ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

A TOUCH OF BAD

Why is the director Neil LaBute so interested in jerks?

BY JOHN LAHR

Once upon a time in the early nineties, in the irony-free zone of Off Off Broadway, the writer and director Neil LaBute sat onstage doing triple duty as an actor in his barroom play, "Filthy Talk for Troubled Times: Scenes of Intolerance." One of the barflies was in the middle of a riff about AIDS and about her fear of infection—"I say, put them all in a fucking pot and boil them . . . just as a precaution"—when a member of the audience sitting right up front shouted, "Kill the playwright!" LaBute, who is thirty-eight and whose wiry black hair and pug nose give him the look of a large, amiable hedgehog, says his first thought was "to get to the exit, to lead the crowd out to safety"; another part of him was thrilled, because "people were listening enough to go out of their way to make a response." The angry patron stayed for the rest of the play, which is a testament to LaBute's good writing and to his canny view of theatre and film as "a contact sport," which "should be the most of whatever it is—the most joy, the most terror."

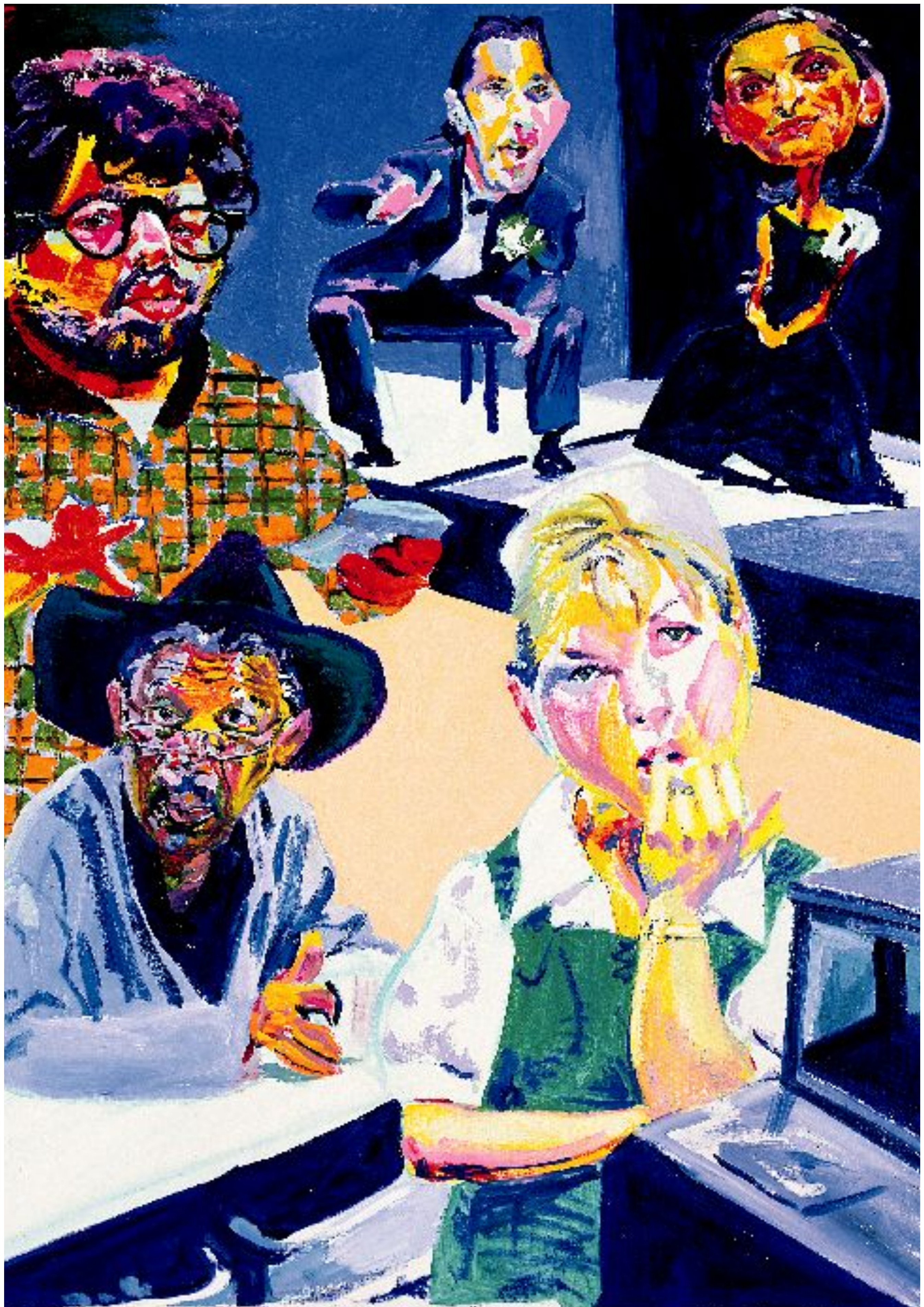
LaBute, whose first play-turned-film, "In the Company of Men" (1997), made his name and also earned him the sobriquet "the angriest white male," courts provocation not for the sake of shock but to make an audience think against its own received opinions. His production company is mischievously called Contemptible Entertainment; his work is cruel, dark, and often very funny. "In the Company of Men" is about two corporate eager beavers—the venomous Chad and his sidekick, Howard—who conspire to find a vulnerable woman, woo her, and then hurt her. "It's a simple story," LaBute wrote in the introduction to the published screenplay. "Boys meet girl, boys crush girl, boys giggle." "Your Friends and Neighbors" (1998), adapted from his play "Lepers," is a sexual merry-go-round among friends. Together, the two films are a kind of "Rake's Progress," and LaBute's model for them is Restoration comedy, which, as he explained to me when we met in Hollywood this spring, "gets down to the dirt of the way we live with each other and treat each other." He pays homage to his source in "Your Friends and Neighbors" when, during a rehearsal of Wycherley's "The Country Wife," the drama professor and sleazy sexual predator, Jerry (Ben Stiller), sitting in the auditorium in periwig and frock coat, explains to his cuckolded best friend, Barry (Aaron Eckhart), why he bedded his wife:

