

T:BA REVIEW: Young Jean Lee's The Shipment

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~Rebecca Robinson

It's hard to think of a piece of theater more relevant to Portland than Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment*. On the surface, this may seem strange, given that it is a show by a Korean-American woman centered on cultural depictions and experiences of African Americans, a group which makes up just 7 percent of the Rose City's population.



This fact, however, is exactly why Lee's sharp and at times uncomfortably perceptive satire speaks so strongly to the issue of race in America, and particularly in predominantly white areas like Portland, where racial diversity is more of a concept than a reality.

There was palpable tension in the Portland Center Stage Gerding Theater Sunday night, as a black comedian delivered a standup routine – the first of several vaudeville-style vignettes – that careened from one “white people” smackdown to another. The overwhelmingly white audience laughed wholeheartedly at first, but as the monologue progressed, becoming ever more scathing and sexual, the laughter became more scattered, the silences more frequent, the confusion – “should I be amused or offended, and what does my reaction say about me?” – more evident.

Watching the audience squirm uncomfortably in their seats as the comedian made a mockery of whites' professed colorblindness was delicious; as he railed on about whites feeling oppressed when “called out on their bulls—t,” some audience members appeared baffled, as if just realizing that behavior they thought tolerant was actually anything but. It's a testament to the power of the piece that it managed to tap so personally into Portland's intense racial self-consciousness.

The next two skits in Lee's show were far less confrontational, though still affecting and exquisitely acted by the all-black cast. One piece depicted the life of a rap star – drugs, prison, success, more drugs, sex and eventual ruin – in a simultaneously hilarious and harrowing mix of story and song (including a knockout a capella rendition of Modest Mouse's “Dark Center of the Universe”). The concluding skit, a parlor-style party gone haywire, was the least straightforward but perhaps the most satisfying, thanks to some wry choices (white stagehands meticulously arranging props for the black cast, for one) and a devastating twist revealed by Lee in the scene's final seconds (though the aforementioned wry choices let perceptive viewers in on the joke early on).

Lee's keen powers of perception on race and human interaction elevate the show beyond mere caricature to something much more profound and memorable, and three pieces which could have been disparate are effortlessly united through tone and theme. The actors brought Lee's material to life with a rare mix of passion and subtlety that was both a joy and a wonder to behold.

The capacity crowd at the Gerding seemed electrified and a bit shaken as they exited the theater. And why not? They had just witnessed a great, pull-no-punches piece of theater which spoke directly to their city's multicultural ambivalence: celebratory in rhetoric, tentative in practice. *The Shipment* challenged Portlanders to reconsider their colorblindness, and suggested that perhaps acknowledging, not avoiding, our differences is a truer embodiment of diversity.

(photo by Sarah Krohlwich)