

Cultures, generations clash in Kim's Convenience at Neptune Theatre

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1 / 4 The Soupepper Theatre production of Kim's Convenience starring Paul Sun-Hyung Lee as Korean-Canadian convenience store owner Appa and Rosie Simon as daughter Janet runs at Neptune Theatre till Feb. 5. (TED PRITCHARD / Local Xpress)

When Paul Sun-Hyung Lee read the script for *Kim's Convenience* he thought playwright Ins Choi had been spying on his family.

The stage play, which spawned a CBC TV series, is opening at Neptune Theatre on Friday. It is the story of a Korean immigrant who comes to Canada in the 1980s with his wife and young family. A respected school teacher in Korea, he couldn't continue in that role because of the language barrier, so he opened a convenience store in the Regent Park area of Toronto.

"My parents were teachers in Korea," says Lee, sitting in the lobby of Neptune Theatre before a pay-what-you-can performance of [Kim's Convenience](#), which previews Wednesday and Thursday.

They immigrated to Scarborough when he was three months old.

They couldn't be teachers here so they had a convenience store and we lived above it. Now I'm a father and I appreciate that feeling of not wanting your kids to struggle as you did. On so many levels, it speaks to me and my family. It is about the Korean community, but has a lot of universal themes about family, legacy and expressing love to one another."

Lee has played store owner Appa since the play's debut at the 2011 Toronto Fringe Festival. He continued playing the family patriarch in Soupepper Theatre's remount, the touring version of the play and in the 13-episode TV series that debuted in the fall of 2016.

"Appa is a gift to play: opinionated, stubborn, interesting, outrageous and has heart. The play has the entire spectrum of the human condition, comedy, pathos and tragedy. As minority actors, we are not often given the opportunity to shine, it's a blessing to be able to show what I'm capable of doing."



Paul Sun-Hyung Lee as Korean-Canadian convenience store owner Appa wishes Janet (Rosie Simon) would take over his store in Kim's Convenience running at Neptune Theatre till Feb. 5 (TED PRITCHARD / Local Xpress)

Jan. 18 will mark his 400th performance in the role.

"It's been a blessing to do the role so long, you don't often get that many kicks at the can. Especially with larger than life characters, you find things that you would miss," he muses, noting he was pleased that after his initial read for Choi, the playwright began creating scenes with him in mind.

[See also: Kim's Convenience more than convenient entertainment](#)

There's a new group of cast members for this production and they bring with them their own energy, which can alter the course of a scene, continues the friendly actor, whose program bio "full-time father,

husband and geek, part time actor — wannabe ghostbuster — gives a clue to his warm and playful personality.

Richard Lee, who plays son Jung, Rosie Simon who plays daughter Janet, Maki Yi who plays mother Umma, and Ronnie Rowe Jr. in multiple roles are all making their Neptune debut. None are involved in the TV series.

The stage play is set 30 years after Appa arrived in Canada, where he has made a comfortable living and raised two now-grown children.

"There are bound to be culture clashes and generational clashes and that's at the heart of the story. His son is estranged and has run away from home and (Appa's) trying to push the store on Janet, who has different ideas about what she wants to do. He's had an offer to buy the store — Regent Park is undergoing gentrification — and he doesn't want to sell the store and wonders what is his legacy."



Paul Sun-Hyung Lee and Rosie Simon as father and daughter, Appa and Janet, star in Kim's Convenience, which mines comedy in the clash between Canadian and Korean cultures. (TED PRITCHARD / Local Xpress)

Director Weyni Mengesha has been "an incredible leader guiding the show from the beginning," says Lee. "She has such an intimate knowledge of the play. I trust her implicitly and I have done for so long. You need that outside eye or you can fall into ruts or patterns."

Mengesha, who grew up in Vancouver and Toronto, is the daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, so relates to the play in a very personal way.

She sees similarities between Kim's Convenience and *Da Nink in My Hair*, a play about a first generation Jamaican hairdresser that debuted at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2001. Mengesha was in Halifax when the comedy played the Atlantic Fringe Festival. After runs in New York and Toronto it became a TV show.

"So many come to this country with a dream and when their dreams and their dream of the children collide, what do they do?" she asks. "How do you redefine your purpose, how do reconcile the discrepancies?"

A Soulpepper artist-in-residence, Mengesha was at York University at the same time as Choi and both were part of the Soulpepper Academy. She says Lee shines as Appa because of his huge heart.

"He has one of the biggest hearts of any actor I've worked with. You can see it in the way he cares for the cast and the show. He's so emotional, so connected to the show I have to be conscious of how many times I run the scene. He identifies so much with Appa and keeps going through that journey."

While Kim's Convenience has lots of comedy in the misunderstandings between Canadian and Korean cultures, what affects the Dora-winning director most is the scene where Appa finally has the courage to express himself and his love for his children.

"Everyone can identify with one or more of the characters in a pretty profound way."

She's not involved in the TV series, but says it's fun to see what's been taken from the play and expanded.

Lee says fans of the TV show will enjoy seeing where Appa's story began.

He has been enjoying discovering Appa's lighter and prankster sides while shooting the TV series and is also excited to get new lines.

A professional actor since 1996, Lee was initially concerned about how the show would translate from stage to screen. Appa on TV is 10 years younger than Appa on stage and at a different point in his life.

"The play is a concentrated version, very intense. You get to know the character in one hour and 20 minutes. On TV you have a larger arc and it is spread out," he says.

CBC TV is hosting a meet and greet with Lee and Choi on Saturday at noon. Enter the draw to attend the event at www.cbc.ca/kimsinhalifax.

Kim's Convenience runs at Neptune Theatre till Feb. 5.

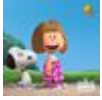
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It's just simply one of the best plays I've ever seen. Hilarious, moving, incredible acting. Not to give an Appa guilt trip, but you'll regret not seeing this as people will be talking about it for years. Halifax is so lucky to get this.

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