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COMPANY

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# Straight White Men

by Young Jean Lee



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la boite 46

Australia Government

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for the Arts

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ARTS SOUTH  
AUSTRALIA

**DURATION APPROX: 1 1/2 HOURS**

**SUITABLE FOR** *Years 11 - 12*

*DWS performance followed by a 20 - 30 min Q&A session*

**WARNINGS:**

Frequent coarse language

Loud & explicit rap music will be played pre-show, but will finish before the show begins

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# Cast & Creatives

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**Director**

Nescha Jelk

**Set & Costume Designer**

Victoria Lamb

**Lighting Designer**

Ben Hughes

**Composer**

Busty Beatz

**Accent Coach**

Simon Stollery

**Assistant Director**

Alexis West

**Fight Choreographer**

Duncan Graham

**CAST**

**Ed**

Roger Newcombe

**Jake**

Christ Pitman

**Drew**

Lucas Stibbard

**Matt**

Hugh Parker

**Stage Hand in Charge**

Alexis West

# Writer

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## YOUNG JEAN LEE

Is a writer, director, and filmmaker 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 ten shows in New York with Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, and toured her work to over thirty 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 *We're Gonna Die*) and by Samuel French (*Three Plays by Young Jean Lee*). She is currently under commission from Lincoln Center Theater and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and has written a screenplay commission for Plan B/Paramount Pictures.



Her first short film, *Here Come the Girls*, was presented at The Locarno International Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, and BAMcinemaFest. In 2013, she released her debut album, *We're Gonna Die*, with her band, Future Wife.

Lee is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two OBIE Awards, a Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a Doris Duke Artist Residency, a Foundation for Contemporary Arts grant, and the ZKB Patronage Prize of the Zürcher Theater Spektakel. She has also received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Rockefeller MAP Fund, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, Creative Capital, the Greenwall Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Arts Presenters/Ford Foundation Creative Capacity Grant, the Barbara Bell Cumming Foundation, and the New England Foundation for the Arts: National Theater Project Award.

## ABOUT YOUNG JEAN LEE

Lee's work proactively tackles identity politics and detonates cultural stereotypes - of Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, feminists and Caucasian men.

Young Jean Lee is a Korean-American playwright, director and filmmaker and Artistic Director of Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company. She was born in South Korea and moved to the United States when she was two years old, growing up in Washington. She attended college at UC Berkeley, majoring in English. After college she studied Shakespeare for six years before moving to New York to become a playwright.

Watch the following YouTube clip of Young Jean Lee talking about how she became a playwright.

I AM THEATRE: Young Jean Lee



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Drjx7m-cDBE>

## INTERVIEW WITH YOUNG JEAN LEE (Excerpts from interviews for *City Mag & State News*)

### **Could you describe the creative process behind *Straight White Men* (from conception to stage)?**

With all my shows, I cast the show first, and then write in collaboration with the performers, my artistic team, and workshop audiences. Normally we talk about stuff in rehearsal, and then, based on what we talk about, I go home and write. I come in with whatever I've written, and that's when everyone pitches in.

*Straight White Men* was a little different, because I didn't know how to write naturalistic dialogue. The actors were a huge part of writing this piece for me. Particularly important in the early writing stages was the ability to observe the speech and behavior patterns of straight white men.

I developed the script with the New York actors and students at Brown University, where I did the show's first workshop. I had both casts do a lot of improvisation that I built the skeleton around. Then I replaced the bulk of those improvises with my own dialogue. The actors helped me to make sure that the dialogue sounded natural and true to how they would speak. And as the characters evolved, the actors also helped to make sure each moment of dialogue continued to feel appropriate for their emotional trajectory over the course of the show. As always, the cast and I picked over every word of the script along with my dramaturg, Mike Farry, and my associate director, Emilyn Kowaleski. We were constantly asking, "*How can we make this line stronger?*" and we would all brainstorm. Throughout the entire process, because the actors hadn't spent a ton of time thinking about straight white male identity, we opened the conversation to other collaborators of diverse identities and backgrounds.

I had never really been at a venue like The Public before, where they have a more traditional theater going audience, one that is richer than I'm used to. I didn't want anyone from my audience to come to the play and feel like they didn't belong there. I tried to create a pre-show environment with music that would make someone like me feel comfortable and at home (loud hip-hop with raunchy lyrics by female artists). And I think it worked. Wherever we've done the show, some audience members, definitely not all, but a lot of them, have gotten very upset, because they didn't feel comfortable in that environment. They felt that the music was aggressive toward them, and when they tried to make it stop and no one would comply with their requests, they got extremely angry. It really highlighted the privilege of our audiences. And I added a transgender/queer non-straight-white-male character to be the announcer at the beginning of the show and to direct the transitions (which are lit) to show that a non-straight-white-male was running the show.

### **Can you talk me through the process of crafting the character of Matt?**

When the play was in its early stages, I was in a room full of students—women, people of color, and queer people - a very diverse room. And they started talking very harshly about straight white men. I said, "*Okay. Now I know all the things you don't like about straight white men. Why don't you give me a list of the things you wished straight white men would do that would make you hate them less?*" So they told me all these things, I wrote down the whole list, and then I wrote that character. And they all hated him because he was a loser. For example, everyone at the first workshop was like, "*I want a straight white man to sit down and shut up. I want him to take a back seat, to take a supporting role. I don't want him to be aggressive. I want him to be passive and sit there and take it. I want him to listen. I don't want him taking the head role or the biggest job or to be going after the biggest stuff. I want him in a supporting role to me.*" And nobody wanted to date that guy or be friends with that guy or hire that guy! Do we actually want that? No, not according to our value system. And that's what made me realize that, in spite of all these social-justice values, in our peer group, being a loser is worse than being an a\*\*hole. It kind of revealed our continuing investment in the patriarchy. So that became interesting to me in the play, and this character became a litmus test for the audience.