JERRY: . . . I just feel . . . Fuck, I don't know how to put this, I just feel . . .
BARRY: "Bad"?
JERRY: "Bad." Exactly! Bad.
BARRY: I mean, my wife . . .
JERRY: I'm sorry.
BARRY: The same hotel room even.
JERRY: I am sorry.
BARRY: Yeah . . .
JERRY: But I . . . I mean, I still feel . . .
BARRY: . . . "Bad."
JERRY: Right. "Bad."

The moral and emotional nonchalance of LaBute's characters echoes the amorality and privilege of the Restoration fops, who, LaBute has said, are "well-to-do people with time on their hands who go around hurting each other, doing things that are pretty unpleasant, just because the opportunity presents itself." The original court entertainments emphasized the notion of appearance versus authenticity. "Behind that great sense of costume—the wigs and makeup—there was a sense that all was well, even while bugs were crawling in the wigs and the physical self was falling apart," LaBute said. "There was still the sense that it was better to look good than to feel good." LaBute's contemporary fops have no authentic self to hide: they are all façade. He links this to the nineties

PHILIP BURKE

LaBute, center, with actors from "Bash" and "Nurse Betty": Ron Eldard, Paul Rudd, Calista Flockhart, Renée Zellweger, Morgan Freeman, and Chris Rock.



obsession with style and with the insistence on appearance as reality. "There's a huge sense in the nineties of 'I can become anything I want as long as I present it tenaciously enough.' Clinton would be a fair example."

LaBute, who calls himself "a part-time moralist," is a practicing Mormon; he converted to the faith in the early eighties, before he married Lisa Gore, a psychotherapist who is deeply involved with the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. The Mormon obsession with moral improvement and with "pretending nothing bad happens," as he says, accounts in large part for LaBute's relish of transgression. The absence of surface detail in his films—"In the Company of Men" takes place in a nameless city and at a nameless corporation where nameless executive tasks are performed—allows the viewer to focus on the psychological aspects of the piece: the casual cruelties we commit, the ways in which we displace our anger.

"Neil always wants you to personalize his work," says the actor Aaron Eckhart, who starred in both "In the Company of Men" and "Your Friends and Neighbors," and has a part in the forthcoming "Nurse Betty," LaBute's first mainstream Hollywood movie and the only one of his films that he has not written. "He wants you to say, 'I'm that person' or 'I have done that.' "

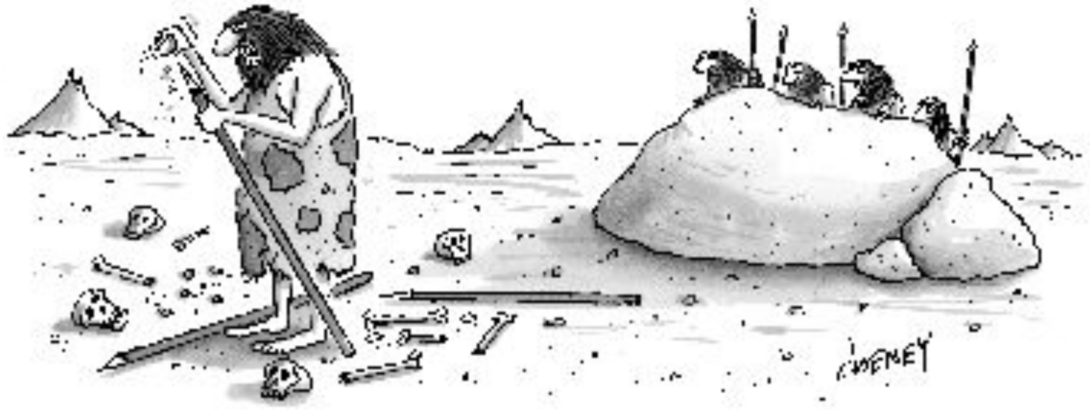
For the same reasons, in his stage work LaBute favors the black box—the unadorned proscenium—and the confines of the monologue. His versatility in this form is shown to brilliant and unsettling effect in a trio of short pieces collectively called "Bash," which opened last week at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre, starring Calista Flockhart, Ron Eldard, and Paul Rudd. Here, in one of the pieces—a tandem monologue entitled "A Gaggle of Saints: A Remembrance of Hatred and Longing"—a soon-to-be-married college couple recount a road trip to New York City with a few Mormon college friends for a party at the Plaza. During the day's long trajectory of good times, the guys find themselves attacking a homosexual in a Central Park latrine:

