

LaBute or LaBrute:

Negotiating Misogyny and Social Critique in Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*

I'd like to open the presentation of this paper with a quote by Christopher Bigsby, taken from his newest book, *Neil LaBute: Stage and Cinema*:

[T]he shock of LaBute's work does not derive from the cruelties he identifies, the language some of his characters deploy, his vision of an alienated world. What disturbs beyond anything is the shock of recognition, the realization that

LaButeland is our land, that these plays and stories all carry our own DNA. (233)

The comparison of LaButeland with our land is inherently political and while LaBute argues that he is not a political writer, he does admit that he appreciates the politics of gender and putting the audience on edge with his comparisons.

I recently directed Neil LaBute's 2004 play, *Fat Pig* at Bowling Green State University, which is located in a fairly conservative community in Northwest Ohio. Due to the controversial nature of LaBute's plays, it was important to me that that alongside our student's witnessing the performance, that we also offer them room to talk about the play's subject matter. Because I believe the play raises interesting concerns regarding body image, social pressure, and conformity, I was surprised by some of the initial questions posed by our audience members, mainly, "As a woman how did you feel directing a play by a misogynist?" While I plan to share with you some of the student responses and the dialogue that surrounded our production of *Fat Pig*, the larger insight I would like to examine today, is LaBute's use of misogyny and social critique in *Fat Pig*.

I certainly will not sit in front of you today and argue that LaBute's plays are free from misogyny or that the attitudes towards women his characters spout are necessarily healthy. If I did, I would be inviting well-deserved criticism and a multitude of warranted counter-arguments. Take Carter's line about his co-worker for example: "It's not, like, some derogatory thing I'm saying about her—not the therapist cunt, but Jeannie—it's just an idle thought. She seems to be packing it on some. That's the problem with winter: chicks don't get out much and they bloat up" (22). This statement clearly doesn't paint women in a positive light. Still, it is possible to read the play on a whole as a critique of the misogynistic attitudes that pervade our contemporary American society. It is this possibility that I'd like to talk about in light of our student responses to the play.

For those of you unfamiliar with the play, in *Fat Pig*, LaBute tells the story of Tom, a traditionally good looking and successful businessman, who falls in love with Helen, a quirky, pretty, but overweight librarian. They meet by accident in a crowded cafeteria, where Tom is forced to take the only open seat, next to Helen. Tom is soon enchanted by her sense of humor and he asks her if they should meet again. The remainder of the play traces Tom's journey as he tries and fails to come to grips with loving Helen, despite her weight, in a society that judges people based on appearance. In the end, Tom discontinues the relationship because he is unable to stand up to the pressure his friends and co-workers place on him. He says to Helen that he loves her "[b]ut sometimes it just isn't enough. You know? All this love inside and it's not nearly enough to get around the shit that people *heave* at you . . . I feel like I'm drowning in it – *shit* – and I don't think I can . . . I don't wanna fight it anymore. I am just not strong enough for that, so I'm gonna lie on my back for a while and float" (83).

Many of the students who witnessed the performance and subsequent talkbacks (either after immediately following the production or in classes later that week) were disappointed by what they perceived as Tom's lack of strength. They wanted a fairy tale ending, one in which Tom was strong and able to overcome his fears, and in which he and Helen would live happily ever after. When the students were asked why LaBute might write an unhappy ending for *Fat Pig*, many simply answered, "Because it's true." More specifically, one student said: "It's a sad fact that many people care a great amount about how others view their lives and it ends up dictating their actions, even ending a beautiful relationship because of something as petty as outside appearance." Another said: "The play rather ruined my optimism for a couple days. I mean it made me think a lot, but damn, it was depressing. The one character I identify with ends up losing everything because she has a weight problem. . . . But the play did what it was meant to do. It was meant to provoke thought on our superficial world. I just hope some people caught on."

Our student audiences aren't the only ones who find LaBute's canon depressing. In a relatively well-known article in *New York Magazine*, critic John Simon dubs Neil LaBute, "LaBrute" and attacks the playwright on a personal level when he writes, "*Loathsome* is the word for Neil LaBute." Simon then goes on to lambaste admirers of LaBute's work, saying, "Yet, so insensitively thrill-seeking are critics and audiences that LaBute garners rave reviews and full houses." In response to Simon, I'd like to point out the aforementioned student's hope that "some people caught on." While I'm not sure that Simon has caught on, it seems as if many of our students did. Following the close of the production, the student's writing in journals and reviews suggests that they mostly understood that, while the play presents people in horrible situations and who say contemptible and misogynistic things, it does so in order that the audience

critique what is presented before them. One particularly astute student writes, “*Fat Pig* was a play that left me wanting to talk. This may or may not have been one of the goals of Neil LaBute, but it was certainly one of the effects of his play.” Later she argues that LaBute champions social change through Tom, as the audience is “placed in Tom’s shoes, and meant to identify with him. I am thinking specifically of the person sitting next to me who would laugh loudly and then stop himself and say – ‘That’s horrible!’ In this way, catching ourselves in the act of derision, we can create change. But only with solid introspection can an individual benefit from this performance.”