**You are known for writing about topics that make you feel uncomfortable. Are you able to explain this in context to *Straight White Men*?**

When starting a play, I ask myself, *"What's the last show in the world I would ever want to make?"* Then I force myself to make it. I do this because going out of my comfort zone compels me to challenge my assumptions and find value in unexpected places. I feel a lot of resistance towards the idea of identity-politics art, which is why I make so much of it. For *Straight White Men*, I asked myself, *"What's the last identity I would ever want to make an identity-politics show about?"*

I had never written a straight linear play before and had no interest in doing so, but I saw the traditional three-act structure as the "straight white male" of theatrical forms, or the form that has historically been used to present straight white male narratives as universal. And I thought it would be interesting to explore the limits of that form at the same time as its content - to bring the two together into one big nightmare.

**Your play could be considered a reaction to the often reductive depictions of people of colour in media today? In essence, are you turning the tables?**

No definitely not. Since we're dealing with naturalism, I based these characters on interviews with countless straight white men. At many points I objected, *"No, this seems too stereotypical"*, but I was assured that the depiction was spot-on for many men. There are definitely men who don't identify with these characters, but the majority of straight white male audience members have told me that they identified with the basic behaviours. People have only recently started thinking of straight white maleness as an identity the way they would think of Asian female-ness as an identity. For a long time, straight white men were always considered the "default human" or "universal hero". Now they are starting to get slapped with this label of "straight white man", and they don't like it. So they are just now starting to experience this thing that minorities have been experiencing for generations. I think I'm turning the tables in a way just by exploring this.

**Hilton Als said that your work is about bodies- about how we inhabit them and how the perceptions of that habitation are misshapen by external forces. How did you inhabit the body of the straight white man when writing the play?**

In some ways, I feel like I already do inhabit straight white male identity, since it's still dominant in our culture. Working on *Straight White Men* really prevented me from feeling totally self-righteous as an Asian female. I mean, *"I'm a woman of color! I'm not a person of privilege! I'm doing great things for the world just by totally selfishly pursuing what I want, because I'm making the world more diverse!"* A straight white guy can't do that. He can't say, *"I'm making the world a more diverse place by just doing whatever I want"*—there are expectations on him that require him to do something. So working on this show has sort of forced me to confront my own hypocrisy and challenge my sense of how committed I am to social justice—how big a hypocrite I am. To some extent, this play is a thought experiment in how I would cope if I woke up tomorrow in the body of a straight white man.

**How have various different audiences in different places received the work?**

Well, there are certain jokes that don't translate when we go out of the U.S. For example, in *Straight White Men*, the characters sing this ironically racist version of the theme song to an American musical number. We just did the show in Athens, Greece, where nobody knew the song or the musical, so that got no response at all. But things like that are pretty rare. It's usually just cultural references that people don't understand.

**You write comedies, but have said that you want this play to feel unsatisfying? Why is that? Is that just part of calling attention to privilege- identifying with something but also seeing the faults in it?**

It has to do mostly with destroying complacency. I don't like it when people think that they know everything and they're right and they are satisfied with themselves. One of the things I believe in most is self-critique and self-awareness. So every show is a challenge to myself as well as the audience. What

I love about *Straight White Men* is that the audience laughs through most of it, and when it's over they tell me they were left with a horrible feeling that irked them because they couldn't precisely define what made them feel that way. I wanted the play to end up being a fundamentally unsatisfying experience because the last thing I wanted to do was make a show dealing with privilege that left both the audience and me feeling satisfied.

**You're very specific about the pre-show music in the stage directions why is that?**

I didn't want anyone from my audience to come to the play and feel like they didn't belong there. I tried to create a pre-show environment with music that would make someone like me feel comfortable and at home. And I think it worked.

The downside was that some audience members—definitely not all, but a lot of them—were very upset, because they didn't feel comfortable in that environment. They felt that the music was aggressive toward them, and when they tried to make it stop and no one would comply with their requests, they got extremely angry.



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# Synopsis

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*Straight White Men* tells the story of the widowed Ed who welcomes home his three middle aged sons for Christmas. The eldest Matt has moved back in after losing his way, while life also holds its challenges for younger brothers Jake and Drew. They enjoy brotherly banter and nostalgic re-hashing of childhood pranks. But amongst the hijinks and smart-arse repartee, they must confront a problem that even a happy family can't solve: when identity matters, and privilege is problematic, what is the real value of being a straight, white man?



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# Plot

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## ACT ONE

### CHRISTMAS EVE

It's the Christmas holiday season. Jake and Drew have returned home for the holidays. Their brother Matt, once the bright star among them, has moved back in with his dad. This arrangement pleases the father, Ed, who admits that he has never gotten used to living alone since his wife died. All of the brothers are unmarried; Jake is divorced, Drew has had trouble committing, and Matt is too shy and self-effacing to even go on a date.