> Tim leans into him one more time, takes a little run at it, smashing his foot against the bridge of this man's nose and I see it give way. Just pick up and move to the other side of his face. Wow. And then it's silence. Not a sound. And for the first time, we look over at Dave. . . . What's he thinking? And right then, as if to answer us through revelation . . . he grabs up the nearest trash can, big wire mesh thing, raises it above his head as he whispers, "Fag." I'll never forget that . . . "fag." That's all. And brings that can down right on the spine of the guy, who just sort of shudders a bit, expelling air.

Clearly, LaBute does not follow the Mormon line about the showing of good. On the contrary, his work is built on the belief that great good can come from showing the bad.

I VISITED LaBute on the set of "Nurse Betty," which he describes as "a feel-good hit that includes scalping, love, a cross-country car chase, shoot-outs, comedy"—in other words, an entertainment, and perhaps a holiday from his usual despair. LaBute, dressed in a blue-and-black plaid shirt, jeans, sneakers, and a slicker with a packet of raisins tucked into the cuff, spent much of the first morning skulking around a crowded Pasadena bungalow, inspecting every cranny of a room where one of the film's heavies, played by Chris Rock, goes looking for Betty, the title character (Renée Zellweger). The film is essentially a chase movie, in which Betty, a waitress, sees her ne'er-do-well husband murdered for the cache of drugs he has hidden in her car; traumatized and deluded, she sets off for Los Angeles to marry her "fiancé," the doctor on her favorite soap opera. On the set, LaBute engages his cast as he does the world—with an almost Presidential bonhomie, at once solicitous and standoffish. He speaks with the low-key collegial composure of someone who knows who he is—the boss. "Love that Tide!" he called to the set decorator, who was positioning the soap-powder box so that the camera would catch it in the corner of the frame. "Love that box of Tide!" The scene called for the actress Kathleen Wilhoite to hold a baby as she answered the front door; on this bright morning, the professional toddler, a

hefty lump called Robert, was bawling himself red in the face. LaBute swooped up the child and cradled him in his thick arms, as adept at handling kids as adults. (He has an eleven-year-old daughter, Lily, and a seven-year-old son, Spencer.) "You'll have the baby in your arms. That'll give you an acting challenge," he said to Wilhoite. "It'll steal the scene," she said. LaBute shot her a grin as he walked away. "They often do," he said.



"O.K., so who gets to tell him he's a war criminal?"

On the bungalow's front lawn, amid a scrum of technicians and prop hands, LaBute, an almost constant nosher, munched a few raisins. "My mom is very happy, because I'm doing more than she hoped for," he told me. "But she'd rather I was doing comedies. I told her, 'I just did, so wait till I do a drama.' "

Chris Rock ambled over, dressed like a Bible salesman, in a loose-fitting black suit. "He's great with scenery," Rock said. "He's the best hair director that ever lived." LaBute gave him an owlish look, greeted him as "Mr. Rock," and said they were nearly ready to shoot. "I don't smile in this movie. I brood," Rock said as he walked away. "Cheating America of the bullshit that is Chris Rock."

It is typical of LaBute that he would find a way to exploit Rock's edgy, darker essence rather than his show-biz surface, even in a commercial film. "Nurse Betty," written by John C. Richards and James Flamberg, is the first of a two-picture deal that LaBute cut with Propaganda Films (the company that joint-produced the four-million-dollar "Your Friends and Neighbors" last year). After he'd signed the contract, he had second thoughts and wanted to bolt; now he seemed to be contentedly and firmly at the helm. "There are a lot of firsts for me here," he said as the other children in the scene were being rounded up and given their orders. "First crane. First squib shot. First in all the things that you may not have dealt with—like anyone pulling a gun, let alone using it." To that list of firsts could be added: first big production (thirty million dollars), first seven-figure payday, first star-studded cast (Rock, Zellweger, Morgan Freeman), first happy ending, first film without his own narrative voice.

