Yorker* it was 'a hot mess,' 'the kind of misfire any young artist is entitled to . . . a collage of things, with no over-arching emotion, no prominent thought to hold it together.'⁵⁹ *CurtainUp* provided no consolation, Gregory A.S. Wilson noting that, 'There's nothing more frustrating for a critic than watching a production which promises things it ultimately doesn't provide, and Lee's new play *Lear* at the Soho Rep delivers this frustration in spades.' To him, the play had 'no narrative through line, nothing to ground the audience's experience.'⁶⁰

In one sense Lee's is a curious admission. What, after all, do we expect of a playwright if not a personal vision carefully constructed to realize that vision. That, however, has never been her method or intent. Not only has she been open to the input of others but the reversals, sudden shifts in style, the deployment of music and dance, anachronisms, profanities, vulgarities are designed to disturb any sense of assurance for herself no less than for audiences. The only predictable aspect of her work is to expect the unexpected. Meanings are not patrolled, pre-determined. At the same time, for all its gnomic gestures, its seemingly inconsequential dialogue and dark comedy, there is an underlying theme and mood to *Lear*. It begins with an approaching death and ends as a threnody, a lament not for Lear, a man who we never see, though whose fate we know, but for an existence that seems to render up no apparent coherence, no justification. It is a play in which death is a presence, a work about mortality albeit approached with a sometimes-brutal humour and disorienting shifts of focus.

The set and costumes for *Lear* are elaborate, even sumptuous, as if for a classical production of Shakespeare's play. We are in the court, now presided over by Goneril and Regan (like Cordelia played by black actresses) along with Gloucester's two sons, Edgar and Edmund, the figures of Lear and Gloucester having been abandoned by Lee following workshops in which they had become too dominant. We enter as the characters perform a courtly dance to authentic Elizabethan music. These are not, though, characters at ease, Edmund in particular feeling guilty at his treatment of his father Gloucester, even as, surprisingly, his brother and Goneril extol the virtues of Buddhism which they see as endorsing the idea of simply accepting whatever happens, including their own violence and betrayals. Edgar, meanwhile, in a far from Elizabethan language, discusses body dysmorphia and the possibility that someday modern technology may cure baldness and other physical problems, the deconstructions affected by time, a subject clearly of interest to him having witnessed, and taken advantage of, the vulnerability of his father and a king whose power proved no defence against decline.

Goneril, meanwhile, in a soliloquy, declares that 'all I wish is to be good to the people around me, to make them feel whole and important,' but not, it appears, out of any sense of altruism, merely that then 'they will dance to my bidding and bend to my will,' (66) even as she has witnessed the fragility of will. For her part, Cordelia returns from France where she has been living with the King of France. Asked what she has been doing, she replies 'Nothing,' an echo of her answer to Lear's enquiry as to what she can offer in the way of love for him, and a word which recurs in the text of Lee's play. 'I told the world to be what it was, come what may' she declares, before contradicting herself: 'and I would transform shit into sugar blossom.' In the same way, Edgar confesses that 'I kick beggars . . . I wear extremely expensive and heavy boots and I kick beggars every chance I get' only to reverse himself: 'I've never kicked a beggar in my

life and my boots are neither heavy nor expensive,' (77) language neutralizing itself as Beckett's Estragon says, 'Let's go' only for the stage direction to indicate 'They do not move.' This is, indeed, less *Lear* as tragedy than as the absurd as Regan observes that, 'Everyone dies,' only for Goneril to ask, 'Then why live. What is there?' 'Some things' she notes, 'are unspeakable' (70–1).

The play now takes two swift changes of direction. The actors abandon their characters and use their own names. The actor playing Edgar, in what is plainly a high-risk gesture, walks into the audience asking, 'What are you doing here? Is this really what you want to be doing with your life? Being here? Doing this?' (88)

The play then takes a further abrupt turn as the actor previously playing Edmund enters as Big Bird, the principal figure from *Sesame Street*, '*bent over upside down and walking backwards*' while holding onto his ankles with his hands and talking through his legs to the actor previously playing Edgar. Why is he speaking through his legs? 'Because,' he replies (echoing a key word from the relevant episode of *Sesame Street* in which Big Bird enters in the same way).