Jake is playing a video game and Drew, who is bored, is antagonizing him by repeatedly singing *"I'm a little airplane"*. Frustrated Jake attacks Drew, only stopping when Drew begs. Without anything else to do, they find the politically correct game their mother made over the board game, 'Monopoly', called "Privilege."

Matt and Ed arrive home with a Christmas tree. Jake is annoyed by the fake tree, *"What's the point of having a Christmas tree if it's not a real tree?"* Then Ed breaks it to Jake that he's not wearing the Santa suit this year, his brothers' tease, *"Look at him! He looks like he's gonna cry!"*

Conversation ensues as Ed asks Jake about his kids, and Drew talks about his teaching job and his new novel. Comparing himself to his brothers, Matt mocks his current temp job that his father got for him. Unperturbed the brothers continue to taunt one another, recovering some of Drew's early writing from his teenage years, with titles such as, "Why I hate people" and "F\*\*\* Humanity" club. The attention shifts to Matt and his teenage idea of starting a school called "Matt's School for Young Revolutionaries."

The Chinese take-out arrives and Ed forces the brothers to put on their pajamas and squeeze onto the couch to eat, because its tradition. As they reminisce, Matt starts to cry. The men are confused and don't know how to react. Ed puts his arm around Matt.

## ACT TWO

### CHRISTMAS DAY

Jake, wearing a Santa suit, and Drew are fixing the Christmas lights and decorating the tree, discussing what's going on with Matt. Ed and Matt enter. Jake gets the pie that Matt had made and they all sit down and eat. Drew tells the others about his therapy and how it has helped talk through the negativity he had as a child. Drew asks if Matt had ever thought of doing therapy. There is a painfully awkward silence, before Jake and Ed attempt to shift the conversation. Matt exits the room.

Drew admits his worries, *"It's shi\*\*y to pretend nothing's wrong when someone you love is unhappy!"* Ed confides that Matt's student loans are crippling and that is the reason he moved back home to try and pay them off.

They all know that Matt is extremely intelligent, but they don't understand why Matt's not using his brain to get a better job. Drew steers the conversation to wanting a family and Ed suggests that Matt would be a wonderful father. Jake disagrees that they should all want the same values, *"He should get a better job, get married, have kids. All that self-actualizer cr@p. Just because that's our thing doesn't mean it has to be everyone's thing"*. Matt re-enters the room as the discussion heats up.

Drew and Jake argue over Matt's reluctance to pursue his ambitions and be happy, *"Jake, I know this may be a hard concept for you to grasp, but what makes me happy is using my abilities in service to*

*something bigger than myself*". Jake questions Drew's beliefs of how being another white guy in leadership can make a difference in this world, *"Our success is the problem, not the solution!"* Fed up with the arguing, Ed leaves for bed. Matt and Drew begin to follow, but Jake puts on Christmas carols, turning it up loudly hoping that his brothers return. He pours himself a shot of whiskey, and as Drew re-enters they begin to dance. Matt and Ed re-enter, all whipping out their finest dance moves.

### **ACT THREE**

#### **THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS**

Drew is fast asleep on the sofa, wearing the same clothes as the night before. Matt is tidying away the empty bottles. Jakes enters after his morning run. He sees Drew on the couch, grabs a towel from the bathroom and holds it over Drew's mouth until he wakes up with a muffled yell.

Drew struggles with his hangover as Matt and Jake tease him by making irritating voices and screeching noises before pouring a glass of water over his face. Upset, Drew asks Matt to read him a story like he used to when they were children. Matt begins to read him Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The men eat their breakfast while discussing Matt's choice of movie *A Man for All Seasons*. Ed tells his sons that he is reading a book about a CEO who grew up in the projects and made a list of all the things he most wanted in life. He asks his sons if they had ever made a list. Matt replies that the most important thing is the three men that stand before him. Saddened by Matt's situation, Ed offers to pay off his loans, but Matt declines the offer.

Jake thinks Matt's 'problem' is that he doesn't sell himself, *"Today, it's all about who you are and how you're perceived, as opposed to what you can actually do. You have to find a way to convince people of your specialness—that you're the best of the best."* Ed decides to conduct a fake interview where it becomes clear that Matt struggles to 'sell himself.' Jake shows him how it's done, resulting in another family feud.

Jakes eventually understands Matt saying, *"A white guy's pretty hard-pressed to explain why the world needs him to succeed. So Matt's trying to stay out of the way."* Ed doesn't understand Matt's reluctance to be part of life, so he ask Matt to move out as he can no longer do anything to help him. *"I love you so much. I've never done anything but love you. I look at you now and don't even recognise you."*

# Director

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## NESCHA JELK

Nescha is the Resident Director at State Theatre Company. She graduated from the Flinders Drama Centre directing course in 2010 with First Class Honours and a University Medal. In 2010 she won Helpmann Academy's Bendigo and Adelaide Bank Award.

For State Theatre Company, Nescha has directed *Gorgon*, *Volpone*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Othello*, *Jesikah* and *Random*. Other directing credits include *Deluge* (Tiny Bricks) as part of 2016 Adelaide Festival of Arts, *Alice and Peter Grow Up* (Milk Theatre Collective), *Hamlet* (The Actor's Folio), and *Sepia* (RiAus) which was awarded the 2012 Adelaide Fringe Tour Ready Award.



Nescha has worked extensively as an assistant director for numerous companies including State Theatre Company, Eleventh Hour, Brink Productions, Griffin Theatre Company, Belvoir, Bell Shakespeare Company and Sydney Theatre Company.