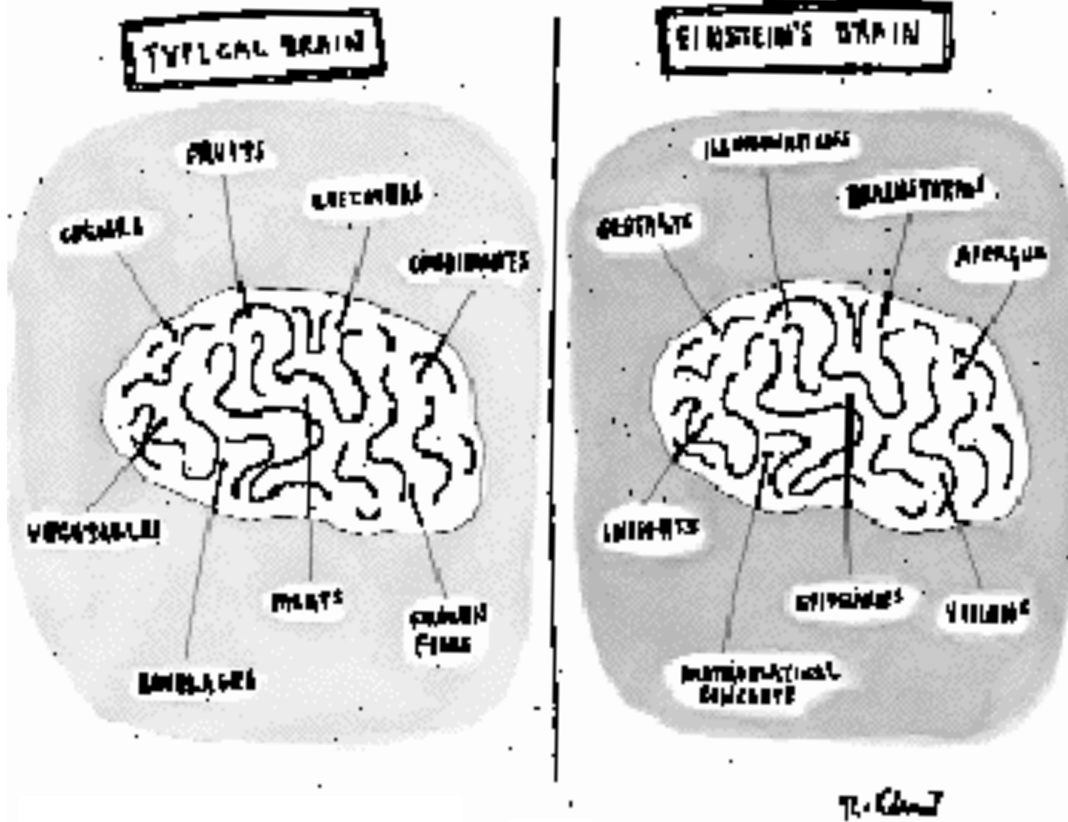
Even so, the Hollywood machine hasn't completely expunged LaBute's instinct for mischief, which became apparent a few hours later, when he was slumped in front of a monitor with two producers at his back worrying about the lack of coverage for an interracial sex scene. On the small screen, Rock was kneeling on a bed behind a white girl, pumping her for information while rogering her doggy style, as Jerry memorably does to Terri in "Your Friends and Neighbors." "This is why I wanted to do the script," LaBute joked. In fact, he said, he shot the scene without coverage on purpose, so it could not be edited, in the hope of finessing his case against the inbred conservatism of the studio. "We talked about the sex," he explained. "Frontal would have been too intimate—he's getting information from the girl. It seemed less personal from behind. They have the same amount of clothes on—in fact, more than they had on in 'Your Friends and Neighbors.' I think it comes down to the race thing. I really do."

After about ten minutes of calm discussion with the producers, LaBute accepted the postcoital option. "Just them in bed," he said. "Her sitting smoking. He's lying next to her, and they're talking." He shoved his fingers into a bag of Cheetos. "Let's do it!" he shouted to his assistant. "Light the bed. Let's look right down on them. And off we'll go. She'll blow a little smoke in his face."

The next day, the production caravan moved to a low-rent side street of downtown Los Angeles. "This is your 'I found the coke' scene. Your daddy will be proud of you," LaBute said to Rock. Rock started over toward his screen father, Morgan Freeman, who was sucking on a toothpick and looking like a Marlboro man, in cowboy boots and pressed jeans. By the time LaBute got the shot he was talking about, it was midday and a tent had been erected to protect the monitors from the glare of the sun. LaBute and his director of photography, Jean Yves Escoffier, watched the screens as Freeman and Rock, for about the tenth time, sauntered toward a parked LeSabre and pried its trunk open. "I shoulda been a film director when I was a kid," LaBute said, happy with the take. "Time would have gone by much quicker. Waiting for Christmas? Go make a movie."