When the actress formerly playing Goneril enters she quotes directly from Lear's speech on the death of Cordelia, which in turn is echoed in an exchange which comes directly from episode 1,839 of *Sesame Street* called 'I'm Sure Gonna Miss You, Mr. Hooper!' an episode designed to introduce children to the idea of death. Mr. Hooper was one of the few human characters in *Sesame Street*. He died in 1982. His friends try to explain to Big Bird that he will never return as Lear had declaimed 'Thoult come no more, Never, never, never, never, never.' When Big Bird, in the television show, asks why he died he is told, 'Because.'

The play ends with an extended speech from the actor who had played Edmund and Big Bird. In a play dedicated to Lee's father, who had died by the time it was published, this speech is about the future death of a father and the need to seize the moment before it is too late. 'I can't imagine what it will be like when he is dying . . . that loss is going to be too much. You can't lose that much' (97). With strobe lights flickering on and off he opens his arms as if waiting for someone's arrival repeating the words 'I'll miss you', ten times, an echo of the phrase used by Big Bird of Mr. Hooper.

Asked for her own interpretation of the play, Lee said,

I think there's a lot of possible interpretations. The one that I had in mind when I was writing was the phenomenon of being an adult and having a parent get sick and realizing their mortality and then realizing your own mortality. In the first half of the play a lot of those themes get played out, most obviously with the rejection of the father, but also with the obsession with getting fat or bald, and just the idea of being incapable of love, love of others or self-love. The first half of the play contains a lot of themes that are in all of my work, which are the tendencies of myself and my demographic.⁶¹

Given that her father was terminally ill when she wrote, there is a poignancy to her observation that, 'I feel there's a moment in every person's life when they realize their parents will die. When this hits, it's like the ground opens up and things aren't solid anymore.'⁶² Hers is a play in which, in truth, there is little room for tragedy. Death lies off stage, but its pressure is present, a fact which its characters experience as dark comedy, farce or the centrifugal force of the absurd, a truth held at a distance and whose function can prompt no answer beyond the blank 'because.' Things in Lee's *Lear* are indeed not solid. They were dissolving even as she wrote it. Edgar's question to the audience – 'What are you doing here' – is more than a

provocation, it is an existential question which equally lies behind that asked by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, up against the brute fact of existence and here quoted by Lee: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more' (90). Language is no defence, devolving into Lear's reiterated 'never, never, never' and here, in Lee's play, into the echoic, 'I'll miss you, I'll miss you. I'll miss you,' (98) repeated until the stage turns to black.

The *Time Out* critic, David Cote, acknowledged the negative reviews the play had provoked (*On Off Broadway* called it 'a really, really bad play') but asked 'after all the reviews have been forgotten and/or archived, will anyone want to revisit this messy, disorienting, obsessive text?' Answering his own question, he added that while, 'at the end of the day, *Lear* may not be as sleek and stunning as *The Shipment*, ... it has power and ought to endure.'⁶³

Though *Untitled Feminist Show* had its first workshop in December 2010, it would be 2012 before it emerged from development, opening at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Meanwhile she moved in a very different direction with *We're Gonna Die* which would go on to win an Obie and which was a performance co-produced with 13P, the company formed by thirteen playwrights and committed to closing after each had staged a play. Hers was to be number eleven. After a performance of the music at John Zorn's *The Stone*, an experimental music performance venue in Greenwich Village which had formerly been a Chinese restaurant, it was staged at Joe's Pub, one of the six spaces within the Public Theatre in New York City, in April 2011.

We're Gonna Die, however, is not so much a play as a cabaret and Joe's Pub offers a cabaret setting. Still committed to produce what scared her, in her own mind being neither an actress, a singer (though she had briefly sung in a band at college and now took singing lessons) nor a lyricist, she had written a series of songs and performed them with a band which consisted not only of musicians but those who were themselves singer-songwriters. For the show she wrote a series of stories which she would perform between the songs.

