YOUNG JEAN LEE’S THEATER COMPANY
UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW
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ON THE BOARDS

TABLE OF CONTENTS
Credits........................................2
Curator’s Note..............................3
Beginner’s Guide..........................4
A brief introduction to Lee’s work
Bios...........................................5
Interview....................................7
Holly Arsenault with Young Jean Lee

ON THE BOARDS
photos by Blaine Davis and Julieta Cervantes
CREDITS

Conceived and directed by Young Jean Lee, in collaboration with Faye Driscoll and Morgan Gould and the original performers

Featuring Becca Blackwell, Amelia Zirin-Brown (aka Lady Rizo), Hilary Clark, Katy Pyle, Malinda Ray Allen and Desiree Burch

Produced by Aaron Rosenblum

Scenic Design David Evans Morris
Lighting Design Raquel Davis
Sound Design Chris Giarmo and Jamie McElhinney
Projection Design Leah Gelpe

Original Cast included Becca Blackwell, World Famous *BOB*, Amelia Zirin-Brown (aka Lady Rizo), Hilary Clark, Katy Pyle, and Regina Rocke
Dramaturgy Mike Farry
Production Supervisor Sunny Stapleton

Associate Lighting Designer Ryan Seelig
Associate Video Designer Bart Cortright
Assistant Set Designer Kate Foster

UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW was commissioned by the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN), and is a co-production of the Walker Art Center, Steirischer Herbst (Graz), Kunstenfestivaldesartes (Brussels), the Spalding Gray Award (Performance Space 122 New York, Warhol Museum Pittsburgh, On the Boards Seattle), and Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company. Originally developed in association with Caleb Hammons. Funding support provided by the MAP Fund, a program of Creative Capital supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the Fox/ Samuels Foundation, the MAP/Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Creative Explorations Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. Residency support from The Park Avenue Armory, New Museum, Mount Tremper Arts, and the Baryshnikov Arts Center.

UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW premiered at the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN) on January 5, 2012.

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THE PAUL G. ALLEN FAMILY FOUNDATION
CURATOR’S NOTE

Coming soon!
BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO YOUNG JEAN LEE

1. Young Jean Lee is . . . a total badass. She has been named one of the 25 people who will shape American theater in the next 25 years by *American Theater* magazine and “one of the best experimental playwrights in America” by David Cote in Time Out New York. Lee has also been awarded a place amongst the inaugural class of Dorris Duke Performing Artists (amongst the likes of Richard Maxwell, Ralph Lemon, Marc Bamuthi Joseph and Liz LeCompte (The Wooster Group)) and was the recipient of the 2011 Spaulding Gray Award. She is really good at her job.

2. It’s a known fact that the first question Young Jean Lee asks herself when starting a new play is, “What’s the last show in the world I would ever want to make?” And then she forces herself to write it. This approach frequently leads Young Jean into controversial territory—if there was a list of squeamish subjects one could write plays about, Young Jean would be systematically checking items off of it. She has written plays about being Korean (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*), being African American (*The Shipment*, which showed at On the Boards in 2009), religion (*Church*), death (*We’re Gonna Die*), and now feminism (*UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW*). One reason why she is considered one of the best experimental playwrights in America is because she approaches these subjects with the intelligence, honesty and humor capable of avoiding polemic or reductive work.

3. Why does Young Jean start thinking about all of her plays by challenging herself to write the last play she would ever want to make? It has to do with how she began playwriting in the first place. Young Jean was actually a PhD candidate studying Shakespeare at Berkley (read: a very smart lady). While working on her dissertation, with the help of a therapist, Young Jean discovered she sincerely hated academia and was studying Shakespeare because she, unknown to herself until then, wanted to be a playwright. In the bravest and most terrifying decision she had ever made in her previously ‘risk adverse’ life, Lee quit grad school, enrolled in a playwriting MFA program and moved to New York to become a playwright. This rift, she claims, rewired her brain: the best thing she’d ever done was also the scariest thing. Ever since, she has challenged herself to be a creative risk taker.