LaBute, who has an encyclopedic knowledge of pop culture and can as easily imitate Don Knotts ("My body is a weapon") as discourse on Werner Herzog's "Stroszek," is a curious amalgam of theatrical influences. "What the fuck's her name? I mean, tits like that must have a name, correct?" has the vernacular wallop of a David Mamet line; actually, it is the self-incriminating telephone talk of Cary in "Your Friends and Neighbors." LaBute writes with the same linguistic cunning as Mamet and characterizes his admiration for the playwright as "beyond fan—stalker perhaps. Psychological stalker." He even managed to mount an expurgated version of Mamet's "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" during his undergraduate days, at Brigham Young University: "My posters were so rococo that the passerby couldn't read what they said."

Where Mamet hears violence and evasion under conversational speech, LaBute hears a kind of moral and emo-



tional entropy—what he calls "the chill factor"—under his characters' jabbering. "I tend to hear a false sense of warmth in the way we lead people in sentences," LaBute says. " 'You know,' 'I mean,' 'Listen.' People are constantly trying to embellish what they say with this false sense of camaraderie—'I'm with you,' 'I'm with you on this.' A phrase that suddenly started coming up more and more and that I incorporated in 'Your Friends and Neighbors' was 'Is it me?' These men were constantly asking, without any sense of wanting to know the answer, 'Who's doing this?' "

In "Filthy Talk for Troubled Times" LaBute developed this idea by orchestrating a counterpoint of monologues in which people talk about wanting to connect while the form of the play insures that they aren't listening to each other. "Women. Fucking broads! . . . You can't fucking trust them," one drinker says to another. "Well . . . personally, I could never trust anything that bleeds for a week and doesn't die." The complete absence of empathy expressed by this vicious joke also finds a powerful metaphor at the end of "In the Company of Men," when the contrite Howard (Matt Malloy) goes in search of the female victim, Christine (Stacy Edwards), and finds her working in a bank. She wants no part of him or his apology; she leaves the bad feeling with him. "Listen," he says to her, then starts to shout when she doesn't acknowledge him. "Listen! Listen!! Listen!!! Listen!!!!" "It's so selfish," LaBute says of Howard's desire to have his impulse toward goodness acknowledged. "I think a lot of the characters I write, and certainly a lot of the male characters, are selfish. They just indulge themselves in taking care of their needs."

This sense of entitlement is the presenting symptom of most of LaBute's characters, and is part of what makes his work so distinctly contemporary. In addition to Mamet, he admires Wallace Shawn, whom he calls "the great chronicler of the ease with which we slowly tumble." "The difference between a perfectly decent person and a monster is just a few thoughts," Shawn writes in the appendix to his play "Aunt Dan and Lemon," which LaBute cites as an influence on his own modest proposals. Charles Metten, who taught directing at Brigham Young, calls LaBute "a young Ibsen," which is perhaps pitching it a bit high. But LaBute is an original voice, and the best new playwright to emerge in the past decade. He brings to his observations about human nature something that other contemporary American writers have not articulated with quite such single-minded authority: a sense of sin.

"The 'should's and 'have to's of Mormonism make Neil struggle with the sinful life," Metten says. "The Latter-Day Saints standards are so high. The humanness of Neil sends him in the other direction. He gets even in his writing." LaBute's plays, which percolate with corrosive skepticism, are, in fact, by-products of the righteous life. "The interesting thing about sin is that we've gotten a bit away from it," LaBute says. "There's a right and a wrong that goes beyond the daily practice of living, and I think we have gotten away from that idea, yet it sort of hangs over all of us." His stories show a sense of goodness being leached out of the lives of his characters and, more hilariously, out of their vocabulary. In "Your Friends and Neighbors," the subject comes up over a meal:

> BARRY: Do you think you're good?
> CARY: What, a good fuck?
> BARRY: No, "good." I'm asking you, do you think you're good?
> CARY: "Good," what do you mean, "good"? What kinda question is that?
> BARRY: I'm asking . . . I'm saying are you, you know, like, a "good person"?
> CARY: Hey, I'm eating lunch . . .

Later, when the thorny issue of salvation comes up—the question of whether they'll ultimately have to "pay" for their behavior, in Barry's weasel words—Cary says, "I mean, if there ends up being a God or something like that whole eternity thing out there, like, then, yeah, probably so. I dunno. We'll see. But until then, we're on my time, O.K.? The interim is mine." LaBute's characters are so lost to themselves, so separated from their souls, that they can't feel anything; they hurt people in *order* to feel something. The murderous mothers and fathers, the violent college boys, the conniving friends and rampant seducers in his work

continually dramatize sin as the inability to imagine the suffering of others.

