Without Mercy? Neil LaBute as Mormon Artist:

A consideration of *Your Friends and Neighbors*, *Bash*, *The Mercy Seat*, and *The Shape of Things*

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PHILIP ROTH ONCE NOTED that American writers were divided into two camps: "palefaces," followers of the refined genteel tradition of Henry James and William Dean Howells with their elevated sensibilities and decorous language, and "redskins" like Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser who were "vulgar" in vernacular and themes. Roth proclaimed himself a redface, a hybrid—one who is compelled to examine and re-examine high moral precepts and equally compelled to do it through shocking, coarse rollicking comedy. Add to this the vision of Roth at war with himself over his own cultural Jewishness and you have an explosive mix: the perversely entertaining spectacle of a sincerely religious writer provoking outraged responses from his own co-religionists. And simultaneously leaving pieces of his own skin strewn about from the controversy.

Neil LaBute is one of the few Mormon writers who could legitimately be called a redface. Again and again he demands from his audience moral responses to hard questions about his characters. How could this one possibly do such a thing? How can that one live with herself after this? Generally speaking, Mormon audiences simply are not used to being challenged in the brutal territories LaBute ranges over in his work. His rogue's gallery of predators and victims can produce bafflement in LDS viewers unaccustomed to the depiction of a full range of human behavior. But faithful readers of Roth and another fierce moralist, Tom Wolfe, will recognize the technique of confrontation through the satire of

thoroughly rotten conduct. LaBute also shares a common trait with two well-loved but seemingly disparate LDS essayists, Eugene England and Ann Cannon, and fiction writer Levi Peterson. They also can write unpretentiously, straight from the heart, without condescension and self-righteousness. Some critics have accused LaBute, like his cinematic soul mate Stanley Kubrick, of a heartless mercilessness. A lack of mercy is not the feeling one gets from him; rather, a rueful sadness. We're told in scripture that God weeps at the sight of human folly (Moses 7: 28-9).

It could be that LaBute, as a convert to the LDS church, was not socialized as a child and young adult into the omnipresent culture of "niceness" (in the Elouise Bell sense of the word). Many Mormons who try to write are hobbled by that artificial, superficial niceness that has nothing to do with the charity mentioned in the scriptures. LaBute, however, is not afraid to cause his audience profound discomfort. He can probe into areas few want to consider at length because he is not a victim of the internalized impulse towards avoidance and denial that is so common with LDS artists.

His second film, after the unexpected triumph of *In the Company of Men*, was 1998's *Your Friends and Neighbors*, a movie of startling power. It tells the story of a small group of college-town dwellers adrift in a sea of relativism. Ben Stiller plays a weaselly college drama teacher (the little beard, glasses, and job description of Stiller's character make me wonder if LaBute is not self-laceratingly basing the character on things he does not admire about himself.) Aaron Eckhart, in a truly astonishing performance for those who saw him play the ruthless misogynist in *In the Company of Men*, plays a pathetic, clueless man married to Amy Brenneman, a sweet but foolish woman who drifts into a humiliating sexual affair with Stiller. Catherine Keener plays Stiller's girlfriend, a bitter woman who can't stand the sound of another human voice during sexual encounters. Jason Patric plays the incarnation of pure male sexual aggression. These characters proceed to betray and back stab one another in scary, hilarious ways. They talk to each other in clichés and fragmented sentences. Ironically, the only strong, clear voice belongs to the vile Patric. He delivers a couple of truly evil monologues proclaiming his warped view of life. Eckhart asks Patric whether he thinks someday he will have to pay for the things he does in this life, and Patric replies, "Someday we may find out there is eternity and God and all that. But until then, we are on *my time*."

There is strong language and strong sexual content in this movie, and almost all of the things the people do are appallingly dysfunctional. Some have labeled this a depressing film. I found it too darkly funny and clear-eyed to be a downer. One of LaBute's special gifts is to make you identify with his characters. I was horrified to see some of myself on the screen, and after viewing the film, I wanted to treat people better than

what LaBute had shown me. Some of the critical responses to this film were revealing. The film presents a relatively conservative view of life that apparently made some reviewers deeply uncomfortable. One wanted to know "who made this guy judge, jury, and executioner." Another critic said that LaBute's Mormonism was obvious because of the shock he exhibits at the actions of his characters and suggested that LaBute "get over it."