4. Part of the experimental nature of Young Jean Lee’s work is its collaborative process. She never has a script in hand when she casts for her plays so she never has specific characters to cast for. Instead, she simply chooses people who are charismatic and intelligent, claiming it’s immediately obvious who will be cast. She then works with the cast and the crew to develop a script. Commenting on her process in an interview with Sara Benson, the artistic director of the SoHo Rep, Young Jean Lee discloses that her, “strategy for making theater is just to pick really impossible things that I can’t do by myself and surround myself with geniuses and then just have us all sort of beat our brains out.” This includes directors, dramaturges, choreographers, and performers.

5. *UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW* deals with feminism—a sort of neon word: it is divisive, it holds a lot of weight, it is frequently avoided, and it is constantly being redefined. Interestingly to me, Lee talks about how in the first month or so of rehearsals, the cast and crew would just sit in a circle and have long discussions about feminism . . . talking about it until, I guess, no words were left—seeing as this is a show without dialogue. She worked extremely closely with New York choreographer Faye Driscoll on this movement-heavy piece, but still calls it theater because, Lee explains, it is in dialogue with peers as a piece of theater, but wouldn’t be as a piece of dance. It will be interesting to see what can be said about feminism without any words and how this piece could speak to the feminist movement that currently, feels at once necessary and hard to talk about.
Young Jean Lee is an OBIE award-winning playwright and director who has been called “the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation” by the New York Times and “one of the best experimental playwrights in America” by Time Out New York. She has written and directed nine shows in New York with Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company and toured her work to over twenty cities around the world. Her plays have been published by Theatre Communications Group (Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays, The Shipment and Lear) and by Samuel French (Three Plays by Young Jean Lee). She is currently under commission from Plan B/Paramount Pictures, Lincoln Center Theater, Playwrights Horizons, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She is a member of New Dramatists and 13P and has an MFA from Mac Wellman’s playwriting program at Brooklyn College. She has received grants from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Creative Capital, NYFA, NEA, NYSCA, the Jerome Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, and the Rockefeller MAP Foundation. She is also the recipient of two OBIE awards, the Festival Prize of the Zuercher Theater Spektakel, a 2010 Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a 2011 Guggenheim Fellowship and a 2012 Doris Duke Artist Award.

Becca Blackwell is a NYC performer known for pushing gender boundaries in their work. Recently worked with Half Straddle, Jennifer Miller’s Circus Amok, Theater of the Two-Headed Calf, Sharon Hayes, Michelle Handelman, and Erin Markey. They are also regulars on the web series Jack in A Box and Gay’s Anatomy.

Amelia Zirin-Brown aka Lady Rizo is a ‘Cabaret Superstar’ (New York Magazine), comedienne and chanteuse. She has been in residence with Joe’s Pub with her sold out monthly show for over two years and just premiered her Public Theatre Commission Lady Rizo: Ordained as part of the New York Voices Series in November. As a recording artist, she has collaborated on albums with Moby and Yo Yo Ma; and in 2010 won her first Grammy on an album with the acclaimed cellist. She is the Mistress of Ceremonies for current hotspot The Darby, a decadent modern supperclub in the West Village. Theatre credits include Tony Award winner Bartlett Sher’s Cymbeline (Intiman), Taylor Mac’s The Lily’s Revenge (HERE), as well as performing and co-composing the score for Los Angeles directed by Adam Rapp (The Flea.)

Hilary Clark has been dancing, performing, teaching and making dances in New York since 1998, when she graduated with a BFA in Modern Dance and Performance. In 2008, Clark was honored with a Bessie Award, or New York Dance and Performance Award, for her body of work as a performer with Tere O’Connor, Luciana Achugar and Fiona Marcotty. Clark has also danced with Jon Kinzel, Larissa Velez, and Greg Zuccollo, among others. Clark is presently working with Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People on And Lose The Name Of Action, which premieres in September 2012. Clark’s own work has been shown at Dixon Place, AUNTS, CATCH, the Painted Bride (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Art Space (Hartford, CT), The Kitchen in December 2008, as a part of Dance and Process, as well as at Dance Theater Workshop, where Clark was a 2008-2009 Fresh Tracks Artist, performing in collaboration with Larissa Velez, and in 2010-2011 for a Studio Series creative residency. She is thrilled to be a part of The Young Jean Lee Theater Company.