If *Lear* had been written when her father was dying, death was, she explained, still on her mind now that he had gone, and this was to be a work in which death would be a common theme. Text and songs were to centre on the fear of loneliness, heartbreak, ageing, sickness and death. The stories were all true, but only one was her own, one in which she addresses her father's death. This was not, though, to be a dirge, a lament, an absurdist performance about the irony of human existence, but a recognition of what is shared and thereby a consolation. It was, in a sense, an antidote to *Lear*. The relationship to the audience was to be different. She no longer wished to provoke and disorient them nor was it an experimental piece, though it involved a moment when she and her band join together in an ironically choreographed dance. As she explained,

If I get on stage I don't look incredibly special and talented. It became this experiment to see, can you just present a person being themselves on stage, communicating directly to an audience, and have that compelling? Normally I have these larger-than-life performers doing this experimental, controversial work that's ... unpredictable and ... a little crazy. With this show I wanted to go in the totally opposite direction where it's just about telling these truthful, simple stories and singing these songs in a way that makes people watching feel like they could imagine themselves up there doing what I am doing.⁶⁴

To that end, she dressed in everyday clothes and it turned out was an excellent composer and singer, the intimacy of presentation and setting underscoring her desire to engage with her

audience this time by 'entertainment rather than weirdness'. One thing she had discovered in writing songs was that 'my lyrics are way more straightforward than my playwriting. I am incapable of being weird or poetic or avant-garde in any way when I'm writing songs – if I try, it feels incredibly wrong and fake.'⁶⁵

Though the fifty-minute show consists of individual stories there is an overall direction, an acknowledgement that the various pains, desertions, sadnesses, traumas, narrated in them are shared, and that there is consolation in that fact, even as there is no flinching from the fact that, in the words of a song entitled 'When You Get Old,' 'everything will hurt all the time . . . And you will be a burden in the world.'⁶⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly the most affecting story is Lee's own as she recounts her father's suffering, dying in terror, approved for an experimental treatment which might have saved him but for a delay which meant that approval only arrived the day of his death leaving Lee enraged and fearful of one day repeating her father's experience until a letter from a friend, who had experienced blows of her own, asks why she had assumed that she was immune from tragedy, from the various wounds life inflicts. This brings her to a realization which is the essential theme of the show: 'when you're a person, all kinds of really terrible things can happen to you. That's why my father died the way he did, and if I die the same way, it'll be for the same reason: because I'm a person.' As she confesses, 'It wasn't some big, profound revelation. But for the first time in a long time, I felt a little bit of comfort' (31). The 'because' of *Lear* now becomes sufficient.

Death is, indeed, the end of the journey but the final song, 'I'm Gonna Die', which acknowledges that 'we can't live forever' and that 'We can't keep each other safe from harm,' (37) concludes with the band members joining Lee in a curious dislocated dance before they come together to sing an a capella version of the song, encouraging the audience to join in the repeated lyric 'We are going to die,' an acceptance of a common bond, offering a shape to contingency, music and song elevating private fact to shared experience.

In 2012 *We're Gonna Die* moved to the newly-constructed 114-seat Claire Tow Theater (LCT3) at Lincoln Centre, returning the following year. Besides winning an Obie Award, it also received praise from Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times* as it did in *The Chicago Tribune* and *Time Out* (New York and Chicago). The play's text comes complete with a CD with the stories told not by Lee but by those she persuaded to work for nothing including Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Colin Stetson and others.

Her next work, *Untitled Feminist Show*, (originally *Untitled Feminist Multi-Media Technology Show*), though its first workshop had preceded *We're Gonna Die*, represented a radical change of direction as she gradually removed language in favour of dance. Out, too, went clothes, the six actors, drawn from the world of cabaret, theatre and burlesque, one of whom was transgender, performing naked. For Lee, this was a way of stripping away more than clothes, more than habits or the seeming requirements of presentation. For her, 'the thing that makes nudity a little bit different from how nudity has been used in a lot of feminist work is that these people on stage are completely in utopia. They are in a state of total joy. That's the thing that makes it feel different . . . it's the first show [*We're Gonna Die* aside] that I've made that is not trying to make the audience feel uncomfortable . . . The nudity is not confrontational. A lot of people forget about it after the first five minutes. The nudity itself is not where the provocation is.'⁶⁷

Though dance had occurred in her other shows, here it gradually becomes the essence of the work. In her original notes she had simply described dances in what she thought of as a play without words, only to doubt the legitimacy of this confessing that as a writer rather than a

choreographer she had a hard time relinquishing words only to find that in the end images were more powerful.

