

Cultural Daily

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Reasons Is Not Always Pretty

Sylvie · Wednesday, August 20th, 2014

There are no rules to playwriting, nor should there be, but an author who opens his play with an unrelenting scene that consists of a one-sided, repetitious verbal assault on the ears of a poor chump (who keeps ducking when he can't get a word in, and trust me he *can't*), should perhaps reconfigure the strategy. Because the unwitting victim here includes the audience, which does not expect to be trapped by such a diatribe right out of the gate and takes it a lot less kindly than this screaming woman's cowering boyfriend.

The tactic works if you want to lose that audience — or some part of it. That, however, does not seem to have been on playwright Neil LaBute's mind when he was writing *Reasons to Be Pretty* now at the Geffen Playhouse. And LaBute did lose some folks on the night I was there, when they failed to show up for the second act. It was their loss in the end, because substance did pierce through in the second act, beyond all the yelling and meandering small talk of the first one.

Poor choice of first scene or not, this playwright was intent on making a statement. The title, although not entirely inappropriate, could well have been *Reasons to Be Articulate*, which does not roll off the tongue quite as elegantly. But since this is not a new play, it's way too late to have this conversation. (*Reasons to Be Pretty* opened off Broadway in 2008, on Broadway in 2009, was nominated for three Tony® Awards, including Best Play, before finding more success in London and elsewhere.)

What LaBute is getting at here is ubiquitous: the monumental difficulty of communicating with one another. At all. Ionesco was obsessed with this subject in virtually all of his plays. Many other writers have tackled it. Playwrights absolutely love it.

Here we have the complexity of four fairly inarticulate working-class individuals — two men and two women — who are friends and lovers and unaccustomed to exposing, let alone discussing their feelings. They lack the vocabulary and all the other tools with which to do it, and they fall back on four-letter words to do the work for them.

The first act's virulence between Steph (Amber Tamblyn) and her boyfriend Greg (Shawn Hatosy) is triggered by an off-hand comment Greg allegedly made to his pal Kent (Nick Gehlfuss) in a discussion about female beauty that reflected poorly on Steph. Kent and Greg work at the same plant, as does Carly (Alicia Witt), Kent's girlfriend. It was Carly who overheard (misheard?) Greg's unflattering remark and reported it at once to Steph. These four souls are chained together by a friendship that is stymied at every turn by their inability to express what's really on their mind, and it is to LaBute's credit that he can *show* us (in the second act) what it is they

each *feel*, when they so desperately try to express it and fail.

Not having seen other productions of this play, it's hard to tell if there is any way that director Randall Arney could have driven that first act any better or, for that matter, if he should have. For better or worse, perhaps LaBute wanted to make it and keep it off-putting. The writing is the writing. But there is a sadness and a kind of nobility in that terrible struggle to articulate – to divine, to express and to struggle at making the right decisions instead of making all the wrong ones. These are ordinary people unable to make utterance or understand themselves. It hurts to watch them fall into all the terrible traps brought on by this massive failure of self-knowledge.

Hatosy's Greg, Steph's boyfriend, is the only one who eventually jumps off the emotional merry-go-round a little more "whole" than the others. He, at least, knows that he's not ready for marriage and is smart enough to make a healthier if still difficult decision. His performance is unforced and subtle enough to deliver just the right measure of ordinariness — enough to persuade us that his reactions are not stupid, just uncertain. The events whirling around him have coerced him into looking deeper and struggling better with his insecurities. This one, we feel, may make a better life as he moves forward.



Amber Tamblyn as Steph, in *Reasons to Be Pretty* by Neil LaBute.

Tamblyn's Steph, on the other hand, chooses to get hitched to the wrong guy for all the wrong reasons, even when she knows they're wrong. The scene in which she makes a last attempt to win back Greg, so painfully and awkwardly, moves us by its almost wordless content (a real contrast to the play's opening rant). It is a remarkable exchange and a prime example of LaBute's capacity to make us *see* the anguished words these characters cannot speak.

Gehlfuss' Kent is your narcissistic blowhard, a typical villain who can't resist a pretty skirt and marries Carly as flippantly as he moves on to a vacant life as a philandering husband. LaBute has a few nasty surprises in store for him and we are able to watch them coming. Witt, as the benighted Carly, is at the receiving end of all these mistakes. We pity her but we do not often like her.



Alicia Witt as Carly and Nick Gehlfuss as Kent, in *Reasons to Be Pretty* by Neil LaBute

In some ways *Reasons to Be Pretty* feels like a blue collar *La Ronde*, as these four people engage in a slow and inexorable dance of death — the death of failed lives. And yet. Our world has been spinning for centuries on the axis of just such wars of misperception. And when you illuminate the particular, in all its fatal flaws, you also magnify the universal.

LaBute has done just that.

WHAT: *Reasons to Be Pretty*

WHERE: The Gil Cates Theater at the Geffen Playhouse

10866 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024

WHEN: through August 31, 2014.

HOW: Tickets: \$39-\$79, available at the Geffen box office, or at 310.208.5454, or at www.geffenplayhouse.com.

*Featured Photo: Nick Gehlfuss, left, and Shawn Hatosy in a scene from **Reasons to Be Pretty**.*

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