

I Introduction

I've absolutely no qualms in saying that I'm a lucky son of a bitch to get where I am . . . The village idiot made a movie and it did well.

Neil LaBute¹

All life . . . comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other.

Henry James²

There was a time when the playwright who turned to film was seen as betraying the purity of his craft, exchanging a dangerous present-tense art for the banality of mechanically recorded images and being immoderately rewarded for doing so. For Clifford Odets, Harold Clurman remarked, Hollywood was sin. For Arthur Miller, one of those offered what he thought of as a Faustian pact by the significantly named Colonel Joy, talent spotter for Twentieth Century Fox (who was, Miller observed, shipping writers to the West Coast in cattle cars), it was a temptation to be resisted in the name of his aesthetic and political allegiances. In his own case he was not altogether wrong. When he eventually went to Hollywood, clutching a radical film script, it was rejected even as he was offered his pick of aspiring young actresses, one of whom, as it turned out, went by the name of Marilyn Monroe.

For a later generation, however, the move carried no such overtones, though the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and short-story writer Richard Ford has observed that, 'All the writers I have seen

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who have gone to Hollywood who are real writers either came back and went back to their work or became gobbled up and became something else.¹³ Having himself written a screenplay and avoided being gobbled up, he plainly saw the risk as exchanging one loyalty for another. Sam Shepard and David Mamet felt no such qualms, moving with ease and assurance between theatre and film, maintaining a double loyalty, even though it took them a few years to find their way towards the cinema. For a young writer who emerged in the late 1990s, that double loyalty was there virtually from the beginning.

Neil LaBute, of French, English and Irish heritage, son of a truck driver who had wanted to be an airline pilot, was born in Detroit on 19 March 1963, the second of two boys. His mother, ten years younger than her husband, worked as a hospital receptionist. He was raised in Liberty Lake, Spokane, in Washington state. The small family home was surrounded by woods. Much against his will, he worked on a farm owned by his father. Though he is understandably resistant to biographical readings of his work, his early years nonetheless seem to have left their mark and he acknowledges that one function of writing is to reshape experience the better to understand it. In a preface to *The Distance From Here* he confesses that basic elements of the play can be traced back to his own schooldays. 'I think,' he said, 'that is often why writers write and painters paint and musicians play their instruments. It's not just because they have a gift, but also to create something even slightly more beautiful or coherent or illuminating than the frenzied, scrambled memories of their own pasts.'¹⁴ He is, he has explained, 'fascinated with psychology. That is all I deal with as a writer, the psychology of people. I will plunder myself and my upbringing, no doubt, for as long as I write.'¹⁵

Shepard's and Mamet's trouble with their father and stepfather respectively offered an early lesson in the dysfunctional nature of relationships and of the suddenness with which moods could change. LaBute's childhood seems to have been scarcely different. Asked what stayed with him from that time, he replied, 'The wreckage!' Childhood, he observed, 'is not something I remember a great deal of, and I think that's indicative of a childhood that was fraught with a fair amount of tension. It was an idyllic setting, in the mountains and so forth. But

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my father was a kind of tough, interesting character ... “a son of a bitch.” He was challenging – the way Hitler was challenging. So, you never really knew what you were waking up to.¹⁶ He recalled tense car journeys with his parents, he in the back seat, they, arguing with one another, in the front, and invokes the memory of this in his preface to *autobahn*. As a truck driver his father was away from home for periods of time, his return not necessarily welcome. ‘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 anger, he confessed, taught him ‘how much damage could be done with language ... 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 reckoning 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.”’¹⁷

He has confessed that ‘There’s a great deal of my father in a lot of the characters that people find somewhat unseemly ... As a kid you get a sense of betrayal that you can’t put specifics to – a sense of women down the line is what one can make a leap to ... There must be something there that I don’t necessarily want the answer to, because it helps fuel the writing.’

