

reasons
to be
pretty

study
guide

reasons to be pretty

IN THE GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

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SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



WE ARE FANS OF NEIL LaBUTE. SINCE WE FIRST PRODUCED *Fat Pig* in 2007, we went on to present four more of his plays (*Some Girl(s)*, *Wrecks*, *The Break of Noon* and his adaptation of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*), and now I have the pleasure of directing our sixth, *Reasons to Be Pretty*.

An essential truth in all of LaBute's work draws us in time and again: We are all fallible – we make mistakes, sometimes irreparably, and yet most of us continue to struggle for the better person in each of us to make it to the surface. While LaBute has garnered a reputation for pointing out the more unattractive aspects of human nature, particularly in his male characters, he also shows great faith in the human desire to be better. Sometimes his characters manage to do so, and sometimes not, but the journey LaBute sets before us is always a rich, surprising ride.

Like *Fat Pig*, *Reasons to Be Pretty* questions the construct of beauty and the high emotional price we place on it. The story is less about who is beautiful and more about how each of LaBute's characters functions within these ideals of beauty. Not very well, it seems. And what better city to highlight the pitfalls of perfection-seeking than Los Angeles? It seems the ideal place to unearth these complicated, eternal questions about what each of us sees in the mirror each morning.

Once again, I have had the pleasure of working with a team of extraordinary designers who have built a world that seamlessly traverses locales and captures the specificity of LaBute's world.

Like all good theater, the play frames as many questions as it answers. I hope you, like me, are as intrigued by the ideas our playwright poses and they leave you talking long after the curtain comes down.

SYNOPSIS

Greg and Steph are in the middle of a huge fight. Steph's fury has been sparked by an off-handed comment Greg made to his friend Kent about her face, which Kent's wife Carly overheard and shared with her. At issue is not just the word Greg used, but also that he compared her to a "hot" woman in his and Kent's workplace – a warehouse, where both men are employed in dead-end jobs, and Carly works as a security guard. As Steph nurses her hurt feelings, Greg struggles to understand what he did wrong, Kent pursues his desires and Carly wonders about her marriage, the four friends undergo changes that leave some of them wiser and stronger.

SETTING/TIME

The outlying suburbs, not very long ago.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

NEIL LaBUTE (Playwright)

Geffen Playhouse productions include a new adaptation of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (2013); *The Break of Noon* (2011, co-production with MCC Theater); and the West Coast premieres of *Wrecks* starring Ed Harris (2010); *Some Girl(s)* (2008); and *Fat Pig* featuring Chris Pine (2007). Theater credits also include *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* (Douglas Fairbanks Theatre, Almeida Theatre); *The Shape of Things* (Almeida Theatre, Promenade Theatre); *The Distance from Here* (MCC Theater, Almeida Theatre); *The Mercy Seat* (MCC Theater, Almeida Theatre); *Filthy Talk for Troubled Times* (MCC Theater); *Autobahn* (MCC Theater); *This is How it Goes* (Donmar Warehouse, The Public Theater); *Land of the Dead/Helter Skelter* (Ensemble Studio Theatre, The Bush Theatre); *In a Dark Dark House* (MCC Theater, Almeida Theatre); *Reasons to Be Pretty* (MCC Theater, Almeida Theatre); *In a Forest, Dark and Deep* (Vaudeville Theatre, Profiles Theatre); *The Heart of the Matter* (MCC Theater); *Woyzeck* – adaptation (Schauspielhaus Zurich); *Things We Said Today* (Profiles Theatre, Sala Beckett); *The Furies/The New Testament/Romance* (59E59); *The Great War* (Ensemble Studio Theatre); *Taming of the Shrew* – additional scenes (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Short Ends* (Open Fist Theatre); *Lovely Head* (Spoleto Festival – Italy, Fringe Festival – Madrid, La Mama); *In The Beginning* (Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Theatre Row); *Reasons to Be Happy* (MCC Theater); *Good Luck (In Farsi)* (59E59); *Over the River and Through the Woods* (Planet Connections Theatre Festivity); *Pick One* (Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Young Vic); *One Day Like This* (American Academy of Dramatic Arts) and upcoming productions of *Here We Go 'Round The Mulberry Bush* (59E59), *The Money Shot* (MCC Theater) and *The Way We Get By* (Second Stage). Film includes: *In the Company of Men*; *Your Friends & Neighbors*; *Nurse Betty*; *Possession*; *The Shape of Things*; *The Wicker Man*; *Lakeview Terrace*; *Death at a Funeral*; *Some Girl(s)*; *Some Velvet Morning*; *Dirty Weekend*; *Tumble* (short); *After-School Special* (short); *Sexting* (short); *Denise* (short); *Double or Nothing* (short); *Bench Seat* (short); *Sweet Nothings* (short); *BFF* (short); *It's Okay* (short). Television includes: *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* (Showtime); *Full Circle* (DirecTV); *Ten X Ten* (DirecTV). Fiction includes: *Seconds of Pleasure* (Faber & Faber).