As a boy, LaBute often went to church and participated in Bible study, even though his parents didn't. He grew up with intimations of a faithless world—what he calls "a vague foreboding that something was not quite right." He explains, "I'm sure a lot of my love of stories—of watching film or theatre, imagining myself in some other context—came from the unsettling environment at home." When LaBute's producing partner, Stephen Pevner, called him at the Seattle Film Festival, after the initial success of "In the Company of Men," in 1997, Pevner remembers getting LaBute's soft-spoken mother, Marian, on the phone. "I said, 'It's taken so long. It must feel so good. He did it, he really did it!' She goes, 'I know. He captured his father perfectly.' I said, 'Well, I actually meant he did it. He pulled it off.' And she goes, 'I know what you meant.' "

"There's a great deal of my father in a lot of the characters that people find somewhat unseemly," LaBute says. Richard LaBute, who was ten years older than his wife, had wanted to be an airline pilot but ended up a truck driver; he specialized in long-distance hauling during Neil's childhood, which was spent mostly in Liberty Lake, Washington, outside Spokane. "As a kid, you get a sense of betrayal you can't put specifics to—a sense of women down the line is what one can make a leap to," LaBute says of his handsome father's long absences. (Richard and Marian were divorced about five years ago, after thirty-five years of marriage.) "My mother never talked about it. When I was old enough to talk about it, I really wasn't interested to find out the truth." He continues, "There must be something there that I don't necessarily want the answer to, because it helps fuel the writing."

Neil, the second child (his brother Richard, Jr., is a linguist and digital-processing executive in Minneapolis), was a bookish, sensitive, goofy-looking kid. Aaron Eckhart describes Neil's father as "a hard-ass" who was "always chipping at him." The family pattern, LaBute says, was to "spackle over problems" and "keep everything hidden—any kind of strife that would make my father angry. I can remember when he came home, a great sense of anticipation, because of not knowing what mood he'd come back in." His father's temper gave LaBute a sense of casual brutality and of "how much damage could be done with language." He goes on, "I can remember working with my father on a car. He'd gone inside. The only thing that really sets me off is inanimate objects, because there's no reasoning with them. I let out a tirade that would have made someone proud. I didn't realize he'd come back into the garage. He looked at me, and I got the sense of 'So this is part of the legacy I've left behind.' "

When LaBute gets angry, according to Eckhart, "he crawls inside himself." Pevner says, "If you're good to him, he's extremely good to you. If you're bad to him, forget it. What's worse than the wrath of God? You won't get anything. You will get nothing." LaBute doesn't like to be touched; he resists intimacy. "He doesn't want people to know too much," the actress Hilary Russell says. "He's the only friend of mine that I feel very close to but I don't know absolutely everything about. There's a lot of dark stuff, and he's trying to figure it all out." LaBute's cordiality and his mystery are confounding. It is as if, like his plays, the warmth of his surface disguises colder depths. "He's very hard to read," says Pevner, who has worked with LaBute for a decade and still doesn't know the exact address of his home, in a northern suburb of Chicago. "He likes ambiguity. He will end up doing something he doesn't want to do, simply not to have a confrontation. He articulates through his writing, and that's it."

LaBute's mother, a fervid Anglophile, encouraged her son's love of drama and film, but his father did not; from the age of ten, Neil waged a perpetual losing battle against his father about his being what he calls "an indentured servant" on a farm that his father operated as a sideline. To LaBute's knowledge, his father, whom he hears from infrequently, has never seen one of his plays or films. Charles Metten recalls sitting in his office at Brigham Young with LaBute, who was planning to write a play about fathers and sons for Metten to direct. "I asked, 'Will it be another "All My Sons"?' He said, 'No, it's gonna be better.' Then, for the first time in our friendship, he started to talk about his father. Tears welled up. He got very, very emotional. In fact, he left and went to the rest room."

Though LaBute was the president of his high-school class, he refused to attend Friday-night football games, because they coincided with the weekly changing of the feature at the local cinema. His yearbook is filled with pictures of him: in "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" (he played Snoopy), "Arsenic and Old Lace," and "Don't Drink the Water." At Brigham Young, which he attended on a scholarship, LaBute continued to act, but he preferred the detachment of writing. He began providing monologues and scenes for friends going into the Irene Ryan Acting Competition, one of whom got to the finals. "I had a quick ability to write short, kind of pungent sketches and monologues," he says. "I had the hardest time writing anything of length, because I hated the idea of stopping. I loved to sit down and finish something. I was always writing short pieces. It was the opposite of writer's block." LaBute earned a B.A. in 1985; he married Gore, whom he had met at Brigham Young, and they moved to New York, hoping that he could parlay his sketch-writing skills into a berth on "Late Night with David Letterman" or "Saturday Night Live."

In his first, frustrating taste of the New York scene, LaBute's confidence was severely tested. A friend gave him the home telephone number of Lorne Michaels, "S.N.L." 's executive producer, and LaBute cold-called him. " 'How did you get my number?' " LaBute remembers Michaels saying. " 'Please don't call me here again. Send it in to the show.' That was the extent of my sketch-writing career. From then on, I started to say, 'Well, then, I'll just make it happen for myself as much as I can.' "

LaBute's early plays were the subject of scandal and concern at Brigham Young, where he worked toward a Ph.D. in the early nineties. "The faculty revered Neil, but they were also afraid of him,"

recalls Eckhart, who first performed LaBute's work as an undergraduate. "This material was absolutely subversive. They thought it was going to tear down the theatre department." The Mormon atmosphere "forced Neil to be more creative, because of the restrictions, the no-nos," Metten says. "Neil was in constant battle." For instance, in order to prevent the staging of "Lepers," which LaBute had rehearsed for three months, the administration locked up the theatre and even the lightboard; LaBute, who was able to get into the theatre only to give a final exam, cut short the exam and did his play. "There was a glee in him," says Tim Slover, who taught playwriting and in whose postgraduate course LaBute wrote "In the Company of Men." "He knew he was doing important work. But the glee was over the fact that this important moral work had surface features that appalled people."

