American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

"FULFILL YOUR OBLIGATIONS TO YOURSELF AESTHETICALLY" YOUNG JEAN LEE ON EXPERIMENTAL THEATER AND TEACHING PLAYWRITING

An interview with Young Jean Lee by Julie Vatain-Corfdir

An outstanding figure in contemporary experimental theater, Young Jean Lee is a subversive and intrepid playwright as well as a director, filmmaker and performer. Among other plays, she is the author of Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven *(first presented at the HERE Arts Center, 2006),* The Shipment *(The Kitchen, 2009),* We're Gonna Die *(Joe's Pub and Lincoln Center, 2011) and* Untitled Feminist Show *(Baryshnikov Arts Center, 2011). With Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, she toured her work across the US and in venues around the world—including in Paris, Berlin, Zagreb, Seoul or Sidney. In 2018, she became the first Asian-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway with* Straight White Men. *Young Jean Lee is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two OBIE Awards, a Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a PEN Literary Award and the 2019 Windham-Campbell Prize in Drama. She has edited the* New Downtown Now *anthology of plays with Mac Wellman. She is also an Associate Professor of Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University, and gave a Zoom playwriting workshop to encourage people to start writing full-length plays during the 2020 quarantine.*

This conversation took place at Stanford University on May 2nd, 2019.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It's wonderful to be able to meet with you, here at Stanford TAPS. Since we're on campus, I'd like to start by asking about your classes. What is your approach to teaching playwriting?

Young Jean Lee. – I use a version of the method I was taught in my MFA program. I studied with the wonderful Mac Wellman at Brooklyn College, where he would tailor the instructions to each student individually. For instance, I was coming out of six years of grad school studying Shakespeare, and I had read so much at that point that I read almost nothing during the MFA, whereas other students in the program were reading constantly. He gave each of us what we needed; different assignments based on what types of things we were writing. In my classes, I really push that method to the extreme, where the students are basically coming up with their own rules, assignments and artistic goals—and then I hold them to that.

They can change the goals if they wish, but they are held very strictly to whatever guidelines they set. And they're graded on how well they fulfil their own obligations to themselves aesthetically.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – So the idea is to get them to fully commit to their own writing, rather than teach them how to write a play. I've always wondered about this, since France doesn't have a tradition of postgraduate writing programs, though creative-writing classes are on the rise.

Young Jean Lee. – Well, France is on to something in some ways. I don't think playwriting can really be taught, in the sense that you can't say, "this is how you write the first act" or "this is how you structure the second act" in any kind of universal way. You can't provide a formula that works for everyone. But what you can provide is what the professional world provides, which is basically—a deadline that forces you to write. I myself would probably not write anything if I didn't have productions and rehearsals scheduled, or grants to apply for. The whole system of the business of playwriting forces you to keep generating material. In these classes, I'm setting up, as closely as possible, what the professional world would demand from the students, which is that they generate work on a schedule. And I encourage them to be very mindful, at all times, of what they want to do.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Do they apply to your class with a specific project?

Young Jean Lee. – No, they apply with a writing sample. Once they're accepted, my agenda is very clear: I want my students writing full-length plays, and I want them to get them produced. I have students who have taken four quarters in a row with me working on the same play, just trying to get it to the level where it can get produced.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – How many students do you take?

Young Jean Lee. – 10-11 is my maximum, although the ideal would be around 5-6.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – I'm guessing small numbers are more ideal because of how in-depth and detailed the conversation is?

Young Jean Lee. – Yes, and there's a lot of reading out loud and group feedback. One of the biggest parts of the class, in fact, is learning how to give useful feedback, and how to receive feedback, processing it in a helpful way. The feedback is very much driven by the writer, though. We'll read the play out loud, and the writer will ask us questions, and we'll answer them. One of the worst things you can do as a playwriting instructor, I think, is to set yourself up as the expert. I tell my students: "If you look at 90% of the world's greatest plays, I probably don't like them. So the chance that I won't like your play is pretty high. And the idea that you would be penalized for writing something I didn't like is ridiculous." Learning how to write to one random person's taste is not a useful thing. Besides, when we're giving feedback, the other

students shoot me down all the time! I'll say something, and they'll disagree, and I'll say: "Okay, I see it, I concede." And when the students see me concede, they learn to concede when it's their turn, so it's a healthy process.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It sounds like the framework of the class is both liberating and demanding.