## INTERVIEW WITH NESCHA JELK

### Why did you want to do this play?

Young Jean Lee was really interested in the fact that for a long time, straight white men haven't had a label, and suddenly they have had the label of 'straight white men' slapped on them. Using ideals from a diverse group of people, she created the character of Matt, who was then branded a loser. What Young Jean Lee realised from this, is that while we may want straight white men to essentially step aside and make some room for others to succeed and take high ranking jobs, we still expect and the straight white men in our own lives to be successful.

This predicament, I think, I really interesting. It's a problem that isn't solved or answered in the play. Instead, this issue is opened up to the audience for them to discuss. Furthermore, it is really important that we get to see straight white male characters wrestling with their own privilege and owning the things that privileged people can feel uncomfortable talking about (and I know this because I am in many ways privileged).

Lastly, the play is also really funny, so that was another appealing quality of this play!

### The deceased mother is mentioned throughout the play. Why is she important to the story?

The mother's influence resonates through the play and you can see her impact on the three sons. It is admirable the way she's tried to raise her boys to understand their privilege, teaching them good values and how not to become oppressors. However, as adult men, her sons all feel a level of guilt about their privilege as straight white men, and they're all trying to deal with this or justify this in different ways. Matt says, "*She would say there's nothing you can do to erase the problem of your own existence. She would tell me to not despair, and to keep trying to find my way.*" I feel that Young Jean Lee is very empathetic towards these men, demonstrating the impact this has had on the sons.

### Tell me about the music at the beginning of the show.

Young Jean Lee's theatre company usually attracts quite diverse, non-privileged audiences. However, *Straight White Men* was co-commissioned by a company that traditionally had a more conservative and privileged audience. The pre-show music features music and explicit lyrics by female rappers played really loudly. Young Jean Lee's intention was to make her usual audiences feel comfortable and the

privileged audiences to feel slightly uncomfortable, switching the usual power balances for those audiences in the theatre. Furthermore, the role of Stage-Hand in charge is controlling the mechanisms of the play, reinforcing that this is a story that is told by non-straight-white-men, with an intersectional feminist gaze on the work.

# Assistant Director/Actor

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## **ALEXIS WEST – Assistant Director/Stage Hand In Charge**

Alexis is an Aboriginal writer, director, collaborator and performer in film, theatre and dance. Her State Theatre Company credits include Assistant Director for *Zoo Story* and a directing secondment for *King Lear*.

She has written and directed plays for No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability, Karrikarrinya Theatre Collective and Kurruru Youth Arts. Collaborating with Alirio Zavarce, Rosalba Clemente and Matt Crook on new/multi/theatre/media/development. Alexis has worked with Vital Statistix ADHOCRACY 2015 *Crawl me Blood* with Willoh S. Weiland, Halcyon McLeod writing with Philip Kavanagh.



Alexis worked with SA Writers Centre to help deliver Tarnanthi: Pirrku Warrapina in collaboration with Art Gallery of South Australia. She has delivered spoken word performances for above-mentioned event, Dirty Words, Soul Lounge, Al Salam Festival, New Zealand Festival of the Arts and Sydney Writers Festival.

Alexis has written and directed several short documentary's for NITV, produced and presented for Arts & Community program *Around the Traps* for NITV and been published in several anthologies as well as having her poetry translated into Polish for 'Poetiks'.

## **What is your role as Assistant Director in *Straight White Men*?**

My role as the Assistant Director is to learn, grow and develop as a director. Through this role, I have the honour to learn the mechanics and magic of seeing words on a page sing on the stage. It has been an amazing privilege working in the room with Director Nescha Jelk, the four talented actors and the remarkable creative team.

The insight that I offer as a woman of colour, as a woman who has faced racism and oppression (and still faces it regularly) I believe brings the 'other' voice into the room. This insight, I hope, offers the actors a different lens of what it means to face racism and to live in a world of white privilege. Young Jean Lee's script is insightful, clever, funny and subversive. When we as people of colour state the issues of oppression and systematic racism that is our lives, we are shut down, told we are victims or to just get over it. Lee deals with this issue in such a remarkable way, she gives voice of the oppressed to straight white male characters, therefore making the message more palatable to a predominantly white audience. This is my view of her work. I think she's brilliant. She's written a satire scrutinising the most privileged people on this globe.

**What is the importance of the Stage-Hand-In-Charge?**

The Stage-Hand-In-Charge has agency to break the fourth wall. To engage with the audience, to acknowledge First Nation's land and peoples, to welcome them to the space and to tell the audience to turn their cell phones off or risk being attacked! The Stage-Hand-In-Charge, whilst seemingly given the role of making the audience feel somewhat welcome, also plays the role of cleaning up the actor's mess for following acts. Whilst this may be seen as submissive, subservient or demeaning, I feel like it is a role of empowerment. Why? Because clearly white straight men have made a mess of things and perhaps it is people of colour that need to be emulated to clean up the mess of this globe. Clean up the mess of this stage. I don't know. These are my thoughts. I feel empowered within this role.

**What are the challenges in making this character something tangible other than a crew member?**

I feel my role is to make people of colour and others feel more comfortable. The challenge is to find a fine line of making the audience feel welcome and comfortable, but at the same time provoke them to think and for me, speak, first nations' language. The character is me... but at the same time I need to protect myself from the onslaught of whiteness that can overwhelm.