Nonetheless, it began as a text. In a series of workshops through 2010 and 2011, beginning with a residency at the New Museum in New York City, she assembled a highly articulate cast with whom she had discussions over feminism but in the end removed all words from the original text following what struck her as the anger of actors and audiences at the original: 'our audiences did nothing but make academic arguments about feminism' where she 'wanted to hit people on a more emotional, visceral level.' As a result, '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. I tried hard to write words that could compete with the movement and dance, but I couldn't. We found that movement communicated what we wanted much more strongly than words did.'⁶⁸ Once the words were removed, 'People still got really angry, but they couldn't angry about anything specific.'⁶⁹ The word 'Untitled', indeed, reflected her sense that any more precise word would be limited and limiting.

For all that *Untitled Feminist Show*, focussed on dance, it was, she insisted, 'a dance-theater piece that was not operating in any way within the context of the dance scene, it wasn't really in conversation with the dance scene at all, but it was using the elements of dance to make a theater piece.'⁷⁰ Thus, she worked with a choreographer but was also open to input from others involved. Conscious that she did not come from a dance background, 'the show became [a question of] using dance to achieve the specific aims that I want to achieve,' confessing that 'it's not a choreographically sophisticated show' but that she was 'interested to see whether the dance world is going to understand that this is borrowing in the same way that dance borrows text all the time but is not a play.' She was 'using the language of music and dance and mime, every non-verbal form of communication that there is,' feeling that 'it is incredibly communicative,' that 'there is a lot of non-verbal communication that is theatrical.'⁷¹

The performance shifts from mood to mood, style to style, because, as she insisted, it is in part concerned with transformation. So, there is a representation of daily experiences, a fight, a seduction, a scene in which the performers carry pink parasols. The music echoes these shifts, fluidity of identity being part of Lee's objective.

There are stories implied in each section but, for Lee, there was a secret narrative, not supposed to be clear to the audience.

The whole theatre is a temple and the cast are high priestesses of this temple. Their job is to generate power for themselves, for the audience, and for people outside the theatre. They are doing a series of rituals to evoke and summon up different forms of power . . . the first half of the show is [the] summoning of power, summoning the power of the domestic worker, they summon the power of femininity, despised femininity, they summon the power of old archetypes . . . In the second half of the show they summon the total primal id which is not civilised . . . aggression, sexuality, and joy, hysteria . . . unleashed wild energy . . . The two become fused at the end . . . the ability to be fluid. The end of the show is channelling the crazy energy. The climax is the closest I come to what gender fluidity feels like.⁷²

The greatest criticism came from those in the dance community, for whom it was not their idea of modern dance, and from some of those involved in feminist art who looked for a

critique of sexism rather than the celebratory rituals at which she was aiming. When it came to mainstream critics, however, there was a marked difference of opinion. For Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, 'Ms. Lee has created an almost undefinable and often, alas, uncommunicative romp.' He acknowledged the element of ritual but regretted that it 'never comes into focus,' finding that 'Any real ideas . . . are clouded in an amiable but weightless air of general playfulness' and that 'the performers gradually come to seem undifferentiated, alike in their sometimes overly cute or coy playfulness.'⁷³ By contrast, *Time Out* and the *Huffington Post* were enthusiastic, as was Hilton Als in *The New Yorker* for whom it was 'one of the more moving and imaginative works I have ever seen on the American stage.'⁷⁴