Young Jean Lee. – It's kind of like a wolf in sheep's clothing. It looks all very free and liberal and you-guided...but, basically, they're being forced to write!

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Which is a virtue of the program, I'm sure! And when it comes to your own creative work, I'd like to hear about your writing processes and how connected they are to performance. First of all, how do you define yourself? Playwright? Performance-maker?

Young Jean Lee. – Playwright. Director. Filmmaker.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – In that order?

Young Jean Lee. – Right now, yes! I tend to write and direct at the same time. So I'll start with a bunch of conversations with the cast, and then I'll go home, and write, and bring it in. Then we'll have more conversations. Sometimes I'll even leave the room while my associate director works on staging, just to rewrite something before bringing it back in. For the stand-up act in *The Shipment*, for instance, I put a tape recorder in the middle of the room and asked them all to say what they were angry about; then I turned that into the stand-up act. There's also a lot of stuff that gets tweaked by the actors on their feet.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – At the risk of asking the obvious question: is being a woman a crucial factor, aesthetically and politically, in how you think about playwriting?

Young Jean Lee. – You know, it never was when I was doing downtown theater. It is much more now that I've started working on Broadway. I've been spoiled. For fifteen years, I never had to worry about that stuff. Even in 2002, when I started, there was a real demand for diversity, people were interested in an Asian female writer, so I was encouraged, it was truly welcoming. It's a very different vibe on Broadway. The more money is involved, the less diversity matters: that's sort of been my experience. Everybody's a white guy.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Which makes it all the more intriguing and ironic that your Broadway *début* should be a play about straight white men, framed by transgender people leading the audience through the show! Would you say there's room for optimism in the theater, though?

Young Jean Lee. – Definitely. Theater off-Broadway is championing women of color like never before, and women and people of color are starting to get forced on to Broadway. There are lots of talented playwrights right now.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Do you feel something has shifted, in recent years, in the representation of women on stage? Stephanie Hunt, who teaches acting here, was telling me that students are obsessively giving scenes the Bechdel test.

Young Jean Lee. –That's right; and the Bechdel test is such a pathetic measure! Which is the whole point, in fact. In terms of the representation of women, I think there's stuff that you just can't get away with anymore. If you have a woman in your play and she doesn't have any complexity, that would be noticed today. Whereas ten years ago, no way.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – One of the concepts I'm researching is the notion of resilience in the work of contemporary female playwrights. Does that speak to you?

Young Jean Lee. – Oh, yes! Resilience is the key. Early in my career, when I was touring with my company, I asked Tim Etchells, of Forced Entertainment: "How does my company get to be like yours?" And he told me: "You just have to survive. Everybody quits. We just stayed and stayed." And by surviving, you achieve a certain status.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – This reminds me of something your colleague and fellow playwright Amy Freed said when I met her. I was marveling at how many young female playwrights there were in the US today, and she said "Yes, but who is still a playwright in their sixties?"

Young Jean Lee. – Absolutely. And I've closed down my company, right? Resilience is the key, but it definitely becomes harder the older you get.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Why did you choose to close down your company?

Young Jean Lee. – Because it meant that I would never be able to do anything else, like teach or make a movie. When you have a company, you have to support a full-time staff, so you have to constantly be producing enough that they can eat, and feed their families. And since the US doesn't really care about experimental theater, it means all the money has to come from Europe, so you have to tour constantly. That just wasn't a sustainable model for me, since touring doesn't leave me enough room for making anything new creatively.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Since you mention touring, can I ask about your experience of European audiences? In Paris in particular, perhaps, since I know you took several shows to the Festival d'Automne.

