

KEEP AN EYE ON: lauren yee

BY AMBER ADRIAN, *Associate Editor*

Lauren Yee has written more than a dozen plays and one-acts. Her work has been produced in such high-prestige places as Los Angeles and New York. She's even been produced in her hometown of San Francisco. Her selected production history runs two pages. She's 19 years old. All those feeling unproductive right about now, raise your hand.

Don't worry. Even Yee is raising her hand. Her career already includes being shown up by a preadolescent. "One contest highlighted an extremely talented 13-year-old who wrote extremely deep and poignant dramas (who ended up being a four-time winner)," Yee shares, "and I was like, 'Uh, I have a 10-minute wacky skit.'" But when you love something, you do it—no matter how many 13-year-old prodigies are waiting to poke you off your pedestal.

Yee has always loved writing. She originally tried fiction but was thwarted by that pesky need for description. "I could never do the exposition," she explains. She discovered at 15 that playwriting suited her better, when she wrote her first play for a short play contest at Asian American Theater Company. In theatre, Yee can tell her stories while bypassing the less interesting elements. "I could always imagine what people would say and what actions they would take, but I could never get through the whole description of the scene." So Yee handily decided to let the set designers take care of that for her.

Yee plowed through multiple plays and one-acts in a few short years, sending them off to contests across the country. In addition to New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, her plays have been produced in San Diego, Atlanta, Alaska, Texas, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and England. "You'd be surprised at what sending your plays out to every theatre on the planet can add up to in returns," she notes.

Much of her early work came out of Youth for Asian Theatre, which she founded as a place for students to write, perform and direct original plays. "That's where a lot of my theatre experience came from," she says of the trial and error inherent in founding a company while still in your mid-teens. Or late twenties. Or early fifties.

Yee still feels an initial shock when she hears her words spoken on stage. "You feel very self-conscious," she explains. "You imagine it one way in your mind with certain voices and intonations. On stage, they sometimes present entirely different interpretations of what you write. Once you get over that, you begin to appreciate the subtleties and how other people can see your work."

Her most recent play, *Joey Buttafuoco Eats a Pastrami Sandwich*, will be performed in the Berkeley Rep Teen One-Acts Festival this month. The inspiration came from a story she overheard about a man who got arrested in conjunction with a pastrami sandwich. Intrigued, she did an Internet search. When Google failed her, Yee began to wonder what can ever be known for certain. "I thought of a character who was very connected to knowledge and dependent on that knowledge to help him sort out his world," she says. In the play, Mr. Buttafuoco grapples with both

the pastrami sandwich and the fact that you can't always rely on knowledge as a guide.

"Unfortunately, I'm not very plot driven as a writer," Yee admits. She finds this problematic when she's trying to assemble her work into a cohesive, performable whole. Her ideas tend to be drawn from small events that lead to sweeping ideas. "Everyday phrases, certain things that aren't quite right or that make you wonder what caused this person to say this," she says of her usual playwriting inspiration.



A junior at Yale, Yee studies English and theatre. Yale emphasizes a holistic approach that involves literature classes, specialized studies like early feminist theatre and—acting. "Which was kind of excruciating for everyone [in the class], I think," Yee says ruefully. She's trying not to overwhelm herself this year, as she recently founded the first citywide playwriting festival for high school students. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities for young playwrights in the Bay Area, Yee conceived the San Francisco Young Playwrights Foundation. It put out a call for plays in September, and Yee was encouraged by the response: more than 50 plays were received, many of high quality. "I really wanted to encourage other young people," she explains. "We're trying to validate these young voices and really encourage them to keep writing and show them that what they're saying is significant and vital to the cultural voice of San Francisco."

Meanwhile, Yee will keep doing what she's been doing since the age of 15: writing and producing theatre. And herding other young folk into theatrical success. *taa*