In researching the piece, Lee looked for recordings of the work of choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, who had worked with the Wooster Group, and Pina Bausch, of the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, and there is certainly something of her approach in Lee's attitude to the theatre as, here, in her use of dance. It was Bausch who remarked that, 'We are not only here to please, we cannot help challenging the spectator,'⁷⁵ as Lee would endeavour 'to find ways to get past [her] audiences' defences . . . keeping them disoriented . . . trying to figure out how to build the best trap for the audience.'⁷⁶ Bausch, though, was more radical, in *Café Müller* requiring her performers to dance with their eyes closed, stumbling over furniture. She placed an emphasis on repetition and the relationship between men and women. On the other hand, she explored precisely that connection between theatre and dance evidenced here by Lee. She also constructed her works in a similar way, questioning her performers, slowly constructing her works, bringing disparate elements together, musically as well as in other ways. Neither required trained dancers, improvisation being the starting point and not the destination. Lee embraced what Bausche called 'danced body language'.

George Steiner has pointed out that though we 'live inside the act of discourse . . . we should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulateness and conduct of the mind are conceivable.'⁷⁷ Music is one such, as is dance, both challenging the critic for though both mediums may access the emotions, tell stories through sound and movement, they may step beyond that, reach out in ways that defy simple description, (often a response to experimental work) or critical analysis, fail to account for the act of translation, of decoding, required of the critic in re-entering language, seeking to account for the visceral, the essentially unarticulated response to form, movement, shifting patterns, in words which carry their own history, socially, culturally, aesthetically. Critical judgements have their context, their vocabulary, their imperatives. This is not to say that Lee should be seen as a radical innovator, carving out new territory, but she is interested in blurring boundaries, unsettling those for whom consistency, evident coherence, meanings freely offered, are if not primary then desirable aspects of a theatrical presentation. Given that she sees herself as deliberately troubling the waters in her work, provoking and even dividing audiences, it is hardly surprising that critics respond similarly. If it were not so, it is tempting to believe that Lee might be disappointed. Ready acceptance has seldom been the goal of the experimental artist. It is not that critics have got her right or wrong. She, after all, has seldom been without self-doubt. It is those self-doubts, however, which in some ways drive her on, always challenging herself to venture where she and others are surprised to see her go, and her next work would provide evidence of that.

In *Interview Magazine*, in 2013, she confessed that the 'ultimate challenge for me [is] can I just do something normal that isn't weird at all,' insisting that 'In terms of the downtown world, I'm not the biggest weirdo. There, I'm one of the more normal ones, which makes it seem . . . I

could appeal to the mainstream.⁷⁸ Her next move, indeed, was to the mainstream, to Broadway (The Hayes Theater on 44th Street), via Brown University, the Wexler Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, a European tour, a Steppenwolf production in Chicago, and the Public Theatre, a long way from the downtown theatre world where she had started.

What attracted her to *Straight White Men* was that suddenly they were seen as having an ethnic identity. Until then they had simply been the default human. Now, for the first time, they were experiencing what others had done. Lacking any real knowledge about them, however, she set out to have conversations with as many as she could. Being an only child she was also interested in the relationship between brothers since the play was about three such. She also brought together a number of women and minorities and asked what they thought of straight white men, only to be taken aback by the onslaught which followed. Further conversations followed with the cast and the wider community. In *The Interval* she explained that,

For *Straight White Men* I knew that I wanted a banker, a novelist, somebody who was living at home, and an older retired engineer. So, I just posted on Facebook, 'Hey, does anybody know straight white men who fit this description?' ... So, all my Facebook friends hooked me up with these guys. I interviewed a bunch of bankers, a bunch of retired engineers, I even interviewed a bunch of women who I modelled the mom character after, who's not in the play ... In interviewing a wide range of people, a character begins to emerge in my mind and I learn how they speak, and I learn what the person's background is and where they're coming from ... I interviewed maybe six novelists, and there were these points of overlap in everyone's stories that then became part of [the character called] Drew.⁷⁹

Straight White Men was her first traditional three-act play. In preparation, she read classic works, including those of Arthur Miller, and had her actors improvise to enable her to familiarize herself with the unfamiliar speech patterns and behaviours of white men. She explained that she,

saw the traditional three-act structure as the 'straight white male' of theatrical forms, or the form that has historically been used to present straight white male narratives as universal. And I thought it would be interesting to explore the boundaries of that form at the same time as its content. It is a naturalistic three-act play, the only conventional narrative I've ever done. And at first people just could not enjoy that show. They kept expecting everybody to break the fourth wall or take off all their clothes. People could not even really experience the show, because they were just waiting for that moment to come, and they were so frustrated when it didn't. So, I had to build in a pre-show announcement where the audience is told that the actors will stay in character throughout the show and pretend not to see you, and that helped a bit.⁸⁰