RANDALL ARNEY (Director)

Randall Arney has been a theater professional for over 30 years and has served as Artistic Director of the Geffen Playhouse since 1999. In addition to his artistic programming and oversight at the Geffen, Arney has helmed more than 10 productions for the theater, most recently *Slowgirl*, *American Buffalo*, *Superior Donuts*, *The Female of the Species*, *The Seafarer*, *Speed-the-Plow* and *All My Sons*. Arney is an ensemble member and former Artistic Director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre where his directing credits include: *Slowgirl*, *The Seafarer*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Death and the Maiden*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Killers* and *The Geography of Luck*, among others. Arney also directed Steppenwolf's world premiere of Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, as well as the subsequent national and international acclaimed productions. Mr. Arney's acting credits with Steppenwolf include *Born Yesterday*, *Ghost in the Machine*, *The Homecoming*, *Frank's Wild Years*, *You Can't Take it with You*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, *Balm in Gilead* and *Coyote Ugly*. As the Artistic Director for Steppenwolf from 1987 to 1995, he oversaw the creation of a new state-of-the-art theater which is Steppenwolf's current home. Broadway transfers under his leadership include *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, *The Song of Jacob Zulu* (six Tony Award nominations) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1990 Tony Award, Best Play). Mr. Arney has an MFA degree in Acting from Illinois State University and has taught master classes and workshops at UCLA, Steppenwolf, around the U.S. and in Tokyo.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

LOOKING GOOD

SOURCE

Geffen Playhouse program:
LaBute, Neil. *Reasons to Be
Pretty: A Play*. Faber & Faber.
Foreword.

tinyurl.com/Wiki-Attractive

tinyurl.com/Cosmo-Beauty

PHOTO CREDIT

RGBstock.com, xymonau



Reasons to Be Pretty is playwright Neil LaBute's third play in a trilogy that includes *The Shape of Things* and *Fat Pig*. All three plays focus on the impact that physical appeal has on men and women and their relationships. In the foreword to *Reasons to Be Pretty*, LaBute asks, "What is it to be 'pretty'? It's not beautiful, and it's certainly not ugly. Why do we care about it so much? Why do we get so caught up in what other people think?"

He explores these questions by giving his characters concerns about how they and those close to them measure up to "world standards" of attractiveness. Steph is racked with insecurity after learning that her boyfriend Greg referred to her face as "regular." She later retaliates by showering him with his supposed physical flaws in graphic detail. Kent is focused almost solely on the good looks of his wife Carly, is drawn to a youthful co-worker and counsels Greg to avoid eating too much so he won't get "chubby."

What we find attractive in others and how we judge our own appearance is shaped by what is valued in our cultures and historical eras, our age and gender and the attitudes about appearance with which we are raised. Evolutionary psychologists, who look how present-day attitudes and behaviors have their origins in helping human beings survive as a species, suggest that for males across cultures facial symmetry and a youthful complexion signal female health and fertility. While women often appreciate chiseled, muscular features that denote masculinity and strength in men, they are usually more concerned with resources than looks. All of these influences lie just below the level of awareness and fire up immediate subjective responses when we gaze at others and ourselves.

Culture in particular has a strong impact on how attractiveness is perceived, especially as it applies to women. Since elongated necks are considered elegant in Thailand's Kayan tribe, women wear stacks of metal rings around their necks from an early age. In the African nation of Mauritania, substantial body weight increases women's eligibility for marriage. Tribal women in Ethiopia insert objects into their ear lobes because such ornaments are considered beautiful, as are the chin tattoos of Maori women in New Zealand.

Current mainstream American popular culture, with its global reach, considers extremely thin bodies, smooth, youthful skin, large eyes, small noses, prominent cheekbones, and full lips the feminine ideal. Celebrities display these features in magazines, films, television, and other media outlets. Many women – stars as well as civilians – surgically alter their bodies and restrict their eating to achieve this ideal.

According to researchers, being considered good looking can help people get ahead academically and professionally, as well as romantically. It can also cause problems: women who are considered extremely appealing can be ostracized by those who fear they might tempt their mates to stray, or, as the character Carly notes, they may be harassed by those they attract.

