

Stage

Neil and Prey

Nearly Naked masters Neil LaBute's drama about love and immorality

By Robrt L. Pela

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Two weeks along, the theater season is already shaping up to be the finest in years. Three of our smaller companies have weighed in with real contenders: *The Last Wallace & Ladmo Show* has filled Theater Works' stage with more Equity actors than it hosted all last year. And Is What It Is Theater has extended its superb production of *Working* -- the company's first-ever musical -- another week. But if you go see any one show this week, it should be Nearly Naked Theater's *The Shape of Things*. Perhaps emboldened by their new residency at Phoenix Theatre's Little Theatre, the folks at Nearly Naked have crafted a nearly flawless version of Neil LaBute's subtle and humorous morality play.

This time out, LaBute -- who's best known for writing and directing films like *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), *Nurse Betty* (2000), and the just-released *Possession* -- stretches a story about the loss of innocence in several fascinating directions. He explores the artist's role in society (are all artists immoral?), pokes into the American obsession with appearance (are we all in love with what's on the surface?) and even wedges in a memo about the meaning of art (is depicting immorality the same as exploiting it?).

Adam, a docent at a university art gallery, meets Evelyn, an artist and a graduate student, who's come to the gallery to deface a statue. He's soon in love with her, and she sets about literally making him her own: She changes his hairstyle, his diet and his style of dress. Adam joins a gym, swaps his glasses for contact lenses, even gets a nose job to please his new lover. While we watch our hero transformed from dorky loser to dishy lover man, we begin to wonder: Is Evelyn's Dr. Frankenstein act all about self-improvement, or about manipulation and control?

Naming his lovers Adam and Evelyn is LaBute's only unsubtle choice. The author's sly morality lesson sneaks up on us as we champion Evelyn's makeover skills and Adam's new self-confidence. But when Adam tests his appeal by sleeping with his best friend's fiancée, we see the effects of Evelyn's work: She's molded Adam for her own purposes, but his vanity and corruption are his own. LaBute's yowsa windup, which I won't reveal here, comes as a genuine surprise because we're roped in by his canny dialogue and exceptional situations.

Director Tim Butterfield's clever set design -- a student gallery full of pop art pieces that double as a bench, a coffee bar, and a doctor's office waiting room -- is home to a small, superlative cast. Jason Barth makes believable Adam's quick descent into vanity (despite the rather obvious rubber nose he sports in Act One), transforming



Starry night: The stars of *The Shape of Things* shine with subtle performances.

Details

Who / What:


The Shape of Things

Details:


Continues through September 14.
Call 602-274-2432

Where:


Phoenix Theatre's Little Theatre,
100 East McDowell

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himself from frump to stud mostly with his voice and demeanor. Paulina Glider keeps the thinly written Jenny buoyant, and Slade Hall's deceptively simple early scenes provide a stunning setup for Phillip's volatile speech later on.

The only trouble with Andi Watson's performance is that it eventually ends. Watson's wicked Evelyn is a distinct creation: funny when she's flexing her authority over Adam, scary when she's conveying the glassy-eyed immorality that's at her core. Watson understands every nuance of this horrible woman; with delicately articulated humor, she makes us believe that Evelyn is a callow, defenseless girl. In fact, Evelyn is something else altogether, and theatergoers will be as surprised and pleased by her secret as they will with this play's absorbing and beautifully acted story.