As a black woman I am put under scrutiny by a predominantly white audience and a small amount of privileged 'others' as I conduct my role as the Stage-Hand-In-Charge. I have the opportunity to have a voice and then for the rest of the play, I am silenced. I love this quote:

*"Lee problematizes the dichotomy between speech and silence by exposing speech as a futile mechanism for communicating presence. In Western society, we associate speech with visibility and presence and associate silence with invisibility."* – Clara Osei-Yeboah (The Subversion of White Projections of Blackness in Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men*)

As a woman of colour, I find myself dealing with the dichotomy between speech and silence continuously. I also have leanings towards introversion which lend itself to my silence before speaking. Lee has created a role giving agency and voice to a woman of colour or coloured transgendered human, she then allows them to speak in the most powerful way, with actions. As Young Jean lee says in the play, *"Actions speak louder than words"*.

**Why have you decided to be a part of this play?**

It's an honor to be a part of this play by Young Jean Lee, playing the role of Stage-Hand-In-Charge and then to be asked to be Assistant Director... I feel that you are hearing my voice and giving me platform to share it. Thank you.

# Actor Profile

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## **HUGH PARKER - Matt**

This is Hugh's first production for State Theatre Company. Previous credits for La Boite Theatre Company: *A Doll's House*, *Pale Blue Dot*, *Julius Caesar*. Previous credits for Queensland Theatre Company include *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Seagull*, *Brisbane*, *The Pitch*, *Kelly*, *Fractions* (co-production with Hothouse Theatre), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Clean House* (co-production with Black Swan State Theatre Company), *Betrayal*, *25 Down*.



Other theatre Credits include *Hotel Beche de Mer* (The Arts Centre Gold Coast); *1984* (Shake and Stir Theatre co); *The Blind Date Project* (Ride On Theatre); *The Thirty Nine Steps* (The Byre Theatre St Andrews - UK); *Cream of British Comedy* (Teenage Cancer Charity Trust / Steve Coogan - UK); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (The Royal Shakespeare Company - UK).

Film credits include *Bullets for the Dead*, *My Mistress*, *Fatal Honeymoon*, *Crooked Business*, *Sinbad and the Minotaur*. Television credits include *Hoges*, *The Family Law*, *Gallipoli*, *Secrets and Lies*, *The Killing Field*, *The Strip*, *Sea Patrol*. UK Television credits include *Vincent*, *Casualty*, *Doctors*, *Monarch of the Glen II*, *EastEnders*, *Smoke*, *Jonathan Creek*, *Broken News*, *2 Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*, *The World According to Bex*, *Wild West*, *15 Storeys High*, *Doctors and Nurses*, *The Office*, *People Like Us*, *Beast*, *The Peter Principle*, *I'm Alan Partridge*, *Black Books*, *Lucky Jim*.

Writing Credits include BBC: *Bruiser*, *The Fast Show* ; Channel 4: *Comedy Nation*. Hugh trained as an actor at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London.

## **INTERVIEW WITH HUGH**

### **Tell me about the show.**

*Straight White Men* points at things that make so many people feel 'other'. It's a dissection of the normal. But the play doesn't point any fingers itself. It asks plenty of questions, including that of the audience. How you choose to answer them will say an enormous amount about your own privilege, and what you do with it.

### **Why did you decide to get involved with this particular piece of work?**

I was intrigued by a character who so often lets his silence speak for him. It seems he tosses grenades into his family's world and looks on to observe how they deal with the explosive effect. The play is an exercise in making the ordinary, extraordinary and the writing is about as clever and funny as it gets.

### **What appealed to you about the play?**

There is the hope, as an actor, that every project you get involved with will teach you something. From studying for the audition to rehearsal, this has proved to be the case.

### **Young Jean Lee created the character of Matt from putting together elements that people wanted in a Straight White Man. What are the challenges in portraying this character?**

Young Jean Lee has been empathetic in her portrayal of straight white men. Her understanding of her craft allows the audience to be open minded in their response to them. Matt says little, but his silence speaks volumes. Keeping your concentration is key.

**How have you approached this character or what type of research have you done?**

I'm Stanislavsky trained, so it's all about knowing your action or intention. What you want and how you aim to effect the other person. Young Jean Lee has created a lean text, so everything has purpose. Anything in the text I felt was operating on several levels, I read up on. *The Birth of Tragedy* is referenced, so I read the book and it explained an enormous amount about the structure of the play and how each of the characters operated.

**Many of the audiences dislike the character of Matt, what do you want to tell the audience about him?**

You can't intend to make your character unlikeable. Their actions must speak for themselves. Matt does not have this intention either. He is not assertive or heroic, he takes a humble position of admitting he knows nothing. And yet this generates dislike. He curbs his straight white man instinct and he is apparently rebuked for it.

**What training have you done to become an actor?**

I studied English Literature, Psychology and Theatre Studies before training for three years at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.



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# Characters

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## **ED**

Ed is the boys' father. He is a middle class, liberal-leaning traditionalist and a widower. He followed the traditional values of going to university, getting a secure job, getting married and having kids, something that he's tried to instill in his sons. Ed worked as an engineer with one company and he is charitable through his cheque book. Ed was devoted to his wife, who was a radical feminist and tried to bring her boys with an awareness of their own privilege, and he misses her dearly.

