
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Too Straight and White for Excitement?

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, December 2nd, 2015

The reputation that follows Young Jean Lee around is that of an artistic many-tentacled iconoclast — a singer, musician, filmmaker, documentarian, playwright and director addicted to experimentation. She has her own theatre company (the Young Jean Lee Theater Company) and her own band (Future Wife). She is the recipient of multiple awards, grants and fellowships, and is currently under commission from Lincoln Center and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Her *Straight White Men*, on stage at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City until Dec. 20, is the fruit of no fewer than six co-commissions from impressive mainstream sources (New York's Public Theater, the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, Center Theatre Group, the Steirischer Herbst Festival, the *Festival d'Automne* and *Les spectacles vivants du Centre Pompidou*, the last two located in Paris).

For someone who has not previously been exposed to the work of this eclectic and eccentric Korean-American artist, the expectation of something astonishing is unavoidably high, but *Straight White Men* at the Kirk Douglas is a surprise in the wrong direction. This play, written and directed by Lee, and created by her titular company, remains a doggedly Christmas-themed drawing-room drama with not quite enough drama — not to speak of, even in the mouths of the three disaffected straight white brothers who fill this room in the home of their let's-keep-smiling father. It's Christmas after all.

The brothers, in their 40s, are unmarried. Drew (Frank Boyd) is the youngest, a teacher. Jake (Gary Wilmes), the middle brother, is divorced with children, and Matt (Brian Slaten), the eldest and most promising, if we are to believe his brothers, is drifting — living back home with Dad, handling housekeeping chores and working a small temp job to pay off aging college loans.



l-r, Richard Riehle, Gary Wilmes, Frank Boyd and Brian Slaten in “*Straight White Men*.”

The reunited “boys” roughhouse as though they were still kids, revisiting childhood games; it’s easier than talking. Dad (Richard Riehle) is happy to watch, even if we detect in him a slight discomfort at having them all there. When one of the boys digs up a game of Privilege (invented by their mother and based on the Monopoly board), the point of the play is obliquely exposed.

It’s only on Christmas Eve, when Matt bursts into tears in the middle of a Chinese take-out dinner, that questions start to fly. But real existential talk takes a long time to hit center stage. It’s late in the game by then, mostly unpersuasive or too bludgeoning.

“You know, privileged white dickheads,” announces Jake the Revelator, “women and minorities may get to pretend they’re doing enough to make the world a better place just by getting ahead, but a white guy’s pretty hard-pressed to explain why the world needs *him* to succeed...” Bull’s eye?



l-r, Gary Wilmes, Frank Boyd (standing) and Brian Slaten in “*Straight White Men*.”

The actors are as evasively chirpy as they should be, including Dad who is mostly at sea trying to figure out what these grown sons are up to, yet preferring to see them only as the boys they once were.

The deliberately unremarkable family room, designed by David Evans Morris and lit by Christopher Kuhl, screams beige middle class; Enver Chakartash’s costumes are as ordinary as required, and the sound by Chris Giarmo and Jamie McElhinney is loud and clear. Loud, by the way, is the operative word for the deafening Hip Hop music that precedes the performance, its

rationale drowned out by sheer volume.

What really disappoints in all this, however, is the absence of anything we didn't know before.

Top image: l-r: Gary Wilmes, Frank Boyd, Richard Riehle and Brian Slaten in "Straight White Men at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. "

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Straight White Men*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

WHEN: Tuesdays–Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8 pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Dec. 20.

HOW: Tickets, \$25-\$55 (subject to change), available online at www.centertheatregroup.org or at 213.628.2772 or in person at the Ahmanson Theatre's Downtown Los Angeles Music Center box office or at the Kirk Douglas Theatre box office two hours prior to curtain.

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