Young Jean Lee. – The Paris audience is very similar to the New York audience—and these audiences are not that fun! They're really undiverse. Everybody's this college-educated, artistic-elite person, and people are very disconnected from the child-like side of themselves that can just, you know, go for a ride. Paris and New York are the worst cities for disconnect between yourself and your sense of childlike wonder. Everybody's just looking for shock value, for something to make them feel like

they're watching something new. But it's actually very very easy to do that. That's what I figured out after fifteen years in experimental theater—it's the easiest thing in the world to have the most talked-about show in town! You just bring a puppy on stage, have somebody come up with a meat cleaver and chop the puppy in half; then your show will be talked about all through the world. I became disenchanted with that audience because I realized how easy it was to impress them. Just do something aggressive, something hostile, something shocking and controversial. There's not a lot of nuance there. People are so jaded; it's like drug-addicts who need bigger and bigger dosages of the drug, to the point where you're just mainlining shock value to the audience.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Your (incredibly helpful) archive website, the Young Jean Lee's Theater Company Archive, presents the shows your company toured with. One of the productions I'm most curious about is *Untitled Feminist Show*, which features performers engaging with the audience through dance and mime and sheer joyful energy, without any clothes or any words. Could you tell me how the show developed?

Young Jean Lee. – Well, Dove soap had an ad campaign, many years ago, celebrating "real women". Basically, "real women" meant women who were not thin models, and they were there, lined up in mom jeans, and I was like: "This does not work. They're saying real women are awesome but they're not presenting them in any kind of an awesome way." When you see an ad, you expect some kind of fabulousness to be happening, you know. So the challenge I set for myself was to find these different people who didn't look like traditional models, who would be so charismatic, even without any clothes or hair-styling or makeup or anything, that they could just completely charm and dominate a room. That's basically the show. It's six performers of different races and sizes, either assigned female at birth or transgender, who are stars of their fields. It was a nightmare to work with them, because everybody is an alpha! There were six performers, me, an associate director and a choreographer: that's nine alpha people in a room, trying to collaborate. It's like working with nine directors! Though the performers were so much stronger and fiercer than us. Which is what I chose them for. They could command a room with six hundred people in it, so of course they could completely overshadow me and my team! It was such an amazing experience: they would just be on stage naked, moving to music, and they would dominate. So powerful. You were asking about audiences in Europe, well: they went bananas over them—in Berlin in particular, people went insane, they were screaming during the show. It was like a rock show.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Sounds like Berlin was the place to be! You've taken all these shows abroad—do you think of your voice as inherently American?

Young Jean Lee. – Yes, I think so.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – And is that something that informs the way you write theater?

Young Jean Lee. – Not consciously in any way, but I feel especially American just because, as an immigrant, I tried so hard to assimilate. I'm probably more American than non-immigrant Americans, in the sense that I've absorbed stuff very effortfully all my life.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. –As a final question, I'd like to ask whether you're working on a play at the moment?

Young Jean Lee. – I am; I'm working on a play about class, which is very difficult to do in the US because we don't have the vocabulary for speaking about class. People don't know the identifiers for what constitutes middle class, or upper middle class, or rich. The good part about it is it allows for class mobility (although our government doesn't help with that). But also, people don't always know where they are, or what to aspire to. And when it's unspoken, power can exert itself much more effectively.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It sounds quite intricate and relevant—I look forward to discovering the play. In the meantime, all that remains is for me to thank you for sharing your experience and your keen insights on experimental theater, as well as teaching. It's been enlightening!

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Abstract

In this interview, playwright, director and playwriting professor Young Jean Lee discusses her approach to writing and teaching, and reflects on some of her experiences touring and presenting her plays. Her views on downtown theater, diversity, audience reception and artistic resilience gradually outline the portrait of a leading force of the experimental theater scene.

Key words

Young Jean Lee; experimental theater; playwriting; teaching; diversity; resilience; audience reception; *Untitled Feminist Show*; nudity

Résumé

Dans cet entretien, l'autrice, metteuse en scène et professeure d'écriture théâtrale Young Jean Lee révèle sa façon d'aborder l'écriture et l'enseignement, tout en revenant sur certaines expériences de tournée avec ses pièces. Ses points de vue sur le théâtre Off-Broadway, sur la diversité, la réception et la résilience de l'artiste brossent peu à peu le portrait d'une force vive et centrale de la scène expérimentale étasunienne.

Mots-clés

Young Jean Lee ; théâtre expérimental ; écriture théâtrale ; enseignement ; diversité ; resilience ; réception ; *Untitled Feminist Show* ; nudité

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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