

Form and Dysfunction

Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* and Jordan Melamed's *Manic*

by Scott Foundas

Can there be art without humanity? So Neil LaBute seems to ask in *The Shape of Things*, his disarmingly funny new film with a doozy of a twist ending. It is, of course, something that many have asked themselves about LaBute's own work, which, despite its recent lapses into lighter-hearted terrain (*Nurse Betty*, *Possession*), has been resolutely committed to prying open the chest cavity of contemporary adult relationships without the aid of an anesthetic. A sadist? It's not hard to make that claim after witnessing LaBute's casual-bordering-on-gleeful approach to human suffering take shape in early films like *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends & Neighbors*. (Personally, I like to think of him as Woody Allen with horns and cloven hooves.) But if LaBute is sometimes prone to excess, it is rarely at the expense of that tightrope dance performed by his films, balanced precariously on the razor's edge of satire, over the precipice of absurdity. At his best, he holds a vaguely distorted funhouse mirror up to the audience, forcing us to see things we would rather keep hidden, daring us to turn away. And *The Shape of Things* may be his best, cruelest, most vital act of confrontation yet.

When we first see Adam (Paul Rudd), the stumbling, stammering English major with a work-study job as a museum security guard, he looks a bit like LaBute himself — shaggy hair, paunchy gut, hand-me-down corduroy jacket, all hiding behind taped-together spectacles. Like many of LaBute's characters, Adam is just this side of a cartoon, a Gary Larson rendering of a terminally introverted, fatally unstylish guy. But we've all known guys like this (or been one ourselves), and so we take the bait. A few short strokes by Rudd and LaBute — surface details about the way Adam looks, walks and talks — and we understand, implicitly, that on life's marathon track this guy lags several hundred meters behind. If we know nothing, really, about him, we feel like we know everything. If only we could buy stock in appearances, LaBute seems to be saying, so high is the price that we put on them.

The Shape of Things tells the story of when Adam met Evelyn (Rachel Weisz, who's a major revelation in her biggest and meatiest part to date), a graduate art student with chopsticks in her hair and a penchant for defacing work that she deems less than honest. Theirs is a meet-cute made in Rock Hudson—Doris Day heaven: She's about to spray-paint a penis onto a statue whose genitals have been censored by an after-market fig leaf; he does his best — or maybe not *quite* his best — to talk her out of it. But then Evelyn looks at Adam quizzically, gives him the once-over (is it possible, he wonders, that she is checking him out?), and utters the two words he has been waiting God knows how long to hear; two seemingly innocuous words that, spoken one after the other, can melt a guy like Adam into a bubbling pool of hormonal ooze. "You're cute," she says — with the caveat that he'd be even cuter if he did something about his hair — and a relationship is born, along with a pattern in which something about his hair becomes something about his clothes becomes something about his nose, and so forth.

But such is the give and take of modern romance. "Almost everyone I've ever gone out with, if you could alter just one thing about them, then they'd be perfect." Words spoken not by Evelyn, but by the perky Jenny (Gretchen Mol), engaged to Adam's old roommate Phillip (Frederick Weller) and lamenting the fact that her betrothed has "about six of those one things, but the point is the same." It's LaBute's point that even the preening, spiky-haired Phillips of the world, the guys who pride themselves on their self-sufficiency, have a little bit of Adam in them — that lust to become the perfect object of their significant other's desire, that willingness to reshape their own surfaces.

Just as Evelyn seeks out that which is false in art, so LaBute has a bloodhound's nose for that which is false in relationships.

Built upon a series of intricately plotted reversals — all too valuable to give away — LaBute's magic carpet of a movie constantly wriggles out of our grasp, lifting us above the action to rethink everything we've just seen from some new, dizzying vantage. Though it is, like LaBute's first two films, a movie fundamentally about cruelty, it is equally a movie about the cruel folly of romance — the calamitous comedy of trying to please the ones we love — and about how a wily opportunist (not unlike LaBute himself) might seize upon that conundrum for his or her own gain. Which is to say that *The Shape of Things* contains not only a more varied and complex pattern than LaBute's previous films, but a newly autobiographical dimension too — so deep a burrowing into the writer-director's catalog of themes and symbols and meanings that what emerges is a beautifully self-critical analysis of his own creative process from the inside out, worthy of comparison to Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* and Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*. It is also, much to the consternation of those who grouse about the talky, stagy aspects of LaBute's mise en scène, the director's most richly cinematic venture to date. Shooting in wide screen with the cinematographer James L. Carter, LaBute unfolds *The Shape of Things* in the same largely static, tableaulike style of his earlier work, but with a keener attention to color, composition and space than he has yet shown. And if there is an artificial stillness in the movie — an absence of extras, background action or orchestral underscore — it is a deliberate strategy, one that makes LaBute's proceedings that much more claustrophobic and inescapable.

"Moralists have no place in an art gallery." That quote, by the Chinese novelist Han Suyin, appears writ large, both literally and figuratively, near the end of *The Shape of Things*, but its implications cast a specter over the entire film. By invoking Han's words, LaBute — no stranger to censors' plaster fig leaves — isn't issuing a knee-jerk reaction against his critics (as some will suggest), but rather articulating a challenge to both himself and his audience. Can there be art without humanity? Or, more pointedly, humanity without artists like LaBute to take us through the lower depths? To borrow the words of LaBute's own screenplay, only indifference is suspect.

The Shape of Things was first performed as a play, in London and then New York, by the same four actors who have, rather marvelously, re-created their characters for the film. And indeed, the movie, shot briskly over 19 days, has the charge of live performance, rehearsed to the point of near perfection — but not fatigue — like the classic theater-film hybrids of Louis Malle and Andre Gregory. Conversely, Jordan Melamed's debut film, *Manic*, set in a juvenile mental institution, has all the uncertainties of a first run-through. A sort-of *Boy, Interrupted*, it's notable for its commitment to a grim scenario and for the notion of showing us a less slaphappy side of adolescence than all those fresh-baked *American Lies*. Joseph Gordon-Levitt (as a suburban high schooler committed for anger-management therapy after bashing in a classmate's head with a baseball bat) and Don Cheadle (as the honey-voiced resident psychologist) contribute heroic performances. The wonderful Zooey Deschanel is here too, confronting her low self-esteem and falling for Levitt's character in a very shallow role that feels like a betrayal of her considerable acting gifts. Meanwhile, *Manic* never clearly defines the machine that its malcontent characters — who also include a girl with a self-tattooed anarchy symbol on her thigh and another who's clearly overdosed at the black-makeup counter — rage against, or overcomes its deeply embedded psycho-ward-movie clichés.