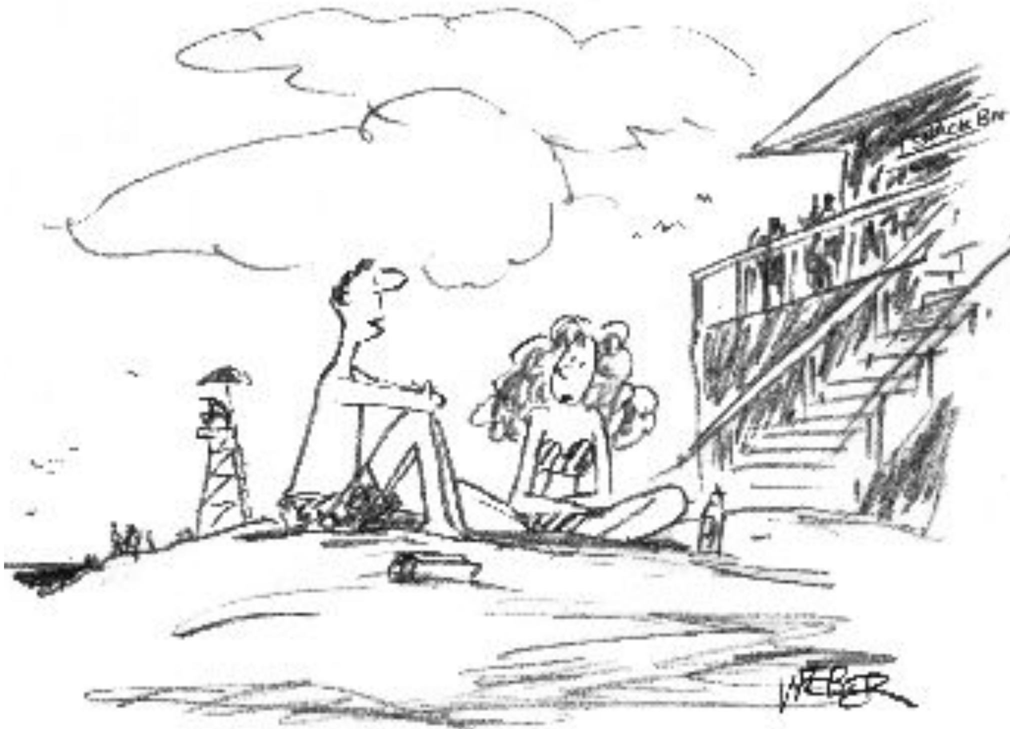
In the larger world, LaBute's uncompromising scripts—which he typed all in lower case, so as not to impede the flow of his thought, and with no stage directions—were hard to sell. "There was a long period of writing plays and putting them away," says LaBute, who supported himself by teaching, and by working in a series of psychiatric hospitals and correctional institutions, where he was able to write late at night. Except for the productions he generated, mostly in university settings, his plays were not getting done. He was, he says, "torn by the hunger to get the work out there and have people see it."

"He wanted to be the greatest living playwright in America," Metten says of his student, whom he characterizes as "a pain in the butt because he was a genius." He adds, "When he would do his work, he knew it was darn good and that he would be ostracized from the regular community." LaBute's plays brought him into conflict not just with the community but with forces closer to home. At Brigham Young, his wife was conspicuously absent from his productions. "I came right out and asked 'Doesn't it hurt your feelings?' " Hilary Russell says. "He's like, 'You know, it did at first.' He just kind of hardens himself. She must know his work, and she's just avoiding it—she's going against every single Mormon standard in not supporting her husband." Although Lisa Gore is listed as a creative consultant on "In the Company of Men," there seems to have been serious disagreement on "Your Friends and Neighbors" up to the first day of filming. "There was a major issue of Lisa's being afraid he'd be excommunicated—I mean, in the Mormon church you're not supposed to even think impure thoughts," says Russell, who was on the set the first day, when LaBute got his wife's phone call. "She said, 'You can't make it. How can you make this film?' I knew something was wrong just by his eyes."

LaBute's exploration of self-aggrandizement is also, by inference, about self-sacrifice: it reflects in theatrical terms his own internal battle to be at once great and good. "There's the Church telling you, 'You can't make these films or you'll go to Hell,' " Eckhart says of LaBute. "And there are other ramifications. Neil's wife holds a position in the Church. You got the whole social thing. It's very acute. I think everything in his life, on a certain level, is telling him in some way to forsake his true love—his work."

