

Young Jean Lee displays splendid irony in *Straight White Men*

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

The Australian, July 11, 2016



Hugh Parker in *Straight White Men*. Picture: Kate Pardey

Korean-American playwright Young Jean Lee's breakout hit, *Straight White Men*, has been - discombobulating audiences since making its debut at the New York Public Theatre in 2014, where it reportedly sent subscribers into a flurry of disapproval.

Now, first with the Melbourne Theatre Company version in April and then this new production, Australian audiences are also being invited to look at themselves, refracted through Lee's astutely satiric smoke and mirrors.

In her lively staging, director Nescha Jelk keeps close to Lee's playbook of shock tactics. Booming from the speakers, before the performance has even begun, is an amped-up playlist of sexually explicit female rappers, assembled by DJ and musical composer Busty Beatz. The point is simple enough: to displace any notion of audience familiarity and passenger comfort.

The other framing device is the stage hand in charge, in this case Birra-Gubba woman Alexis West, cheerily breaking through the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience, reminding them to switch off mobile phones, resetting the stage props and providing ubiquitous gender and ethnic contrast to the white male characters.

Inside these layers is the three-part dramatic comedy about three brothers and their widowed father nostalgically celebrating Christmas. It has a deliberate sitcom format (echoes of *My Three Sons* from the 60s, *Frazier* and many others) and Victoria Lamb's set, in 50 shades of beige, fawn, mushroom and taupe, is, as Lee prescribes, "hyper-naturalistic".

The strategy in *Straight White Men* is not to present the characters as obnoxious supremacists; in fact the sons grew up aware of their good fortune. Their mother even relabelled their Monopoly game, "Privilege", and changed the rules to reward the underdog and the socially altruistic.

Instead the play examines notions of success and wellbeing — for Jake, the affluent business owner; Drew, the academic and published writer; and for their father Don, a successful engineer — and highlights the crisis for Matt, the eldest son, the most promising and well-educated of all, who is without ambition and purpose. In splendid irony, Lee suggests that to forgo the destiny of the straight white male is to have no identity left.

For this funny, thoughtful, engaging production, Jelk has gathered an excellent cast. Chris Pitman's Jake is all buoyant confidence; Lucas Stibbard plays Drew, the self-regarding kid brother; and Roger Newcombe, the benign father oblivious to his assumptions about his own family. But it is Hugh Parker, outstanding as Matt, who brings us to the realisation that admitting what we don't know is the hardest thing of all.

Straight White Men

By Young Jean Lee. State Theatre Company of South Australia and La Boite. Space Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre. July 8

Tickets: \$28-\$72. Bookings: 131246 or online. Duration: 90 mins no interval. Until July 23. Then The Roundhouse, Brisbane, July 27 to August 13.