There is more to that last strategy, though, than mere convenience. As a note in the published text insists, 'The pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions are an important part of this play. They should create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men.'⁸¹ Though it indicates that the play should be performed without irony, the framing introduces an element of distance. The audience enters to designedly loud hip-hop

‘with sexually explicit lyrics by female rappers, music by women of colour,’ too loud for some it turned out, while two figures ‘played by gender-nonconforming performers (preferably of color),’ called Persons in Charge, draw attention to the fact that this is, indeed, to be a naturalistic play with its own conventions. Indeed, the Persons in Charge lead the actors on stage, carefully arranging them, like museum objects about to be activated, in the process implying the limitations of the form. One of the Persons in Charge, unlike the other actors, is allowed to ad lib and determine her own costumes and performance styles with ‘the power and support to have audience members removed from the theatre should the actors deem it necessary’ (5). The other Person in Charge is a non-speaking character, expressing solidarity. If possible, the stage hands were also to be female. So, a play about straight white men takes place in the context of those who are none of those things.

The play’s action covers three days of Christmas in the Midwestern home of the widowed Ed, a retired engineer, who is joined by his three sons, all in their forties. Jake is a successful banker, dedicated to climbing the ladder, selling himself, though recently divorced from his African-American wife who has their two children with her for the holidays. Drew is a teacher and author of a book attacking the country’s materialism, believing he is serving something bigger than himself, even as he is seeing a therapist. Matt, the oldest brother who, long ago, at school, had challenged a production of *Oklahoma* which had found no place for non-whites, an echo of Lee’s experience at her own school, is a Harvard graduate (though ten years on a PhD programme at Stanford suggests something not quite in order) of whom great things had been expected but having once spent time in Africa, to no apparent end it seems, now lives with his father while working at a temporary job with a community group. Throughout the play he intermittently tidies the room, as if this defined his new role, either a surrender to fate or an embracing of a role.

Back in the family home, they revert to their old relationships, enjoy what seems an easy familiarity, playing out customary rituals. They rough house, dance, exchange presents, play a game of Monopoly but one which their mother had revised into one called Privilege, a reminder that they had been raised to recognize their advantages. The game board is revealed to have an anti-money symbol on one half and a female-gender symbol on the other, one of the game pieces earning an ‘Undervalued domestic labor bonus’ (13). It includes an ‘excuses card’ which requires fifty dollars to be paid to a Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center for excusing a racist, sexist or homophobic remark as just a joke.

When young, it turns out, Matt had been a revolutionary, though alarmed at the thought of revolutionary violence, while Drew, prompted by Jake, had been disaffected, convinced of his intellectual superiority. They have all moved on. As they share a Chinese meal, however, it is evident that there is something wrong. For no apparent reason, Matt breaks down in tears.

If he is going through a crisis, however, all of them have been raised to believe that their privileges imply responsibilities, that their lives need to mean something, and there is a level at which none of them seem entirely sure they have fulfilled such even as they are angry at Matt’s rejection of their various interpretations of his state of mind. They feel he has betrayed a family ethos, a moral responsibility, even as they find ways to justify themselves. His benign father is no surer what to make of Matt’s passivity, having, in his own mind, justified himself through a lifetime of work, even if that was not a job he had chosen.

For Jake, Matt’s problem is racial guilt, something which he acknowledges feeling himself, failing to support minorities in his company even as his own children are of mixed race. Having been handed every advantage, he suggests, Matt feels unworthy of success and therefore unwilling to seek

it, something Matt rejects. He is, in effect, a Bartleby figure, simply preferring not to accept other people's interpretations of his life, their admonitions and solutions. After a lifetime in which he has, in his own mind, failed to make a difference, he is apparently content to play a minor role at home and at work. His brothers have chased success while never quite forgetting the lessons taught by their long-dead mother. The play ends, however, with his father determined to expel him from his home, feeling that he has conspired in his son's failure to fulfil himself. He acts out of love and yet Matt is left alone, his future seemingly about to foreclose. As in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Death of a Salesman*, love is an ambiguous force.