Scarcely a coded account, his introduction to *The Distance From Here*, which acknowledges the absent fathers in the play and the shattered families, suggests an early life that offered lessons that would only be fully learned with time. At school, meanwhile, he already evidenced an interest in theatre and film, while at home with his mother he watched foreign films on the local PBS affiliate: ‘It was a survey course of the greatest hits of world cinema. I saw *La Strada* early on, *The Seven Samurai*. *The 400 Blows* was a favorite. I’m as happy watching *La Dolce Vita* as any movie I’ve ever seen.’¹⁸ As a teenager, he was passionate about Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* and it would not be too fanciful to hear echoes of that in his work. Adam, in *the shape of things*, has something of a Woody Allen character about him, intellectually acute but emotionally adrift, physically unappealing and socially inept. LaBute, too, falls back on humour and though the cruelties of human relationships in Allen’s work are presented less

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caustically, betrayal is equally a defining aspect of those relationships. Allen would prove a major influence not simply in terms of subject matter but also with respect to his approach to film making, but theatre also appealed, especially when he saw a production of *King Lear* at his older brother's college. At school, he acted in a number of plays, including *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

LaBute was class president at Central Valley High School. On leaving, he worked in a movie theatre to raise money. Though he was not a Mormon, at the suggestion of a student counsellor, who was a Mormon, he now applied to Brigham Young University in Utah and secured a 'minority scholarship', reserved for non-Mormons. Once at the university, however, in 1981, he converted, joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. He remained a member, albeit somewhat tenuously, until 2004. At BYU, he continued to act and began writing brief monologues for fellow students who were taking part in an acting competition. As he explained to John Lahr, 'I had a quick ability to write short, kind of pungent sketches and monologues . . . 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.'⁹

In 1985 he graduated and married Lisa Gore, a devout Mormon, born in South Africa, who would become a psychotherapist and bear him two children as well as having to deal with the fact that her husband was writing plays of which she should disapprove. They now moved east: 'after graduating from byu I moved to new york to pursue a career in writing – playwriting was certainly of interest but I was also keen on doing some sketch comedy, like "Saturday night live" or that type of thing. After only a year in nyc, I went after a masters degree in Kansas.'¹⁰ It was here he met Paul Rudd who would subsequently appear in his plays. He was in Kansas from 1986 to 1989, at which point he enrolled in a two-year MFA course in Dramatic Writing at New York University, which qualification would later enable him to teach college-level courses in Indiana. He spent the spring semester of 1991 in London at the Royal Court Theatre, an experience which he later claimed to be influential to his

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development as a writer. Then, in 1991, he returned to BYU to work on a Ph.D. in theatre theory and criticism, a degree which, to his later regret, he never finished.

Why did he become a Mormon? He had been a church-goer as he grew up but his conversion was, he explained, in part a product of being in Salt Lake City. They were, he said, 'everywhere. They were an influence that at the time was very welcome to me as opposed to the way I was brought up.' (SBS) The plays he now began to write and direct, however, not only evidenced a fierce dedication but showed an almost total disregard for how church authorities or audiences would respond. 'I'm only interested,' he would later remark, 'in my work concluding in a way that is true to the characters and the tale, without any concern for the audience.'¹¹

As his friend, Aaron Eckart, later to appear in a number of his plays and films, remarked, 'In school, he wouldn't explain his work. He doesn't feel the need to give any justification for his work ... He was loved and hated, revered and reviled.'¹² As he explained, 'there is a blanket of security over that School. Nothing really gets into it. You feel secure because it's a very clean campus. Everybody's safe, but on the other hand you don't get to explore your dark side. But when Neil came into town everybody said, "well, we have a dark side here."' (SBS)

The hostility came in large part from the kind of plays he began to write, plays which explored the human potential for cruelty and violence, even if that was at first viewed obliquely. As he later remarked, he saw his function as 'looking to cause trouble on the stage ... isn't that the job description? To turn heads? To deliver something new?' It was not, he insisted, 'as if I want to be provocative for the sake of provoking. I at least try to make something that is going to look beyond the momentary shock.' He had, he confessed, always 'been a bit of a cold fish ... I'm someone who has said, "Oh, here's a person in pain. Let's bring the microscope down closer."' Causing trouble, though, was not what the authorities at BYU favoured. Nor was his interest in 'cruelty and maliciousness' shared by the Church of Latter-Day Saints which became increasingly concerned with the direction of his work.