Ed is kind hearted, loves his boys and wants the best for them. He is well intentioned, but he'd rather not see problems, or have them easily remedied. He can't understand Matt's reluctance to be successful and as a result, feels that he's let Matt down as a father.

## **MATT**

Is the eldest son, in his forties. He is a PhD dropout who has lost his way and is living at home because of his student debt. He has worked with various charities and social groups, but despite being perceived as brilliant, he has not risen in his career. He sets off a family crisis when, for no apparent reason, he starts crying as all four men are seated on the couch eating on Christmas Eve.

It is revealed that Matt has given up on being a success, stepping aside for others and is now content to be ignored and hidden. He can't shake his feeling of being entitled, and instead begins to destroy himself. Ed offers him money to pay off his university loans, but he won't accept help.

Jake describes him best, *"Matt's not negative! He's not lazy, he's not lacking in self-confidence, and he's not afraid of risk. (To Matt) You believe a guy like you is supposed to sit down and shut the f\*\*\* up!"*

## **JAKE**

Is also in his forties. He is the alpha male, a successful banker who dominates the room with his physical presence. He takes care of his looks, by staying fit and dressing snappy – keeping up the image of 'success'. Jake is recently divorced and has two children, Olivia and Miles. He thinks that the world is f\*\*\*ed and that he is a privileged a\*\*hole, which he takes advantage of. He understands Matt's reluctance to success and offers the best solution, to leave Matt alone.

## **DREW**

Is the youngest son. He is a university lecturer and a writer. As a teenager he felt a lot of negativity, but as an adult he has been seeing a therapist and thinks everyone would be better if they confronted their inner selves. He keeps pushing Matt to discover what's wrong, almost desperately trying to fix him. He is nurturing, but doesn't understand that Matt just wants to be left alone.

## **STAGE HAND IN CHARGE**

The stage directions describe this person as; a person of colour, wearing casual clothes appropriate for a stagehand. The performer should be given the agency to choose their own costume and performance style. They make the curtain speech seriously, without irony. They appear in the scene changes, methodically cleaning up and re-setting the stage for each act. This character is seen as the person controlling the world around the straight white men.

# Themes

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“Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do. Access to privilege doesn’t determine one’s outcomes, but it is definitely an asset that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations a person with privilege has will result in something positive for them.”

~Peggy McIntosh

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## PRIVILEGE

*White privilege is a term for societal privileges that benefit people identified as white in Western countries, beyond what is commonly experienced by non-white people under the same social, political, or economic circumstances.*

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_privilege](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_privilege))

For Young Jean Lee, the play, *Straight White Men* asks the question, “How can these four individuals lead a moral life given the privilege they share as straight white men? It’s the question of, ‘What do we want straight white men to do that they’re not doing? And what happens when they do that?’”

The three boys have been brought up by their feminist mother, who tried to make them aware of their privilege, by creating games such as ‘Privilege’, “*The game where you have fun, by not having fun.*” The game has cards such as; what I just said wasn’t racist/sexist/homophobic because I was joking; there’s no such thing as white privilege; get stopped by the police for no reason and go directly to jail.

As adults, Matt is the only who opts out of this rigged system, refusing to accept money he hasn’t earned, or take a successful job. He even takes on the domestic role at home, cooking and cleaning for his father and is guided by trying not to ‘make things worse.’ Jake says of Matt, “*You’re being an ally, putting yourself in a service position, right? Making copies for the oppressed? You’re trying to live in accordance with what you believe. That there’s nothing people like us can do in the world that isn’t problematic of evil, so we have to make ourselves invisible.*”

He goes onto explain, “*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.*”

Interestingly Lee asked a roomful of women, queer people and minorities, “*What do you want straight white men to do? And what do you want them to be like?*” They responded that they wanted someone who would sit down and shut up. The character of Matt was created using this response and when he was presented to the students they hated him. Lee said, “*I realized that the reason why they hated him was, despite all their commitment to social justice, what they believed in most was not being a loser. Matt is exhibiting behaviour that gets attributed to people of colour: not being assertive, not standing up for himself, always being in a service position.*”

Jake on the other hand, confesses that he is a white a\*\*shole, “*My company’s run almost entirely by white guys, and I do nothing about it. I make ‘ironically’ racist jokes, I give straight guys s\*\*\* about ‘acting gay’, I talk about which of our interns I want to f\*\*\*.*” He conforms to it and has been successful in his career. By presenting this character Lee is questioning the fine line between the two characters of Matt and

Jake and what is the right balance for a straight white man? *"When privileged people do make sacrifices for your benefit, do you care? Do you really want them to do that?"*

## **SUCCESS**

*Definition of Success:*

- The accomplishment of an aim or purpose.
- The attainment of fame, wealth, or social status.
- A person or thing that achieves desired aims or attains fame, wealth, etc.

Each of the boys view success differently. Jake is a successful banker, making lots of money and conforming to that lifestyle. He was married and has children, but he is recently divorced. Drew is a successful writer, having won awards for his writing and is teaching at university. He is working on self-improvement through therapy, but he doesn't have a girlfriend. Both are successful in their careers and through this have attained the status of 'success.'

On the other hand, Matt only works temps jobs, doesn't have a girlfriend and has moved back home, taking a back-seat to others. Matt cannot explain his emotional outburst and wants everyone to ignore it, but a guy shedding tears is too disquieting to be swept under the rug. Matt questions his brothers; why do I have to be happy? Why is it not enough for me to just be useful?