Straight White Men is not an attack on white men. Hers are not characters who exist to exemplify a thesis, and that despite the presence of Persons in Charge. It is as much a family play as *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman* or *August: Osage County*. It is about lives that have not quite turned out as expected, about the love between a father and his sons, and between sons who have chosen different paths but done so in a search of a meaning they once thought gifted to them, within their grasp, and there is a wider context as, implicitly, there is in O'Neill and Miller's plays. That, I take, to be the significance of Matt choosing to read a passage from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in which Silenus, companion to Dionysus, and given to drunkenness (Lee's characters having just woken following a night of drinking), asked what is desirable for mankind, replies that the 'best of all things is . . . not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best thing for you – is to die soon' (55). For Nietzsche, art, especially tragedy, simultaneously acknowledged the inescapable given of existence and the resistant spirit. The challenge is to justify existence. Lee's characters have been set to do no less by their mother, even as they are to acknowledge that they have been given advantages which apparently gift them access to meaningful existences.

For Lee, her characters were 'very politically aware and sensitive . . . cool guys [who] really loved each other. They are very straight white male, but very loving.'⁸² Indeed in writing it she came to recognize her own privileges at a time when identity politics confer their own advantages:

One of the discoveries I made working on the show was just how much privilege I have that is comparable to the privilege of a straight white male. To what extent am I able to enjoy and exploit my privilege in a way I can get away with because I am an Asian female? There are a few lines in the play where the characters say, 'Unlike women, queer people, and people of color, we can't pretend we're doing enough just by pursuing our own ambition,' which is a problem for me personally. It's just taken for granted that my success is good for the world, and that that's somehow enough, which I don't think it is. I've had people of color come to the show expecting to be totally alienated by all the characters, and then being freaked out by how much they identified.⁸³

For Lee, then, this is not simply a play about white men uncertain about how their values can be realized in a world with its own resistances, in which life fails to conform to expectations, meaning never quite cohering, 'it becomes an even bigger question of: What do we want *people* to do? What are our values in society. . . I think that's what the play ended up being about.'⁸⁴ Beyond that, it was a play, she confessed, which stopped her being 'snotty' about naturalistic theatre having 'rewired' her brain in terms of character and plot, the very things against which she had originally rebelled.

Throughout, I have quoted reviews as evidence of the ambivalent responses Lee has received, varying from enthusiastic support to bafflement. Given that one of her objectives was to divide and disturb audiences it is hardly surprising that critics should respond similarly, more especially since her objective was to move out of her own comfort zone and to provoke those watching to do likewise. With this play, however, she received almost unanimously positive reviews, with one notable, and surely surprising exception.

The positive reviews ranged from Charles Isherwood's in *The New York Times* for whom it was 'fascinating' going beyond 'cheap satire [and] ultimately becoming [a] compassionate and stimulating exploration of one man's existential crisis,'⁸⁵ to David Cote's in *Time Out* (*New York*) for whom it was 'both emotionally satisfying . . . and unflinching in its critique of white-driven social justice.'⁸⁶ In a review of a later production, he found it 'immensely pleasurable' in its wit while working 'both as a political satire . . . and also as a philosophical study of human limitations' doing both 'brilliantly'. It was, he declared, 'thrillingly great.'⁸⁷ Marilyn Stasio in *Variety* judged it a 'cutting but deeply humane satire.'⁸⁸ *Huffington Post* was equally enthusiastic, but an extraordinary attack was launched in *The New Yorker* by, of all people, Hilton Als who had responded so enthusiastically to her other work.