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As Professor Eric Samuelson, Chair of the Film and Media department at BYU, remarked, 'some of the faculty and the staff were taken aback by the strength of his opinions and perhaps the disinclination to modify those opinions.' Tim Slover, professor of theatre, recalled that the committee responsible for choosing the season's plays did not select *in the company of men*, written in his playwrighting class, because one of the members of that committee saw it as 'savagely misogynist'. John Lahr reports that in order to prevent the staging of his play *Lepers*, later to morph into *Your Friends & Neighbors*, and which he had been rehearsing for months, the administration locked up the theatre. There is, Samuelson confirmed of BYU, 'certainly some material that we cannot do on stage. There's certain language that we just don't hear.' Slover confirmed that 'The faculty hated it . . . They couldn't deny Neil's talent but they didn't want to see it. They didn't want to hear about it.' Aaron Eckart recalled that, 'the other students were violent about it to the point where we would be in our classes and they would be just yelling at Neil. And he and I would just laugh.' (SBS)

There was, he suggested, 'a mindset of a certain kind at BYU that they don't want to expose themselves to that kind of material.' It was simply not a central proposition of the faith that 'We humans are a fairly barbarous bunch . . . We abuse people through words. We shred each other with what we say,'¹³ even if that is what LaBute had derived from the work of Mamet, Pinter and Bond. Significantly, among the works he staged at BYU was Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, virtually a manual for a young playwright interested in male–female relations, language as aggression, shifting patterns of power. LaBute was, he claimed, 'a wide-eyed realist', it was simply that his realism took the form of staging the contradictions in human nature. As Aaron Eckart remarked, in an interview with Mary Dickson in the *Salt Lake City Weekly* (on 21 September 1998), 'If we really look at each other closely and I listen to what we say to each other in tense moments, we can be really cruel . . . If we put the camera on ourselves, our friends and neighbors, we come up with some scary stuff.' In the same interview, LaBute observed of those in the Mormon church who disapproved of him, 'They look at me and think, "What kind of Mormon

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is he?" Many think I need more practice . . . I have a healthy view on what one can do with art. They're looking for good examples for their audiences. The idea that you can show something bad and the end result can be good is hard for them to accept.' As to his approach to staging drama, Eckart, who he first met in an ethics class at BYU, explained of LaBute that 'his plays would be rehearsed for lengthy periods of time and then be performed only once, usually only once, usually in the morning.'¹⁴

'I can take any empty space,' Peter Brook remarked in 1968, 'and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an art of theatre.'¹⁵ For LaBute, a non-formal location for drama was at first less a case of a theoretical proposition than necessity. As he himself recalled, 'I would look for a play that fit spaces that I found. In college I couldn't get time in a theatre so I would go to the natural history museum and there was a stairwell where I'd stage something in that space and put the audience on the stairs. I staged Pinter's *One for the Road*, a political parable, down there. Not that he ever got paid, but the idea was pure. But it was that kind of hunger – nothing was going to stop me from doing what I wanted to do.'¹⁶ As he explained,

I love the simple confines of a theatre – a black box, a proscenium, a found space. Even in my film work I prefer to move people within the frame rather than to move the frame itself. As a student, I used to hunt down new spaces to work in, trying to adapt shows to the places I would find . . . Bond's *Passion* in the open air of a city park; my own work in a local bar with people sitting around, drinking and interacting with the actors. Movies require a technology, a screen, a bucket of popcorn. Theatre only needs someone to stand up and say: 'Listen to this.'¹⁷

The theatre, he explained, was about 'what if?' At the end of *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook had made the same observation: 'In everyday life, "if" is a fiction, in the theatre "if" is an experiment. In everyday life "if" is an evasion, in the theatre "if" is the truth.'¹⁸ Whatever else it would be, LaBute's drama would never be about evasion.

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In order to support himself LaBute worked in psychiatric hospitals and taught, all the while continuing to write and place his plays. He took up a post at St Francis College in Fort Wayne and it was here, drafting in local citizens to help, that he made the film of *Your Friends & Neighbors* which transformed his life.

LaBute is unsettling. He disturbs in the same way as Harold Pinter, describing a familiar world but one in which motives are often obscured, relationships seldom what they appear. His characters frequently lack something more than the tact required for social living. They lack a concern for the consequences of their actions, treat life as a game in which their own needs take precedence. Sometimes, as in *The Distance From Here*, a kind of blank incomprehension leads to a spasm of violence. More often, he catalogues the small betrayals, casual deceits, instinctive cruelties which characterise daily experience. As LaBute has explained, in a preface to *Fat Pig*, 'I love to make life unpredictable for a lot of my fictional characters as they face terrible mishaps, calamities, and upheavals.'¹⁹ John Lahr quotes Wallace Shawn, for whom LaBute has confessed admiration, as remarking that 'The difference between a perfectly decent person and a monster is just a few thoughts.'²⁰ If some of LaBute's characters never seem to have become acquainted with decency, others, particularly those in *Fat Pig*, precisely exemplify that sense of the thin line between civility and betrayal, genuine feeling and calculation, concern for others and concern for the self. For LaBute, it is the step from the one to the other that compels attention, and not because of the distance between his characters and those who see or read his plays but because of their moral proximity.