Katy Pyle is a performer and creator of performance currently developing and disseminating a new technique, Ballez. The first Ballez, The Firebird, premieres this May at Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church. Her performance works have been presented at many downtown venues, including The Bushwick Starr, PS 122, Dance Theater Workshop, Dixon Place, and La Mama. Her work as a performer/collaborator in projects by artists including Faye Driscoll, John Jasperse, Karinne Keithley, Jennifer Monson, and Katie Workum has taken her to Europe and around America, and she’s excited to be on the road with the Feminists again.

cargocollective.com/katypyle

Desiree Burch is a writer, comedian and actress, best known for her full-length solo shows—like Tar Baby and 52 Man Pickup— which have toured NY, L.A., San Francisco, Seattle, New Orleans, London,
Amsterdam and Edinburgh. Her stand-up, emcee and solo work have been featured at various NYC venues, including Carolines, Gotham, Joe’s Pub, Bowery Ballroom, 59E59, Ars Nova, LaMama, PS. 122, Dixon Place, the New Museum, and the Greene Space, as well as on VH1, MTV, Comedy Central, NBC and E4. She is a New York Neo-Futurist, an arts educator (American Place Theater), public speaker (TEDx), and a graduate of Yale University.

desireeburch.com

Malinda Ray Allen is a performer and bodyworker living in Brooklyn, New York. Her work has been shown at Dance Theater Workshop, Chez Bushwick, Dixon Place, PS 122, the New Museum, Movement Research at Judson Church, and the Director’s Lab at Lincoln Center, Dance New Amsterdam, and the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. Her current project is The Part of Me In You, a solo dance-essay about the neuroscience of romantic love.
INTERVIEW
with Holly Arsenault and Young Jean Lee

HA: Hi Young Jean.
YJL: Hi!

HA: I’m Holly Arsenault, thanks for taking the time to talk to me today.
YJL: Of course.

HA: Where are you speaking to us from?
YJL: I’m in Providence, Rhode Island

HA: What are you doing there?
YJL: I am work shopping my latest play which is called Straight White Men and I’m doing it with Brown undergraduates.

HA: Alright, Cool. My first questions, like I said, I learned a lot about you this weekend, there are a couple of holes in your bio that I wanted to fill in. I know that you grew up in Pullman, Washington. I did some of my growing up in Spokane and my mom’s parents are actually from rural Idaho so I feel like have a little bit of an idea of where that is and what that’s all about. So I’m curious, given that you grew up in Pullman, what was your first exposure to theater.

YJL: There was a little summer stock thing called the Summer Palace and I started going to plays there at a pretty young age.

HA: Alright, did you decide early on that was something you were excited about and wanted to be involved with or did that come later?
YJL: I was definitely super excited about it; it never occurred to me that it was something I could really be involved with, until I was almost thirty. But I loved it, I was so into it.

HA: Then I know you went to school at UC Berkeley, and then you went to grad school and then you left grad school. And what happened there? What was that trajectory like? What sucked you out of grad school and into New York? You went straight from Berkeley to New York City, right?
YJL: Yeah, well I was so miserable. I was just so miserable in academia, and I went to see a therapist and I just sort of discovered over the course of therapy that the reason why I was so miserable was because I hated every single aspect of academia. I was studying Shakespeare and the only reason why I was studying Shakespeare was because I secretly wanted to be a playwright, I mean, I loved Shakespeare, but it was about my repressed desire to be an artist, and so that kind of came out through therapy and I just decided to move to New York and try.

HA: So did you just move to New York and start writing plays? I know that The Appeal premiered at SoHo Rep in 2004 and everything that I’ve read about you sort of refers to that as your first play, but was it literally your first play?
YJL: No, my first play was in 2003 at the Ontological Hysterics Theater. It was kind of like a shorter play, but I moved to New York in 2002.