## **GUILT**

Each of the boys show guilt for who they are and who they've become. The boys grew up with a left-wing feminist mother who raised her boys to be aware of privilege. Drew and Matt championed various diversity in their teenage years, trying to be racially and socially aware.

As an adult, Jake discusses how he's living in a white male dominated world, where he succumbs to being racist and sexist to fit-in. As a teenager, Drew built up negativity and anger and tells his family that he is only now finding himself more balanced emotionally through therapy. Matt has taken his guilt to the extreme, by stepping back and allowing others to achieve, despite his intelligence.

## **VIOLENCE**

There is violence and cruelty depicted in these male relationships. They know how to antagonize one another and often feel a need to let off steam. They fight with one another, annoy and tease each other, demean each other and are aggressive in behavior. They have carried this aggression through from childhood as they proudly discuss the cruel taunts and their alienation of each whilst they were growing up; something their Dad doesn't seem to be aware of.

They also pantomime "the other," dancing freakishly to hip-hop one minute and feigning gay sexual moves the next. Is this behavior destructive to their relationships; or is it the only way they know how to show affection for one another?

# Interesting Reading

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## NATURALISM

*Straight White Men* is a naturalistic play. The set and costume design reflect ordinary places and people, the script is written as linear and naturalistic conversation, and the characters are from a middle-class background.

Naturalism is an extreme form of realism. The sets are often bland and ordinary and costumes and props are a reproduction of reality. The characters are often working class and are shaped by their circumstances and controlled by external forces, such as hereditary of their social and economic environment. Naturalism also looks at real, often taboo situations but attempts to offer a photographic reproduction of reality, a 'slice of life'. The use of distinctly Australian language, colloquialisms and slang also place this work firmly in the world of realism.

### Characteristics of Naturalism

- Is an extreme or heightened form of realism
- Stage time equals real time – eg. three hours in the theatre equals three hours for the characters in the world of the play;
- Costumes, sets and props are historically accurate and very detailed, attempting to offer a photographic reproduction of reality;
- Follows rules set out by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, known as 'the three unities' - of time, place and action;
- The action of the play takes place in a single location over the time frame of a single day;
- Jumps in time and/or place between acts or scenes is not allowed;
- Characters are often working class/lower class;
- They regularly explore sordid subject matter previously considered taboo on the stage in any serious manner (e.g. suicide, poverty, prostitution).

## CITIZEN KANE & GEORGE ORSON WELLES

At the end of the play Ed tells Matt, "*Orson Welles, he failed many times before he was successful.*" To which Matt replies, "*What did Orson Welles ever do?*" Angrily Ed replies, "*He made Citizen Kane!*" The last line of the play has Matt respond, "*What a gift*" – suggesting the burden he feels as a straight white man.

Orson Welles was an American actor, director, writer, and producer who worked in theatre, radio, and film. He co-wrote, produced, directed and starred in *Citizen Kane* (1941), ranked as one of the all-time greatest films.

Welles was an outsider to the studio system and directed only 13 full-length films in his career. He struggled for creative control on his projects as his films were either heavily edited or remained unreleased. *Citizen Kane* is a quasi-biographical film that examines the life and legacy of Charles Foster Kane, played by Welles himself. It follows Kane's career in the publishing world that gradually evolves into a ruthless pursuit of power.

## THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

Is an 1872 work of dramatic theory by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It deals with the nature of Greek Tragedy, and how this model can be used to understand the state of modern culture, both its decline and its possible rebirth. Nietzsche argues for the primacy of the arts over philosophy as the means for understanding human existence.

Matt regrets his existence as a straight white man. When he reads for *The Birth of Tragedy*, he starts it as a cheerful children's story, but as he reads, he becomes somber reading, "*The best of all things is not to be born, not to be, to be nothing.*"

# Designer

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## VICTORIA LAMB

Victoria graduated from the South Australian T.A.F.E course for technical theatre in 1989 and from The University of South Australia with a Visual Arts degree in 2000. For State Theatre Company, Victoria's design credits include *Othello*, *Kryptonite*, *Maggie Stone*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Speaking in Tongues*, *November*, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *King Lear*, *Ghosts*, *Blue/Orange*, *Lion Pig Lion*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Metro Street* for its Adelaide and Korean seasons. Other designs include the opera *Undertow* for the 2004 Adelaide Festival (which toured to Budapest and Helsinki) and the concept design and art direction of the Boho Bar on Unley Road SA. In 2012 she designed *The City* for NowYesNow at the Bakehouse Theatre.



In 2010 Victoria was awarded the national inaugural Kristian Fredrikson Scholarship for Design in the Performing Arts. In 2011, she designed *The Business* (Belvoir Street Theatre), *And No More Shall We Part* (Griffin Theatre Company), *Loot* (Sydney Theatre Company) She also lectures in Performance Design at Flinders' University, and designs a popular line of figurines for the Miniature Gaming industry through her own company; Victoria Miniatures.



(Set Design: *Straight White Men*)

# Set Design

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Young Jean Lee writes very specific notes about the set and costume design, pre-show music, curtain speech and transitions in the play. However, to accommodate the corner configuration of the Space Theatre and the thrust stage at La Boite's Roundhouse Theatre, the designer, Victoria Lamb, needed to condense the layout of Lee's design.