LaBute ran into trouble with his church over his 1999 play *Bash: Latter-day Plays*. One could compare *Bash* to Kevin Smith's Catholic farce *Dogma*. *Dogma* also has a core of genuine religious feeling, but nevertheless brought down the wrath of conservative Catholics who questioned Smith's loyalty (he says he is a faithful member of his church). Interestingly, the cause of the controversy over Bash may have been identified by an Orthodox Jewish journalist in *National Review*, the conservative magazine. In a July 26, 1999, review titled "LaBute and the Beasts," David Klinghoffer said he admired *Bash* although it was only good for people "who already have a moral framework in place." The New Yorkers who flocked to *Bash* may have had a different moral framework than LaBute and his fellow Mormons. Instead of receiving the play as a preachment of eternal Mormon values, the hipster audience may have seen *Bash* as an attack on religion, "wrenching the mask from the face of the Mormons, revealing the satanic face underneath." Perhaps LaBute's church leaders made a mistake similar to the one Klinghoffer claims New Yorkers made. Yes, LaBute was laying bare human—and Mormon—weaknesses, but he was doing this from a moral standpoint connected to his Mormonism. Although LaBute's work is subject to misinterpretations by both LDS and New York audiences, it remains the duty of the writer to speak truth as he sees it, without undue concern about how it will be received. If you are always anxious that you might be misinterpreted, you might never write a single word. Because somebody will get it wrong.

Bash is a trilogy of one-act plays, each of which climaxes with a murder. (The book edition is dedicated, "for emma, chet, and billie," the names of the victims.) Two of the titles of the mini-plays that make up the sequence refer to Greek tragedy: *Iphigenia in Orem* and *Medea Redux*. The first is a monologue by a young businessman from Orem who is staying in a Las Vegas hotel room. As he tells his story to an unseen stranger, a creeping sense of horror unfolds. The nameless yuppie describes his conventionally Mormon background, and it feels eerie to hear the actor Ron Eldard talk in the chilling context that unfolds about "the U" and "the Y" and "relief society" and a "mission." *Iphigenia* has the nasty sting of an O. Henry story suddenly turned lethal. The penultimate line, the cliché "be good to your kids, there's nothing like 'em in the world, believe me" has never sounded so sinister.

The middle playlet, *A Gaggle of Saints*, involves John and Sue, part of

a group of young Mormons from New England who visit New York City for a church activity. While in Central Park, away from their women, John and his friends encounter a gay male couple and beat one of them to death in a park restroom. The savagery of John and the obliviousness of Sue are trademark LaBute; we get a glimpse of the fearful reality behind the smiles. The final playlet, *Medea Redux*, is another monologue, this time by a rural young woman who was seduced by her junior-high school teacher. It has the thinnest connection to the church (she is apparently not LDS, but lives for a time with Mormon relatives in Utah). The seduction has tragic consequences that can be guessed from the title.

Bash was LaBute's first work with overtly LDS characters—although the ruthlessly competitive young men with short hair and ties and white shirts of *In the Company of Men* reminded me of the politics I encountered in the mission office during my own mission. LaBute knows male one-upmanship like no writer since David Mamet. The married couples of *Your Friends and Neighbors* could be sexually unexperienced marrieds at BYU; they hurt each other out of timidity and sheer ignorance. The young man in "Iphigenia in Orem" turns out to be a patriarchal monster in sheep's clothing. He may in fact sit next to me in sacrament meeting. In *Bash*, victimization begets violence. But this is the human condition that Mormons share with everyone else. Murderous homophobia is hardly confined to just Mormons, though Bash does raise the question of whether the cultural side-effects of Mormonism predispose us to self-righteousness.