HA: Reading your work and reading what people have written about you and listening to some interviews, I kept getting struck over, and over and over again by this willingness to confront and embrace the possibility of failure as like a big key to what makes your work work. You have this earned reputation for fearlessness that’s really born out of this creative relationship with fear. I was wondering if you could just reflect on that a little bit, I’m curious where that comes from.
YJL: I was an only child, I grew up in a small town, I have really overprotective parents, and I think I grew up really risk adverse. The reason why, people ask me you know, how could you stay for 10 years doing something that you hated, and I’m always like, well I was just too afraid to deviate from the path. And I think being that afraid of change and then making such a violent break, you know, because to drop out of grad school after 6 years, that’s a lot. So I think the violence of that break kind of changed my wiring a little bit, like it changed something in my brain because it was like, the best thing I’d ever done in my entire life. And the best thing I’d ever done in my entire life was the craziest thing I’d ever done in my entire life. So I think that just started this process of rewiring where I started to
associate risk with good things. And when I started writing, I was really hindered by my risk adverse tendencies so I had to find different ways to get myself to do crazier and crazier things. But the one thing that’s different is that, I wasn’t born brave, but I was born incredibly aggressive, it’s weird . . . on my father’s side of the family, it’s almost all men and it’s kind of this legend of family lore, that there are very few women born into my father’s side of the family, and the women who are born are these fierce, unbelievably tough, fierce, scary women. Or, to put in more nicely, very powerful women, and I definitely fit into that category in the sense of being very—it’s weird—even though I’m so risk adverse, I’m guess I’m not so afraid of what people are going to think of me, you know, like, I care, obviously if I do something and people hate me for it, I care about that, it’s not that I don’t care what people think of me, it’s just that I’m not afraid of what people are going to think about me. I’ll feel terrible if people think badly of me, but in advance, I won’t be worried about that, I’ll just sort of plunge into stuff. And also, growing up Asian in this small white town opened me up to a lot of humiliation and so I think I got kind of used to that from a young age, so I’m not as scared of it as most people are.

HA: It’s so funny that you’re saying that because, I told you at the beginning that I’ve written one play, it just premiered, and that was great, and what happened with that was that I had been wanting to write something for a really long time, I’m 33, and I never really got around to it while I was in school, and I never really got around to it after school, and it finally got to this place where I was like, ok, if what I have to do to be an artist is just completely embarrass myself and just accept that that might happen and that’s part of it, then that’s what I’m going to do. And I feel like I drew some courage from having seen your work—not that your work is embarrassing to you in any way, that’s not what I’m trying to imply, but you can feel what you’re talking about, this lack of fear of utter humiliation, which I feel like is sort of at the core of—I’m starting to feel like it’s at the heart of all really good art is that the artist is willing to expose themselves to complete humiliation.

YJL: Yeah, I think that’s true, I think that self-consciousness and self-protectiveness is really bad for art. And I would say that one of the major determinants for success in anything is a willingness to fail completely.

HA: Yeah, I absolutely agree. So I want to go back to something you said, given that your parents were so protective of you and yet there is this tradition or family lore of prizing aggressiveness. I’m curious about how your parents respond to your work.

YJL: Well my father passed away a few years ago, but he liked it, he got it, and my mom is a—my parents are both evangelical Christians, and my mom is super religious so I think all of the cursing and the sex talk and stuff really freaks her out. But she really liked my show Church.

HA: Oh good! I read it last night and was kind of eviscerated by it, in a great way. So thank you. I’m still working it out. I wish I could see it, are you touring Church right now?

YJL: No, actually Church is just getting produced by other theaters.

HA: Gotcha. So I wanted to ask you, I work with teenagers who are interested in arts criticism. And one of the things that we’ve been talking about a lot—I work with a group this year who has agreed to see everything at On the Boards’ season—and we get together on Saturdays after and just talk about it and that’s the whole thing. It’s totally awesome. One of the big topics of discussion is what is contemporary art or experimental art and I’ve heard you very fluidly describe your work as experimental theater, it seems like that’s a descriptor you feel very comfortable with, so I’m just curious how you define experimental theater.

YJL: I think for me it’s just like a marketing term, I don’t think it has a ton of—it’s not a very concrete thing. I call my theater experimental theater when it suits me to and if it doesn’t then I would call it something else. You know there are things associated with the words experimental theater like nonlinear prop structure, a sort of absurdist bent, and there are certain tropes that are fairly familiar in experimental theater. But my recent shows haven’t really had those things and a lot of people have said, you know, she doesn’t make experimental theater anymore. But every show for me is an experiment so I continue to call it experimental. The experiment now is a totally naturalistic straight play, that’s what I’m working on now at Brown, and for me that’s experimental theater but it’s not going to look like experimental theater.