To do this, she kept the beige/taupe colouring in the walls, carpet and furniture. However, the bookshelves have become part of a desk, the door to the garage comes through the laundry, storage is in the laundry and the exercise bike has disappeared due to lack of space. Lighting is also described as naturalistic and the music is prescribed to enhance moments of the play.

**Below are Young Jean Lee's notes on the set design.**

*A hyper-naturalistic middle-class family room glows invitingly onstage.*

*The room has wall-to-wall beige carpeting, taupe walls, and minimalist molding. Stage left, a linoleum-floored mudroom leads to a door to the garage. There is a storage bench next to the door, which coats hanging on pegs above. In front of the storage bench sits an ancient exercise bike. On the other side of the door is a closet containing a washer and a dryer. Around the corner is a coat closet with a dart board on it.*

*Centre stage is a taupe leather sofa, a matching easy chair, a dark brown recliner with matching ottoman, a side table, and a large battered coffee table. The focal point of the furniture is an invisible television downstage center, whose presence can be felt though it is unseen. Because of this, the wall behind the sofa is oddly bar – this is the wall that no one ever looks at when they're in the room. Against this wall are two matching bookcases packed full of old books, games, puzzles, and a component stereo system. Cabinets in the bottom of each bookcase store booze and glasses. Stackable clear plastic storage bins sit next to the shelves.*

*Stage right is an unused fireplace flanked by two windows. On the fireplace mantle are a hand-crocheted, multi-ethnic Christmas nativity scene and Christmas cards, with stockings hanging above the fireplace. A small desk sits under the downstage window, its surface covered with Christmas ornaments and decorations that have been removed from nearby plastic bins.*

*Upstage left, three carpeted steps lead up and out into a hallway running between the kitchen and living room, with a door to a half-bath in between.*

## **STAGE HAND IN CHARGE**

The stage directions also specify the details for the Stagehand-in-Charge: *Is a gender non-conforming person or woman of colour who introduces the show in their own vernacular and makes several appearances in traditional moments throughout the play.*

Alexis who plays Stagehand-in-Charge starts with acknowledgement of country and then tells the audience that they will see a naturalistic drama, where the actors will speak in fake American accents, eat real food and pretend they can't see us. This role is positioned to cast a 'black feminist gaze' over proceedings.

# Costume Design

Young Jean Lee details the costumes for each character in her writing, describing their naturalistic look and style in detail. Designer, Victoria Lamb, has used these as a basis for the costumes for each character.

**Ed** – Looks adorable in corduroys and a cardigan.

**Jake** – Dressed expensively in jeans, a sweater and a button down.

**Drew** – Wears a red plaid hunting shirt, skinny jeans, and patterned socks.

**Matt** – Is handsome, but horribly dressed in ill-fitting loose jeans, an oversized t-shirt, and a too-small fleece jacket.

Each character also wears check pajamas that Ed calls ‘tradition.’



(Matt)



(Jack)



(Drew)



# Essay Questions

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## ENGLISH QUESTIONS

1. Humour is used throughout *Straight White Men*. Discuss the intention of humour and how it works in the play.
2. The play is said to 'lead with empathy.' Discuss.
3. What is the importance of using an Aboriginal woman as the Stagehand-In-Charge?
4. How successful is the play at presenting privilege?
5. Discuss the contrasting roles of Matt and Jake. What qualities do you like/dislike in each and how do their roles fit into modern society?
6. Discuss the theme of guilt and how it relates to each of the sons.
7. Why do you think Matt ends with the line, "What a gift?"
8. Is Donald Trump the epitome of the privileged straight white man? Discuss his role of privilege in modern society and whether the views that he holds can be seen as damaging to those less 'privileged.'
9. Discuss Young Jean Lee's references to the movie, *Citizen Kane* and to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and how they help develop the story or the characters.

## DRAMA QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the naturalistic elements in the text and the staging.
2. What do you think is the role of the loud hip-hop music at the beginning of the performance and how does it relate to the context of the play?
3. Discuss how the musical elements throughout the play help portray characters and family.
4. *Straight White Men* is like a sitcom with a dark undertone. Discuss
5. Discuss the role of Matt and how he is portrayed on-stage. How does he conform to the idea of stepping aside?
6. Choose a social issue that interests you and write a short scene for two characters. Read aloud with a partner and identify the positives and negatives of structuring this issue into a scene and whether it helps others understand your viewpoint.

## DESIGN

Read Young Jean Lee's stage directions. Design a set for the play without following her strict guidelines. Compare the differences in your design to that of the prescribed design in the play you saw.

## DEBATE

Can a straight white man give up privilege and still be successful?


## WRITING

Write a letter from the mother to Matt discussing her hopes and visions for her children.

## OR

Re-write the ending of the play.

## BELOW ARE SOME LINKS TO PRIVILEGE EXERCISES YOU CAN DO IN THE CLASSROOM

 [https://www.buzzfeed.com/dayshavedewi/what-is-privilege?utm\\_term=.rn0VVNjnVD#.ic044PoJ4R](https://www.buzzfeed.com/dayshavedewi/what-is-privilege?utm_term=.rn0VVNjnVD#.ic044PoJ4R)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KlmvmuxzYE>

# Tables

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	production elements	performance elements
strengths		
impact on audiences		
weaknesses		

design role	technique	what did this contribute to the performance?
lighting	<i>one</i>	
	<i>two</i>	
	<i>three</i>	
music	<i>one</i>	
	<i>two</i>	
	<i>three</i>	

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## INTERESTING READING

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