

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Neil LaBute, Erasing the Points of Safety

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You just opened *In a Forest, Dark and Deep* in Chicago. How does the experience of the American production differ from its London premiere last year?

For one thing, I am more removed from it and working only as a writer this time around. In London I was in the position of writing and directing a new play and that can be very difficult in the sense of getting enough distance and perspective on the thing. Luckily, I had a terrific cast who, once they felt that they had permission to openly revise the text (a luxury not all actors are afforded in rehearsal), were quick to jump in and tear away anything that didn't work. Between myself, Matthew and Olivia (along with a really fine assistant director and smart producers), I was able to keep only the best bits. This time around I'm letting the director and actors of the American premiere find their own way and only jumping in when they ask for help.

You work in different media. How do you know if a story should be a film or a play?

I often don't know when I'm starting out. I have several pieces in various file folders that could be a film (albeit a very talky film) or a play. I don't worry about that as much as just plunging in on my ideas when they feel ready to be written. Happily, I still spend time writing that is just for me, at least in the beginning – creating things that aren't commissioned or paid for but are simply fun for me to write. Sometimes I can feel that one of these is a play or a film but the best of my work is a little bit mysterious that way, revealing itself only in the end. The flipside is I write a lot of half-finished crap that nobody ever sees.

Your films and plays share a disquieting relationship between terror and humor. Sometimes I don't know if I should laugh or be really, really fearful of what might happen next. Is that how you see the world?

I think you give a pretty wonderful description of both my work and the kind of work I'm drawn to as an audience member; I like the feeling of not knowing what's going to happen next. Not outright horror but a growing sense of dread that permeates the proceedings, even when I find myself laughing. I think that comes from growing up in a household where you never knew what the emotional landscape of a given day was going to be. That sort of thing tends to make you a little jumpy as both a person and as a writer.

How do you communicate that to your collaborators, and the actors you direct?

Hopefully the people that you work with have picked up a whiff of this in my previous work or the piece that they've been cast in and/or are directing and are there partly because they're drawn to this kind of material. I think that wonderful gray area is one that a lot of us live in, where emotions and events can shift in a fleeting moment, and to be able to capture some of that on screen or stage is exciting. I love to erase the points of safety that audiences have come to expect and to remind them that none of us are ever truly safe. I've become the town crier, I guess, in some sense (but with a better sense of humor, I hope).

You're involved with [TimeWave](#), an international arts/technology/transmedia festival coming in November. What are you doing with TimeWave and what attracts you to it?

I think a lot of what TimeWave is trying to accomplish is in line with what I previously described—trying to break down barriers and push the envelope between artists and audiences. I'm not sure what I'll be doing specifically but i know I'll be involved with great people and that I will, hopefully, be writing and/or directing something that is extremely immediate and flexible. I really respect how the founders of TimeWave are actively reaching out and embracing the best parts of new media and are striving to make an ancient art form feel so completely of the moment. I recently did a live writing session online with the playwright Theresa Rebeck which people could watch unfold in real time and that was an absolute rush for me, almost like improv for writers. I hope that TimeWave will have that same kind of immediacy to it. It might also be a little scary at first, but hey, I'm used to that.

Photo of Neil LaBute by Aaron Eckhart.

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