As some of the characters discover in *Reasons to Be Pretty*, no matter how they fit an accepted notion of what is physically attractive, people who radiate vitality and positive qualities from within have an inner beauty that can make them strongly appealing.

DISCUSSION POINT

In what ways does our physical appearance affect our personal and professional well-being? What is most important to possess, inner beauty or outer beauty, as defined by the culture-at-large? Why?

RELATIONSHIP WOES

COMMUNICATION

(Noun) The act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else.

Merriam-webster.com

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Communicate-Info

tinyurl.com/Relate-Success

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain: via usa.gov



In all the plays of his trilogy, LaBute casts a cynical eye on the abilities of women and men to create and sustain trusting, caring relationships. As the play's dialogue and action unfold in hard-hitting and sometimes humorous ways, we experience how the characters fail to communicate, engage in power plays and resort to verbal and physical aggression when deeply frustrated.

Perhaps they, like many, assume that effective communication simply depends on being clear about what you think and feel. Therapists who work with couples know that successful interactions rely on partners listening closely and seeking to understand each other's point of view. The aim is not agreement, but making sure the other feels heard. This creates the space in which to establish trust, let go of hurts and find solutions to conflicting needs and desires. Psychologists and linguists have also proposed that men and women have different communication styles and goals. "Women communicate through dialogue, discussing emotions, choices and problems. Males remain action-oriented – the goal of communication is to achieve something." So says Susan Sherwood in an article for the Discovery Channel that draws on the work of Deborah Tannen, among other experts.

DAVID MAMET

Renowned American playwright known for his staccato, edgy, often profanity-laced dialogue.

Women and men's inability to navigate these gaps and differences are on display as we witness the changing relationship between the protagonist Greg and his girlfriend Steph. When she shares her upset at the beginning of the play, she doesn't feel heard, nor does she believe Greg is willing to take responsibility for his hurtful remark. He minimizes her feelings by telling her she is "talking nuts" and reasons that the rest of what he said reflected how much he cared for her – why isn't this enough to quell her anger?

Like other supporting male characters in the plays that constitute LaBute's trilogy, Kent is a jerk, who treats his wife Carly nicely on the surface but thinks nothing of manipulating her to cover up his misdeeds or get what he wants. He lords over his friend Greg, until Greg becomes conscience-stricken, at which point Kent attacks Greg's masculinity, choice in women and him.

LaBute's use of profanity is similar to that of David Mamet's: characters infuse obscenities into their speech freely, as if out of habit, and lob them at each other like weapons when enraged.

DISCUSSION POINT

Why is listening to others essential to building successful personal and working relationships? How do we show we are listening? What does it feel like to be listened to and understood?

CONFLICT

CONFLICT (Noun)

Competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons).

The opposition of persons or forces that gives rise to the dramatic action in a drama or fiction.

Merriam-webster.com

Drama cannot exist without conflict. The competing desires of the characters drive the action of the story. In *Reasons to Be Pretty*, LaBute orchestrates intense conflicts between romantic partners and friends with compelling dialogue.

In the following scene early on in the play, Steph wants her boyfriend Greg to disclose what he said to his friend Kent about her appearance.

STEPH

Tell me what you said./ TELL ME, I just want you to say it and then I'll stop!

GREG

No.../ No, you're...what is up with you?!

STEPH

Say it!/ SAY IT!!

GREG

It's not.../ I didn't say...how did this happen, why are you such a freak? I mean, this is like a serious personality glitch you've got there...

STEPH

SAY IT TO ME, SAY IT!/ SAY IT NOW!!!

GREG

Stephanie, stop it or I'll call the cops myself, I will./ STOP! (BEAT) It'll be me this time, ok, not the neighbors! I'm not kidding around here!! Seriously...

STEPH

THEN SAY IT! SAY IT. (DEAD CALM) Just do it and I will quit.

DISCUSSION POINT

Why are conflicts inevitable in human relationships? How do they trigger strong emotions? How can we handle and resolve them responsibly?

CREATING CONFLICT

To explore how playwrights work with *conflict*, collaborate in groups of three to create a short scene.

1. Select three characters who live in the same house, and determine their relationships. Examples: Husband, Wife, Son or Daughter; Three Siblings; Boyfriend, Girlfriend, Friend; Three Roommates.

Who are the characters?

