

It's a white, white world

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Musical comedy exploring race and the pressures to integrate is moving to Toronto after Kitchener run



Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille has a mandate to tell the stories of all Canadians and when they learned that Korean-Canadian singer/songwriter/ poet, Janice Jo Lee had written her first musical comedy about race, they were intrigued.

Parasram was so intrigued with Kitchener-based Lee's show, "Will You Be My Friend" that Lee was invited to bring the show to Toronto as part of Theatre Passe Muraille's 2018 fall series.

"She's a natural performer," said the theatre company's associate artistic director, Jiv Parasram. "Her (music) tour last year was a fantastic experience. She has a natural ability to engage the audience, get the audience on side."

The show, produced by Green Light Arts in Kitchener, is on at the Registry Theatre until May 20.

Lee, who describes herself as a "hard femme queer radical," has long been known as a politically active artist. The one-woman show is her first foray into performing as an actor.

Having a full stage and a captive audience for 85 minutes means she can explore race issues beyond the confines of just writing a song. The play is multilayered. She enters the stage in a lab coat, introduces herself as Dr. West, a scientist from Pluto who pronounces the word human as "hooman" and plans to help Lee erase her Korean-ness and fully integrate into white society.

Dr. West is performing a social experiment on Lee, who essentially plays herself. The play explores Lee's relationship with white people, particularly white men, hoping to help Lee assimilate more fully.

Her catch phrase "Become white! Make friends! Achieve success!" drives the scientist, though the experiment doesn't go well.

For most of the play, Lee rails against what she perceives as white supremacy, white privilege, and the Caucasian as equals. Without doubt, Lee is talented and as well as being a good singer and multiinstrumentalist, she has some acting chops. She's also funny and her comic ability is nuanced and surprising.

Though Lee's diatribe about white folks does not reveal anything new in terms of conversations about race, her monologue at the end of the show is gripping.

It's this sort of unique and politically charged production that Passe Muraille was looking for.

The pioneering company was founded in 1968 — its name meaning "to pass through walls" — as a space for many voices, coming from all avenues of society, even if those voices make some audience members uncomfortable. It's about opening conversations, because without recognition of the issues, nothing will change.

"It's a chance to work with an artist that is politically driven, making it attractive to us. We don't do your typical plays," Parasram said.

"It's a musical comedy but it's not quite musical theatre," he said. "It's our genre."

He was also keen on Lee's message and knows how she feels.

"It's very interesting, it's a lived experience," said Parasram, who has Indo-Caribbean heritage. "I grew up in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, as a person of colour."

While it's not unusual for Toronto performances to come to Waterloo Region, the reverse is not as common and Parasram is hoping there will be future collaborations between his theatre and productions coming out of the region.

Parasram said Theatre Passe Muraille has worked with the Kitchener-based multi-cultural theatre company, MT Space, in the past and they are hoping to establish more connections with other theatre companies in the province.

"It's a way to collaborate with theatres across Ontario," he said. "It's reciprocal and it also shows that Toronto is not the centre of the universe."

For the artist it means more exposure and can open a whole new audience.

"Will You Be My Friend" is produced by Green Light Arts, a small company founded and run by Matt White and Carin Lowerison. The couple worked in Toronto before coming to Waterloo Region but maintained their connection to the Toronto theatre scene, including Parasram.

White directs this show and local singer/songwriter Joni NehRita arranged Lee's 15 original songs.