Bash was eventually televised on the pay cable channel Showtime with Eldard, an almost unrecognizable Calista Flockhart, and Paul Rudd, who would later show up in *The Shape of Things*. In recent published interviews, LaBute has said he was disfellowshipped by local church leaders for writing *Bash*. Although a bystander can't know all the facts of the case, on the merits of LaBute's work this action seems unjustified. If the concern is about publicly depicting LDS members in a bad light, perhaps the *Deseret Morning News* should stop covering Mormon criminals. Is it the duty of LDS writers to present only flattering images of LDS people? Philip Roth once said that for him, the finest literature is the literature of self-indictment. Perhaps LaBute's self-lacerating honesty could increase his credibility with non-Mormons and help his "preachments" win a wider audience. In a *New Yorker* profile of LaBute, John Lahr wrote that LaBute's next film, *Nurse Betty* (2000), was his first with a happy ending and it's one "for the Mormon brethren, and maybe even for his wife, who wanted him to delight the world rather than disenchant it."

But his most recent play, *The Mercy Seat* (2002) continues at his full-blown, wide-open scurrilous best, much like *In The Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*. That is, the language is profane, R-rated, and calculatedly shocking, using frank talk of sexual matters to symbolize

life's more fraught issues. The blurbs on the cover compare LaBute to Edward Albee, Sam Shepherd, August Strindberg, and David Mamet: some pretty tough customers. But as the critic David Thomson once wrote, tough guy writers are frequently sensitive souls saying, no matter how tough times get, I can take it. And often these writers try to find beauty in the harsh mechanisms of survival.

September 11, 2001 seems to be entering our national consciousness as the contemporary counterpart of December 7, 1941: an epochal, terrible event that changes many things forever. But we seem more confused in our responses than our grandparents were. *The Mercy Seat* is not really about the attack itself, but about our individual reactions to an overwhelming atrocity. In a preface, LaBute writes that he was on an airline flight when the idea for the play came to him in a flash. He says he "ordered a ginger ale" (perhaps a wink and a nod to his fellow "Saints"), pulled out his laptop, and went to work. The play, he writes, is not about politics but a "particular kind of terrorism: the painful, simplistic warfare we often wage on the hearts of those we profess to love."

The play opens in the apartment of Abby Prescott, not far from Ground Zero in Manhattan, on the morning of September 12. A fine white ash covers everything (the cover of the book is a field of white ash with the play's title written out as if by a finger). Abby is in her forties and a woman of some prominence in an investment firm located in the World Trade Center. (In the New York production she was played by Sigourney Weaver.) Seated on the couch is Ben Harcourt, a man in his thirties, Abby's junior at the firm, and her lover. Ben was supposed to be at work in the Twin Towers, but was in the apartment getting oral sex from Abby when the planes hit.

The Greeks said "character is destiny." This man and woman are forced by soul-shaking events to confront who they really are. Abby is a strong, competent, mature woman who begins to see that her relationship with Ben is a superficial caricature of what she really needs. In Ben, LaBute presents us once again with a character who makes us painfully aware of our own weaknesses. LaBute's men are generally either sad-sacks or predators. Ben is a sad-sack who aspires to be a predator. Ben is married with small daughters. He confesses to Abby, "I always take the easy route, whatever it takes to be liked, get by. That's me. Cheated at school, screwed over my friends, my marriage is a fiasco. . ." He's a stunted man. He doesn't get Abby's references to the Amazing Kreskin and Audie Murphy; he explodes, "knowledge that isn't practical is crap, education that isn't an MBA is shit. . ." (Unfortunately, I have heard similar sentiments expressed in my own circle of acquaintances. Maybe LaBute heard such sentiments from fellow students at BYU.)

Ben sees 9/11 as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to escape, without financial, legal, or emotional complications. He is presumed dead; his

cell phone continually rings—who knows who is frantically trying to reach him. He wants to run away and start over, and he wants Abby to go with him. LaBute manages to raise a lot of questions about American society in this short piece. Ben and Abby both know that their affair is sexual harassment according to the strictest most current definition of the term. Ben argues that his plan to run away is all-American. "That's what Americans do, overcome, do what it takes, we're still going to have Christmas and the World Series." LaBute, however, remains a fire-and-brimstone moralist. In a profane speech by Abby about their bedroom habits, LaBute gives us an unforgettable image of Hell. And his dialogue, as always, remains scaldingly and disturbingly funny.