-
-
-

2. Choose something that people argue about within a household. Examples: cleaning up; watching TV; paying bills; taking care of pets; deciding what to eat; staying out late.
3. Determine the argument between two of the characters and where it is taking place. Jot the letters A and B next to the characters in the list above and note their sides in the conflict. A third character will enter and help resolve the argument. Jot C next to that character in the list above and note how he or she will help ease the conflict.
4. Each character will have three lines. Decide what A and B will say to engage in their argument, and what C will say to help them resolve it. Be specific about what the characters want and find words that express their emotions (using socially-appropriate language). Write down the characters' dialogue in the following order:

A:

B:

A:

B:

(C enters)

C:

A:

C:

B:

C:

(End of scene)

Once your group is satisfied with the dialogue, divide up the roles, stand up and bring the scene to life. Infuse the lines with feeling to help make the conflict and its resolution clear.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GERHARDT

What is your official title, and how long have you worked at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Supervising House Manager and have been at the Geffen since February 2012.

What are your primary responsibilities?

I manage the front of house staff to ensure audiences are comfortable and safe and enjoy themselves, before, during and after the shows. I also work with the maintenance and custodial staff to make sure the Gil Cates and Audrey Skirball Kenis theaters are beautiful.

What exactly do front of house staff members do?

The house managers and I greet patrons at the concierge desk, provide assistance, such as hearing devices, make sure they enter the theater at the appointed times and are seated. During the shows, we are prepared to handle problems, such as health emergencies or disruptive audience behavior. Afterwards, we respond to complaints, which can range from concerns about room temperature to issues with the play's content.

How did you get involved in theatre? What work brought you to the Geffen?

I did theatre in high school for fun. Since I come from a family of academics, I pretty much

forgot about it when I went the University of Colorado at Boulder. As I was studying geomorphology, which is about the processes that shape landforms, I felt extremely unfulfilled. I switched into a theatre major and received a B.F.A. in acting. Along the way, I developed affinities for writing plays and theater management. I became involved with a Theatre for Social Change group, and started working during the summers for the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, which was based at the University. I started out in facilities, and then became the house manager of both their theaters, including a 1000-seat outdoor venue. After I graduated, I came to LA to make my way as an actor. I discovered early on that I didn't have the drive that actors must have in order to succeed. While keeping my writing going, I have been focusing on a career path in arts management. Two and a half years ago, I had the good fortune to land this job.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

People are sometimes less than pleasant if they are unhappy about their play-going experience. Since I aim to provide excellent customer service and represent the Geffen in the best possible light, I do my best to respond to their concerns. It's



also challenging to seat latecomers without disturbing the actors, who can hear and see much more than audiences realize, and other patrons. The same can be said for cell-phones: we have to make sure that hundreds of people don't use them during a performance.

What do you find most satisfying?

I believe theatre inspires empathy and has the power to change society. In this age of electronic devices and being able to post comments anonymously on the Internet, empathy is incredibly underdeveloped. In theatre, fellow human beings tell stories that help us understand life from other perspectives, which can lead to tolerance and, I hope, less aggression. I love to see patrons leave the Geffen talking about the show or still teary because they've been moved. When young people come to our student matinees and cheer the performers, it shows, once again, how theatre can reach people in special ways. ■

SECTION 4

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and members' interests, guide your group to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Put off? Entertained? Tense? Bored? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What was the most surprising moment in the production? Disturbing? Moving? Describe each in detail.
- With which character did you identify the most? The least? Why?
- How did this play confirm or alter your attitudes about what makes men and women physically attractive?
- How did the conflicts among the characters make you feel? What did you learn about handling and resolving conflicts?
- Think about where each character was by the end of the play. Which characters do you believe went on to succeed in work? Which went on to have fulfilling relationships? Why?
- What did you appreciate about the performances? Share the details.
- How did the set, props, costumes and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- What did you find particularly provocative about the play?

NOTES



SECTION 5

RESOURCES

READ the other plays in playwright Neil LaBute's trilogy – *The Shape of Things* and *Fat Pig* – available at the Los Angeles Public Library.

WATCH playwright Neil LaBute discuss his writing, reputation as a provocative writer, and teaching at tinyurl.com/LaBute-Interview2.

EXPLORE how beauty varies according to cultures by visiting journalist Esther Honig's Before & After photography project at tinyurl.com/HonigBeauty. Beauty editors, at publications throughout the world, photo-shopped an image of her according to their personal and cultural concepts of beauty.

LEARN about how women and men communicate differently according to Discovery Channel author Susan Sherwood at tinyurl.com/Communicate-Info.

LEARN about how different styles of communication affect men and women in the workplace, according to linguist Deborah Tannen at tinyurl.com/TannenTalk.

LEARN about why conflicts happen in relationships and how to handle them effectively at tinyurl.com/Conflict-Info.

ENHANCE your understanding of theater by visiting broadwayeducators.com. Lessons, including one on *character & conflict*, illuminate various aspects of the theater experience.

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