In his preface to *This Is How It Goes* he explains his admiration for Pinter's work and in doing so identifies something of his own concerns. What he was drawn to in Pinter was 'his fearless examination of men and women while searching for answers, hoping for change, raging for equality – but never ducking for cover. Who', he enquired, 'can ask for more? What I really admire about Pinter's work – and strive for in my own – is that the point of it is not merely to upset people, but that what's being addressed is worth getting upset over.' He had also, he confessed, learned something about structure from his

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work and the need to maintain interest rather than succumbing to a desire to please.²¹

The 'hoping for change' and the 'raging for equality' may seem surprising. In the case of Pinter, the need for change is implied by the very bleakness of the world of *The Birthday Party* or *Mountain Language*. The rage for equality is rather more difficult to find within the plays, whatever we know of his politics. This would seem to be equally true of LaBute. He does stare into the dark to testify to the light but there is little sign in his work of a yearning for equality. What is most striking about his work is the coldness of his eye. He is an anthropologist exploring human behaviour with a detachment that can seem chilling. Dean Mendell has drawn attention to Émile Zola's comment on *Thérèse Raquin*: 'I simply carried out on two living bodies, the same examinations that surgeons perform on corpses.' Asked what painting most corresponded to his own vision, LaBute identified the work of Caspar David Friedrich. He did so, he explained, 'because so many of his figures are turned away from the viewer and there's a certain distance I put between my characters and my audience, the audience and myself. Things are kept at bay.'²² At first glance this might seem an odd remark from a writer whose reputation is for sometimes brutally direct works in which the subconscious seems to bubble to the surface, repressed instincts are allowed free rein. But in fact there is a degree of detachment to his style as we are seemingly invited to witness, with something approaching a scientific objectivity, a series of exemplary actions (or the narration of those actions). Beyond that, at times indirection seems a key to his aesthetic as well as to the strategies and tactics of his characters, though a number of them are inclined to lay out the details of their moral failings, even if they obdurately refuse to acknowledge them as such.

In 1992, the year he abandoned his Ph.D., LaBute made a brief appearance Off Off Broadway as writer, director and actor in *Filthy Talk for Troubled Times: Scenes of Intolerance*. The title was hardly misleading. He was about the business of provocation. John Lahr has recalled the impact of one speech, in a series of overlapping monologues. In the context of a diatribe about AIDS a character remarks, 'I say, put them all in a fucking pot and boil them . . . just as a precaution.'

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At this, a member of the audience shouted out 'Kill the playwright.' LaBute confessed to a certain trepidation but the man stayed and his response underscored LaBute's conviction that theatre 'is a contact sport'.²³ The play was not published and in 2007 he was still working on it for a possible future production, having stolen a line or so for his later plays.

It was to be a further five years, however (during which he taught at a college and wrote for regional theatres) before LaBute first registered on the national consciousness, when he won the Filmmaker's Trophy at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival with *in the company of men*, financed in part by money that two communication major friends had won as a result of a car-accident insurance policy. Audiences were simultaneously shocked by and admiring of a film which dealt with the emotional destruction of a young deaf woman by two businessmen, Chad and Howard. The portrait it drew of the relationship between men and women as America moved towards the millennium was bleak. If the business of America was business, then America seemed in crisis. One nation indivisible was exposed as divided along lines of gender and race, a young black man being as casually humiliated as a vulnerable young woman. It made for uncomfortable viewing. Its protagonist, with movie-star good looks, charm and wit, was wholly amoral. Language was no more than a tool of the confidence trickster. Yet the film was wholly compelling. Audiences found themselves in the uncomfortable situation of watching an act of calculated cruelty and thereby in some sense becoming complicit. As LaBute has confessed, 'I love the idea of pulling people in and then turning on them. For instance, seducing them into thinking that the character of Chad is amusing and even charming, only to leave them shocked when they discover later just how much of a viper he really is.'²⁴

Careers have seldom started so explosively or been sustained with quite such energy. Careers have seldom been quite so controversial. Though his work covered a wide range of subjects and styles, at its heart was a seemingly pitiless exploration of human pathology that left many uncomfortable. He appeared to be a combination of Edward Bond and David Mamet (indeed he dedicated one of his plays to the