Before he got the financing for "In the Company of Men," Eckhart remembers LaBute's saying, "I don't know if I can make a film. Who's going to trust me?" He was an unknown director, with an unknown script, unknown performers, and an unhappy ending. His father-in-law, an importer of industrial silks, declined to invest, but two of LaBute's former students stumped up their insurance payouts from a car accident. The actors got themselves to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where, in the mid-nineties, LaBute was teaching at St. Francis College; his next-door neighbor put them up. "We had a wonderful D.P. and sound guy, but, as far as everyone else, they were all volunteers from Fort Wayne—I mean, postal workers, college students, housewives," Stacy Edwards, who played the woman, says. "Neil was doing everything that normally would take at least six people to take care of."

LaBute shot "In the Company of Men" in eleven days, on twenty-five thousand dollars. Later, Sony added a quarter-million dollars in postproduction money to the film, and it grossed over five million dollars. "We knew through the entire shoot we really only had two takes per scene," Edwards says. "So you had to get it right." Eckhart recalls, "Stacy and I were sitting at that restaurant. It was six o'clock at night. We didn't close the



"I see myself going into some form of public service, like banking."

restaurant down, because he had no money. Those customers are real, and they're kicking us out. So Neil comes up to me and says, 'Aaron, we've done it once, and it isn't right.' It was on my closeup and the last shot of the day. He says, 'Aaron, we've got one hundred feet of film left. We're getting kicked out of the restaurant.' He goes, 'Don't feel any pressure, but you have to get this one.' How many times did I hear that?"

There was no video playback, there were no dailies, and there was almost no movie when the lab gave LaBute three days to pay his bill or lose the film. But the end of the struggle came with a standing ovation at the Sundance Festival, where "In the Company of Men" won the 1997 Filmmakers Trophy. "In the middle of the screening, I turned to Matt Malloy and said, 'This thing is hot,' " Eckhart says. "I knew Neil felt that way. When we came out, it was right there on his face—'All right! This is going somewhere. I'm vindicated. Everything that I knew about myself has just happened.' He didn't say it. I saw it."

"It's eBay fever—we'll have to pull the plug!"

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I LAST saw LaBute in Projection Room 7 of a squat building off Santa Monica Boulevard, where he was hunkered down in the far-right-hand corner of the first row of a screening room, watching seven hours of dailies. For this marathon, the members of his team were spread out behind him over five rows: they came and went, snoozed and talked as clapper board after clapper board announced a new take of shots 87 A through D. I sat directly behind LaBute, hoping he might talk to me during the process. He didn't. Instead, he worked away at a large bag of Doritos and a Pepsi as he watched a well-shot sequence that included a white Mercedes tearing up the ramp of a hospital emergency entrance and ramming an ambulance; an exchange of gunfire; flying bodies; breaking glass; and Nurse Betty, in her hospital disguise, pressed into real medical service by some gun-waving gangbangers who mistake her for the genuine article.

In the film, Nurse Betty is spellbound; and it struck me over the next hour that perhaps the purpose of this exercise for LaBute was to live, however briefly, in the exhilarating spell of the Hollywood system that had captivated him as an adolescent on those Friday nights. LaBute had accomplished the hardest thing: he had found both a style and an audience for his point of view. Now, for the moment at least, he was giving up the personal for the impersonal, the subversive for something that conformed more or less to the commercial formulas that his other movies shunned. "Nurse Betty," a will-she-or-won't-she saga, plays against LaBute's great strength, which is to force the audience to take a position rather than to abdicate thought for the sake of fun. I tried to see it through his eyes. Pevner had told me, "I think he wanted to acquire power—you know, psychological power, emotional power, financial power. To overcome his obstacles. I think he's truly a romantic figure."

In a way, a full-blown Hollywood movie could be seen as LaBute's victory lap—a little moment of vindictive triumph, to show the panjandrums of commerce who'd rejected his early work that he could succeed in this part of the business, too. In the past, he had access to nobody; now he was on the Rolodex of everyone in town. He was an artist with money chores to be done, and sometimes it was wise to give the piper a dance. There were historical precedents: Scorsese's "Cape Fear," Hitchcock's "Dial M for Murder," Huston's "Annie." Then again perhaps this dance was not for the piper at all but for the Mormon brethren, and maybe even for his wife, who wanted him to delight the world rather than disenchant it.

When LaBute and I talked again, a couple of weeks ago, he was making plans to come East for rehearsals of "Bash." He declared himself pleased with "Nurse Betty" and with the new bag of tricks he'd mastered. "It's sort of freeing," he said. I asked him if the film was LaButian, and, with typical LaButian ambivalence, he answered, "Yes—and no." He did see some thematic connections with his plays and his tougher work. "There is a series of mediocre-to-bad men and a woman scrambling to save themselves," he said. With LaBute, one way or another, salvation remains the issue. ♦