LaBute places three epigraphs before the play. One is an excerpt from a hymn about "the mercy seat, where Jesus answers prayers." The second is from Edna St. Vincent Millay: "A wind with a wolf's head/ Howled about our door/ And we burned up the chairs/ And sat upon the floor." The third, and most important, is from rocker Nick Cave: "And the mercy seat is waiting/ And I think my head is burning/ And in a way I'm yearning/ To be done with all this measuring of truth." LaBute shows us how ironically painful it is to live in the presence of the mercy seat, to know our actions have eternal consequences and that we can't take the easy way out without abdicating our souls. As another song says, would you want to see, if seeing meant you had to believe, in things like Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets. . .? What does that responsibility really involve? In the end, Abby decides to show Ben "more mercy" than he's ever shown her, but it's mercy of the cruel-to-be-kind type. In this little play LaBute remains one of the most tough-minded of our artists, a generous dispenser of what he calls "the hardest, coldest currency on the planet"—honesty.

The Shape of Things (2003), LaBute's most recent movie and his strongest yet, is a bracing examination of the consequences of treating other people as objects. It's also a stunning anatomization of some vicious contemporary mindsets. At first it appears to be a straightforward love story. Nerdy Adam (Paul Rudd) meets charismatic, renegade art student Evelyn (Rachel Weisz). She then proceeds to remake him, urging him to lose weight, lose the eyeglasses, get a more stylish haircut, dress better, and even get a nose job. This all happens much to the consternation of Adam's more conventional friends, the sweet, demure Jenny (fetchingly played by Gretchen Mol) and the sexist pig Philip (Frederick Weller in the Aaron Eckhart role). A disturbingly shocking ending puts everything we've seen in a new light.

There are traces of BYU all over this movie. Apparently "Mercy College" is in a rather conservative community. Philip remarks that Evelyn's preferred performance art will not find much of a response in "this kind of town. We're not Berkeley." Much is made of PDA (public displays of

affection) by students. Jenny and Philip are, for young undergraduate students, very preoccupied with marriage. Evelyn strenuously avoids caffeine in her drinks. The serene physical layout of Mercy College (complete with stained glass windows) suggests a church as much as a university. Jenny is the very model of a BYU co-ed; she doesn't like swearing in her house.

The plot is, of course, a parody of the story of Adam and Eve[lyn]. But there is a unique LDS spin to it. Contrary to orthodox Christian thinking, this Adam is not a perfect man living in a flawless paradise. He's a sweet guy, but very much a doofus, ignorant as well as innocent. His fall is in some sense a fall upwards. As Evelyn secretly notes, Adam's capacity for action increases as he "progresses" or becomes more attractive. The price is agonizing, but Adam's eyes are indeed opened; he comes to know good and evil. However, the film raises the question of whether the price of that knowledge can be too high.

The cast of the film is expert, having performed the play in London and America. Paul Rudd is brilliant and touching as he moves from goofball in love to something else entirely. But this movie really belongs to Rachel Weisz. This is a part many actresses would kill for—Weisz makes the most of it. She is irresistible and terrifying behind her Mao button in her Che Guevara t-shirt.

The Shape of Things has gotten a decidedly more mixed reception than LaBute's previous work from critics who are perhaps discomfited by LaBute's essentially moral stance. Evelyn may proudly proclaim that moralists have no place in the gallery of art, but her creator has proven himself one of the toughest-minded moralists in American movies and theater. J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* calls LaBute a Puritan and yawns that he's seen it all before. Andrew O' Heihr in *Salon* sneers that this movie is the most cutting edge movie of 1982. In other words, it is ideologically retrograde, stuck in the Reagan era. Haven't we all, he seems to ask, moved beyond the concern for individual morality? Aren't appearance and attractiveness everything in modern America? Hasn't it become clear to us, as it has to Evelyn, that all things are subjective—that if you feel it's true, then it is true, for you?

LaBute challenges this moral relativism, and with his brutal portrayal of characters we find both reprehensible and yet familiar forces us to challenge it as well. *The Shape of Things* is a bookend to *In the Company of Men*, only this time the demonic figure is, instead of a corporate male drone, an avant-garde woman artist. No one in LaBute's world is privileged—no one absolved of the capacity for evil—not even the audience. Some may find this disturbing, but I find it exhilarating. LaBute is an essential American, Mormon writer.