HA: Right, part of my reasoning in asking this question was that I heard you describe this play that way and I was wondering if you’re not messing with form how do you know it’s still experimental . . . but you just answered my
question.

So, *UNTITLED FEMINIST SHOW* is the show that is coming to On the Boards in April. I heard you talking with Michele Steinwald at the Walker Center about it right after opening; I think it was the day after opening night that you gave that interview. So I’m curious if, I know you have toured it a bit in Europe now, I’m curious if the show has evolved at all, do your shows continue to change while you’re on the road?

**YJL:** No, not really. I mean, when new performers come in that will change the show, but in terms of actually changing choreography, we don’t really do that.

**HA:** Have you been touring with it or are they off without you because you’re working on this other thing?

**YJL:** I have been touring with it up until now but this spring since I’m at Brown and I can’t leave they’re going to be touring it without me.

**HA:** So I’m curious about what your experience has been like bringing the shows to other places, particularly because the show has no words in it, and I know you’ve been touring in some places where, perhaps, where you have non-English-speaking audience which I assume is not a new experience for you, but maybe a new experience bringing a show like this that doesn’t rely on language to an audience like that, I’m just wondering if you could reflect on that a little bit.

**YJL:** I would say because the show doesn’t have words there’s even less of a difference from audience to audience. I have not noticed huge cultural differences from place to place in terms of response; you know it’s a pretty straightforward show in terms of what it is. People are either going to be like, that was fun, or they’ll say, that wasn’t experimental enough, that wasn’t feminist enough.

**HA:** I know that you made this show as you make a lot of your shows, in collaboration with the performers, and the choreographer and your associate director, over a period of how long did you all work on it?

**YJL:** God, it feels like two years.

**HA:** So in your interview with Michele Steinwald you said that when you’re casting your shows you look for people who are good talkers, for people who are good at unpacking ideas and that that’s something they’re interested in being a part of. What other qualities do you look for in collaborators and how do you know when you’ve found them in the casting process?

**YJL:** Oh, it’s really easy. It’s like the number one quality is charisma. So it’s like, since I audition people without a script, we’re not looking for like a type. There’s no script when they come in so we’re just looking purely for charisma and intelligence and it’s always clear who we’re going to cast. It’s like, somebody will walk in the room and we will all unanimously be like, yes, that’s the person. You know some people have that “it” factor and it’s kind of undeniable and those are the kind of people I tend to work with.

**HA:** I heard you say that when you see your shows you tend to sit in the middle of the audience and try to experience everything that is going on around you. I found that to be amazing and shocking. I just closed the premiere of my show and I literally sat in the back row every night drinking whiskey, and then I would go hide at intermission so that I didn’t have to actually interact with anybody, and it’s just incredible to me that you’re actually able to just sit amongst the audience, presumably not all of them realize they’re sitting near you, and I just wonder what that experience is like for you and what you get out of it and if it’s difficult or not difficult or . . .

**YJL:** Well you know, I feel like it’s always pretty harrowing, but I feel like I learn so much about the show that way. I sort of learn how the show works because the audience is like this living, breathing animal, and I feel like if I’m sitting right out there with them I can sort of see what’s happening to people, what’s happening in the room, how the dynamic between the audience and the actors work. And I give notes every show so you know that’s why I do it, so I can keep making little tiny adjustments.

**HA:** It’s well known that you start with the challenge to yourself to make the play that you would never want to make. It feels like that might be as much
about avoiding something as it is about seeking something.

YJL: It’s trying to avoiding the fear of caring about what other people are going to think. Because if you set out to make something where you know people are going to be against you then it sort of takes that away, it’s not a question anymore. It’s like, oh yeah, they’re going to be resistant.

HA: Are you still working on this film with Plan B Pictures?

YJL: Oh that, that film was funded by Paramount. And we, both Plan B and I, came to the conclusion that it’s not in me to write a Hollywood movie of that kind and that if I’m going to do a project with them, it should be a more indie type of project. So I just submitted a TV pilot idea to them where I didn’t worry about commercial considerations. So that was like a really good lesson, they basically just paid me to learn how to write a screenplay and also to learn that I’m not Hollywood material. I don’t know if that’s the right way of putting it; actually it’s not about Hollywood versus non-Hollywood, it’s about me making something worrying about commercial things versus me just making something I want to make.