In a 2001 interview for *American Theatre*, John Istel asked LaBute about his characters’ “ambiguous morality.” LaBute answered: “That’s certainly what I reach for. I’m not slithery, but I am difficult to read. I am a bit of a fence-sitter, and that’s through choice. As a writer, the more you raise the questions and show no intention or inclination to answer them, the more you force audiences to confront those issues themselves. And hopefully some of it is carried away when they leave the comfort of the theatre” (40). As is evidenced through the few examples I’ve already shared with you, many of the student audience members found themselves in such a position. In the talkbacks the week following the close of the show, some students were eager to express their opinions regarding the issues raised by the play. Other students, however, like John Simon were reluctant to speak and were even more reluctant to give LaBute and our production of the play any credit whatsoever for attempting social critique. One student writes: “I was very upset and angry about the derogatory comments towards women . . . [and] I was very curious as to why BGSU’s theater department approved such a demeaning play.” It would be simple for me to dismiss this student’s claim and argue instead that “she just didn’t get it,” but her opinion is representative of a common reaction to LaBute’s work.

Since he began writing for the stage and screen in the 1990s, many scholars and critics have harshly reprimanded LaBute, albeit not in so many words, for reifying patriarchal and often misogynistic attitudes. While the misogyny inherent within LaBute's work allows me to understand this point of view, I instead argue that LaBute uses misogyny in order to critique the misogynistic attitudes that pervade our contemporary American society. In the introduction to *Staging the Rage*, Katherine Burkman and Judith Roof argue the following about misogyny in modern drama:

As a part of a binary gender structure, misogynous representations in modern drama are produced by the structural interplay of masculine and feminine as those positions relate to one another and to the action, dynamics, and ideological vestments of a play. Whether a representation is misogynist depends not so much on whether there are negative representations of women or of femininity, but rather on how those representations function within the whole system by which a play's meaning is produced. (12)

The system that exists in *Fat Pig* is one in which the men are critiqued as harshly as women, one in which social norms have the advantage and any person, male or female, who deviates from the norm is often severely punished.

It is possible to argue that Carter, the most repulsive character of the play but also the character with the wittiest dialogue, is LaBute's representative of social expectations and norms. It is Carter who consistently reminds Tom and the audience that appearance is paramount in our contemporary society. When Tom argues that "things aren't just based on *appearance!*" Carter quickly counters with "maybe you should snap on the TV once in a while. (*Beat.*) I'm not talking about what people deserve, I'm saying what they get. You look one way, you have access to *all*

this. Look some other way, all you get is that” (71). It is obvious that although Tom tries to ignore Carter, he values his opinion, an opinion that can be read as representative of popular attitudes in our community. Through Carter’s and Tom’s relationship, the audience can witness the effect of social expectations on Tom as he attempts to love Helen. As I pointed out earlier in this paper, Tom is unable to withstand the social pressure and he instead breaks off his relationship with Helen, in favor of “floating,” or going along with what is socially expected of a person of his size, shape, and level of success.

While LaBute asks his audience to identify with his protagonist, Tom, it is mainly through the character Carter that the audience finds itself in the position of critiquing their own behavior. Many of Carter’s lines are witty. Often they are witty and despicable at the same time. In the words of one student, “the play mixes zany, witty humor and dialogue with horrible, gross jokes that come at the expense of Helen . . . What the play does is make you examine just why you’re laughing and at what you’re laughing.” The same student later writes,

The audience response is especially telling in these regards. Initially, everyone would laugh at his [Carter’s] jokes without even a second thought. However, when the fat jokes were made, most of the audience immediately turned against Carter, booing his subsequent jokes. Some people still laughed, showing an ignorance of the situation, or simply that they found the jokes funny, being dulled to the hurtful impact that they had. What LaBute tells us with these jokes is that we, as a nation, are not only dulled to such treatment and discrimination of others, but that we also feel enough disgust that we have to make jokes over such things.

This student has caught on to a key thread in LaBute’s canon. His humor is meant to provoke thought and critique on the part of the viewer. By placing the audience in a situation to laugh at

the grotesque humor he offers, they are then implicated in their response. An astute viewer will, hopefully, question his or her response to the offensive material.

While I in no way intend this paper to be one about audience reception, Susan Bennett's observation in her conclusion to *Theatre Audiences*, proves helpful here. She writes, "spectators are thus trained to be passive in their demonstrated behavior during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available" (206). Understanding the social commentary and critique offered by LaBute in his plays means becoming an active spectator as described by Bennett. Because LaBute implicates the audience through the social critique in his plays, in order to make that critique he relies on the audiences' willingness to actively decode what is placed in front of them. Without such active participation it would be very easy to sum up almost any LaBute play as "horrifying" and "misogynistic." It would be very easy to make the leap from LaBute to "LaBrute."

In conclusion, I'd like to briefly return to the first question posed to me by an audience member at the talkback following opening night: "As a woman how did you feel directing a play by a misogynist?" To answer most directly: "Great!" I feel as if we presented a play that was readily available to our students, yet that still challenged them in terms of subject matter. For the active spectators, it provoked discussion and debate about social norms and expectations relating to obesity in the subsequent talkbacks in various classrooms across campus. To answer the question in a more complicated manner, I am uncomfortable agreeing that LaBute, himself, is a misogynist. As I conducted my research to write this paper, it quickly became obvious that critics and scholars (as well as some of our student audience members) conflate the playwright's canon with the playwright himself, thus the equation becomes LaBute equals misogynist. As I have already argued, I am more comfortable with the notion that LaBute uses misogyny in the

manner of the materialist feminists, as a convention to critique society. I am more comfortable with LaBute than “LaBrute” and I believe the former has more to offer us than the latter.

Works Cited

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