This was, he declared, a play without a script Lee having, in his view, not 'so much written a play as handed it over, to the director' and actors, providing only 'notes in the shape of a play. That those notes are flat and boring, with no organic force or comedic interest whatsoever, is only part of the problem' since the work was 'rigged' so that audiences could 'give a thumbs-down to some straight white men.' It appeared to Als that Lee, 'wanted to make a "straight" play and hang out with the Broadway boys, without appearing to aspire to anything other than the spectacle's success.' Is her point, he asked, 'that straight men are superficial creatures bound by codes of behaviour that make them stupid and puerile?' adding that, 'The dishonesty in the play runs deep,' she having 'scripted a simplistic morality play whose thrust is Them bad, Us – audience members, Persons in Charge – good.' *Straight White Men*, he declared, is 'ultimately, not much more than a repetitive Twitter rant about what's wrong with other people.' It lacked the humour and passion of her earlier work when she was writing about her own culture or American racism. Now she was content to create characters who were 'like silhouettes in a shooting gallery – easy marks.' Characters were underwritten while the play itself was 'soulless . . . shallow, soporific, and all about itself.'⁸⁹

So, instead of cleaving to explorations of race, gender and identity, here she was focussing on white men, who hardly lacked dramatic, social or political attention, apparently in the process handing them a free pass when she should have been exposing them for the very privileges whose inadequacies Lee, in truth, had set herself to explore finding them not quite so remote from her own experience as she, and, as it turned out, Als, had assumed.

It seems to have struck him as akin to the moment Bob Dylan picked up an electric guitar. There is a distinct sense of betrayal in his remarks. He had been an admirer of her work as a leading figure in experimental theatre and now here she was on Broadway with a naturalistic play though, as we have seen, she had deliberately infiltrated a subversive element by framing the play with 'gender nonconforming performers', free to break free of the text.

Does *Straight White Men* deserve Als's strictures? He certainly seems to have misread Lee's attitude to her characters while seeming tone deaf to the play's humour and unaware of the significance of the framing device. He accuses her of writing a 'white' play, in effect of passing, assuming the values of those she satirizes. A British Prime Minister, John Major, in a debate on

law and order, once remarked that we should condemn a little more and understand a little less. That would seem to be the implication of Als's concern while surely the reverse of her intent. His sense of *Straight White Men* being an incomplete play was perhaps a recognition of her refusal to resolve the issue she raises, though that, of course, had always been evident in her earlier work.

One of the curious aspects of Als's remarks is that in a 2014 article in *The New Yorker* he had explained that, 'Lee has moved on from the internalized view of white men she explored in "Songs of Dragons." She has given the straight white male his own body and heart, though he is not entirely free of her distinctly political view. Nor should he be. The challenge, when Lee began writing "Straight White Men," was to find a way to be both herself and not herself; that is, to inhabit the title of the work, its declaration and its challenge.' At this stage he praised what he called a 'profound scene' from the play in which the brothers dance together 'in a kind of awkward tribal rite.'⁹⁰ It is unclear why he now chose to read the play differently.

For Lee, this was one more experiment, even as there was an undeniable irony in her choosing to write a play of the kind against which she had once rebelled and for an audience which she acknowledged was,

still mostly white. In the big theaters, everybody's over sixty, mostly over seventy. They're all straight, they're mostly there in couples. It's bad. Downtown, of course, it's much better, much younger, more diverse, but it's still very white, college-educated. Classwise, there's very little diversity. I definitely see more diversity in a museum, especially the ones that are free. I find that there's also a lot more openness in visual art on the part of practitioners and patrons. I feel like theater is way behind visual art. If the art world were the theater world, most people would still be demanding figurative painting. Anybody who did anything remotely abstract would be considered very marginal. Whereas visual art patrons just have always insisted on boldness. In the theater, the older generation just wants their stories, they don't want anything else, and theater caters to them. In art, there's a market-driven search for the new, whereas in theater, the market drives the search for the familiar.⁹¹

Yet just as Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has made it evident that a person of colour can have a major impact with a form that is radically different, she has expressed the hope that her own work may, in turn, open doors for others, that the unfamiliar would begin to command attention. Meanwhile, even as her plays are performed across America and around the world, she runs her own theatre company, is part of the band called Future Wife, and has turned her attention to film and television, unwilling to be contained either by the expectations of others or, indeed, by her own. Hers is a restless talent.