

Who's Afraid of Osama bin Laden?

Neil LaBute's post-9/11 autopsy



Neil LaBute has issues. A graduate of theater at BYU who was later “disfellowshipped” from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LaBute’s plays revel in an abrasive, anaerobic atmosphere of nihilism in which gimpy characters, short on introspection, become little more than expectorants of extreme despair. His career, which first took off with the malignantly brilliant 1997 movie *In the Company of Men*, is beginning to look like a forensic audit of what Tennessee Williams liked to call *mendacity* — that knot of lies, lust, hypocrisy and cowardice

which perverts our best intentions. LaBute pens satires so harsh and depilatory they make Mamet look mealy.

In *The Mercy Seat*, directed by Andy Hock for Trial By Fire TheatreWorks, LaBute sets his claustrophobic tale of love, identity and betrayal on Sept. 12, 2001 — in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Ben Harcourt (Benjamin Newman), a family man who might otherwise be buried in the rubble of the World Trade Center, instead finds himself alone with his mistress and boss, Abby Prescott (Emily Hart), in her Manhattan apartment. For these two sad, solipsistic

lovers, this moment of national upheaval presents itself as a kind of erasure: after all, every ending is also a beginning. As Ben’s cell phone incessantly rings, a sure reminder of his wife and kids, he comes to realize that he may be — he *can* be, should he so chose — dead to the world. Should he and Abby, suddenly shipwrecked in time, start a life together anew? Do they dare?

The collective tragedy of 9/11 becomes, in LaBute’s hand, something extremely personal and existential, an abstract device of deracination — Ben and Abby are indeed uprooted, but only from yesterday’s reality, when they were the cheating husband and the other woman. The tight, strangling atmosphere of the play, which takes place entirely in Abby’s apartment, has the feel of a film noir. For all the couple’s self-involvement and romantic opportunism, the collapse of the towers may just as well have been a car crash, a fire, a faked death. “Through all the apocalyptic shit, I see a way for us to go for it,” Ben tells Abby, who for her part accuses Ben of using the attack as a “meal ticket” to get her.

Hart and Newman are fierce and focused as the bickering couple, maintaining a fever pitch of dialogue that is impressive, and sometimes exhausting, to behold. LaBute’s lines are blunt, brutish and nasty — “fuck you” becomes a kind of mantra of carnal confusion — but both actors mine subtlety from the

pitiless barrage of abuse; Newman is by turns frenetic and emotionally greedy, and Hart, as both alpha and boss, is a canon of feminine loathing, her contempt capped only by regret. Whether desperately embracing or trading barbs, Ben and Abby recall another corrosive couple on the boards, two souls engaged in a game of emotional sabotage and romantic brinkmanship; Labute might have subtitled his play *Who’s Afraid of Osama bin Laden?*

The question remains: Does *The Mercy Seat* have a political bone in its body? Yes and no. It has absolutely nothing meaningful to say about the geopolitics of terrorism, the collective psychology of nationalism or the Bush Doctrine. LaBute may be a misanthrope and a satirist, but he is no Voltaire; the man has other fish to fry. The play — so relentlessly inward-turning it tears open a black hole — diagnoses the effects of calamity on a pair of solitary lovers so alienated and narcissistic, so entranced by their own bullshit, that they are trapped in eternal limbo. Even together, they are alone. Substitute “citizens” for “lovers,” and the politics come clear. “I am saying that you really dodged a bullet there, Ben,” Abby says of his being in her apartment when the planes hit. “A plane,” he says. “It was a plane.” — *Rick Levin*

The Mercy Seat plays 8 pm Thursday, Sept. 29; Saturday, Oct. 1; and Oct. 7-8, at Reality Kitchen, 245 Van Buren; \$10, info at trialbyfiretheatre.org or 683-1429.

Blue Man Speaks

Jerry Kops spills on the thrills of joining Blue Man Group



JAMES PORTO

Music, mania and Mediterranean-blue make-up have created a worldwide sensation — something akin to a raging party and your favorite painting giving birth to a theatrical experience.

So wailing on an instrument in a massive, multimedia international outfit sounds like a musician’s dream job, right? To get an answer, I rang up Blue Man strings guy Jerry Kops as he idles in San Diego before the group motors up to Eugene for their early October engagement.

“Yeah, it’s awesome,” Kops says, just waking up as I call him a few minutes before noon.

audition led to another, and five year’s later he’s taking a break from the small NYC venue to hit the road with the blue-painted performers.

The dream isn’t always easy. In smaller towns, the Blue Man Group performs split weeks, with two days in one place, long days of travel and then two in another. “But I have a job doing what I love,” Kops says. “I work for two hours and am paid a full day’s wage.”

And it all seems worthwhile when patrons travel miles from their tiny Midwestern towns to see something they’ve been waiting years for. “We met a

‘I’ll just say keep your eyes opened. You’re gonna feel it.’ — Blue Man Jerry Kops

Kops, a native New Yorker (if I’m allowed to judge by his accent), was working 12-16 hour days at multiple gigs: as a registered nurse or in his family’s machine shop, and playing at night in bar bands. On a trip to Las Vegas, his wife talked him into seeing Blue Man Group.

“I kept telling her, ‘We’re New Yorkers, why would we see a show on vacation? We can see it at home.’” But tickets were purchased, and Kops was sold. “I was enthralled by the musicians,” he says, the electricity of excitement warming his voice.

It took a little more pressure from his wife to get Kops to audition for the group. “I figured for something this big you had to know somebody,” he says. But one

(teenage) kid who said he’d wanted to see us since he was 10,” Kops says.

When the boys in blue roll into town on Tuesday, Oct. 4, you can look for Kops on the strings. The two strings players rotate positions, so he’ll either be rocking the Chapman stick and base, or working a guitar and an electric zither.

When I asked him if there was anything a first-timer should look for, Kops laughed. “Coming from the small, organic experience of the New York show to the advanced, technological, multimedia touring show, I’ll just say keep your eyes opened,” he says. “You’re gonna feel it.” — *Anna Grace*

Blue Man Group performs Oct. 4-6 at Hult Center. Info & tickets at hultcenter.org or 682-5000