

ARTS COMMENTARY

Playwright gives love a whole new meaning



Remember a one-panel cartoon that'd run on the comics page I used to read. It was called "Love Is..." and featured naked, Kewpie doll-like characters with oversized eyes and no genitalia. Each day the panel would say something like, "Love is...letting her have the last cookie," "Love is...picking her flowers," "Love is...sharing secrets."

love is... Cute, saccharine, totally inoffensive.

Pretty sappy stuff, actually. In playwright Neil LaBute's world, love's the opposite. His view of love comes from the very depths of hell. In LaBute Land, people manipulate, lie and betray others - just for the perverse pleasure of it.

J. Geils may have sung "Love stinks," but their disgusted view of love is positively rosy compared to LaBute's.

In LaBute's scenes, couples brutally betray each other as easily -and as unconsciously—as breathing.

After seeing one of his plays or movies, you want to take a shower. Not because his characters make you all hot and bothered, but because they're so slimy.

Theater-goers were invited to LaBute's world in late May at the Florida Repertory Theatre. As an end-of-season extra for theater patrons, and as a way of showcasing the talents of their four interns, Florida Rep offered a three-night run of LaBute's "The Shape of Things."

In this play, Evelyn (Alesia Lawson) meets Adam (Rob Hagle), a shy museum guard, at a museum. The two flirt, and she winds up giving him her number. She also winds up defacing a statue of God, spray painting a penis on it.

Adam, a not very confident but decent guy, starts changing due to Evelyn's encouragement and guidance. He begins running, lifting weights, eating healthier. He gets a better haircut, ditches his glasses for contacts, and trades in his old wardrobe for new threads.

All of this is pretty par for the course - falling in love can often make us better people. It's not unusual that those we love bring out the best in us and encourage us to aspire to be more.

But Evelyn soon crosses the line. A con-

trol freak, she pushes Adam to get a nose job. He does. Then she pushes him to stop seeing his friends, without any explanation to them. He does.

His friends, by the way, are Jenny (Rachel Lomax) and Phillip (John Warren). Adam's had a crush on Jenny for three years, but never did anything about it. But now that he's become a new, improved Adam, she realizes what a catch he is. Especially now that she's engaged to Phillip and is scared (with good reason) that he's cheating on her. (Phillip, by the way, is a typical LaButeian male - a not-too-bright, misogynistic, self-centered jerk. And I'm being kind here.)

Though I thought they made a better pair, the friend who attended the play with me wasn't happy when Jenny and Adam got cozy.

"She had her chance," he said at intermission. "She had three years! Now that someone else finds him attractive, she wants him! That's the only reason why."

He also didn't find it strange that the two men, so diametrically different, were friends. How could such a nice guy be friends with someone so crass, I asked?

"Easy," he explained, with typical guy logic. "Guys don't care about that. They have different values. You can be friends with a guy you know is a total jerk; it doesn't matter."

Adam is so head-over-heels in love he even gets a tattoo of Evelyn's initials.

As the play's short run is over, I can tell you how it ends: Evelyn invites Adam to her art class where she presents her thesis project. Much to his surprise, he discovers that he was her art project. She set out to change him, molding him like a sculpture. It's the ultimate betrayal. She displays his journals and video tapes of them making love, and even presents her engagement ring as evidence.

She never loved him, she says. It was all an art project. And with the complete lack of feeling of a sociopath, Evelyn claims no regret or shame. Adam is shattered.

Evelyn talks a good game about changing a life and about truth in art, but for me, it all seems like a smoke screen, an excuse for her to act as callously as she wants.

Like a typical LaBute character, she takes something that happens naturally in relationships - wanting to better ourselves, wanting to please the other - and cruelly twists it for her own means.

The play gave much food for thought and discussion as to the nature of relationships, trust and intimacy, gender differences, and the ways people use each other. I couldn't help but wonder what happened to Adam afterwards. Does he hook up with



Neil LaBute

COURTESY PHOTO

Jenny after all? Does he become a typical LaBute male who uses and manipulates women? Does LaBute intend, with this play, to show us how some of his characters became so cold and callous?

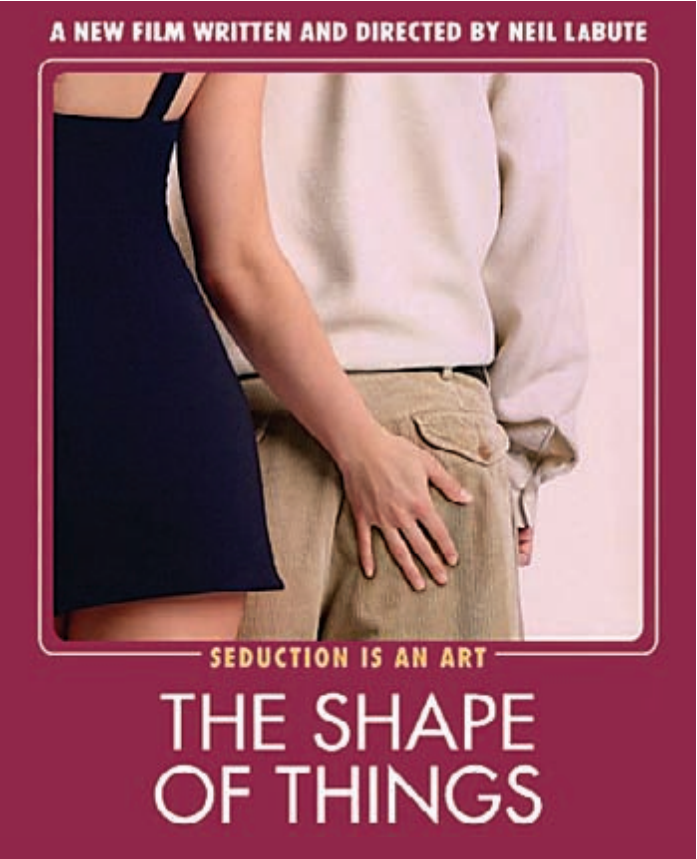
The audience at the performance I attended were really hooked, and many excited conversations broke out at intermission. (One friend who attended said that after all four characters had their first scene together, he wished they'd stop, switch characters, and play the scene all over again. I think he felt they were cast according to type and wanted to see what it was like if they weren't.)

As an experiment, the play succeeded. The production I saw was so well-attended extra seats had to be added.

Florida Rep offered something new, by seating people on stage and, in effect, turning the stage into a black box. It was great, in terms of intimacy, but unfortunately, the seating was all on one level, which meant that only the front row had unobstructed

sightlines. Everyone else had to continually crane their heads and peer through the spaces between the silhouettes of those in front of them. Sometimes, you could only see a face, and not even the faces of both people in dialogue: a definite drawback.

True love doesn't have to be sappy like a "Love Is..." cartoon, but God help us if LaBute's world is the only alternative. ■



Movie poster for "The Shape Of Things"

From The Bank of **Great Interest**

3.75%^{APY*}

**On Balances of \$1,000 and over
15-Month CD**

For a limited time, Sanibel Captiva Community Bank is offering this great rate.
We are the only bank chartered on Sanibel Island.

Sanibel Captiva COMMUNITY BANK

Please visit us at our convenient locations:

239.472.6100 2475 Library Way Sanibel, FL 33957	239.472.6150 1037 Periwinkle Way Sanibel, FL 33957
239.210.7100 15975 McGregor Blvd. Ft Myers, FL 33908	

Member FDIC *The Annual Percentage Yield (APY) set forth above is accurate as of the publication date but is subject to change thereafter. There is a penalty for early withdrawal.