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Heavy Lifting

MPC attacks obesity issues with Neil LaBute's sharp and sassy Fat Pig.

Posted September 11, 2008 12:00 AM

By Walter Ryce



Helen (Jessica Voris) and Tom (Todd Stone) find real chemistry in a relationship that his peers find unusual.

Going to a Neil LaBute play is an invitation to be poked, tested, offended even. But bored... no.

The evidence isn't hard to find. Take, for instance, an office shark in LaBute's film adaptation of *In the Company of Men*, railing about communicating with his deaf secretary. "After about two minutes I can't watch any more saliva form in the corner of her mouth," he says, "or I'm gonna lose my taco salad."

Or, in his *Your Friends and Neighbors*, as a married couple dutifully has sex, the wife asks of her expressive husband, "Is there any chance you could shut the f*ck up?"

He's been called a misogynist, a racist, and a bastard (although, that last one he said of himself). He's also been called intelligent, confident and brilliant. That last one comes courtesy of Kirsten Clapp, who is directing one of LaBute's plays at MPC's Studio Stage for a three-week burst of a run. The name of this one: *Fat Pig*.

The story centers on Tom (played by Todd Stone), a youngish yuppie who meets Helen (Jessica Voris), a sensitive librarian. The unlikely pair talk over lunch, connecting in a way that's sweetly tentative at first, then later deeply passionate. It is all normal enough, only Helen happens to be grossly overweight.

This isn't a problem when the couple is alone or in intimate settings. But it causes ripples and rumblings in Tom's image-conscious peer group. Jeannie (Chamille Marcello), with whom Tom had an office fling, is furious at being dumped—for an overweight woman.

Perhaps worse, Tom's friend and agitator, Carter (John Carroll), an alpha yuppie, is seemingly having a ball with the incongruous match-up. His mantra is "it only stings if it's personal."

And at its center are two people who are a good fit for each other in the deepest ways, struggling under the eyes and expectations of society.

The title of the play gets people talking, as Clapp and three *Fat Pig* actors did after a recent rehearsal.

"Weight is something I was always thinking about," Clapp says. "Even as a teenager. It's something I think about every day. Most women do. This play was really relevant. It spoke to me."

Voris, who plays Helen, adds, "Being previously severely obese, I had to figure out people first. I know people like Carter. There are people who are like 'Here's a fat chick...'"

“... she must want to eat,” Clapp says.

“What I love about LaBute,” Voris continues, “is he’s not politically correct. It was courageous what he did.”

And *Fat Pig* does it in a uniquely LaBute way. The simple nature of the plot leaves room to focus on why characters act as they do. LaBute criticizes human weakness, though he seems to have softened his typical cynicism. Maybe because he, himself, has at times been overweight.

“He was healing and venting through the Helen character,” Clapp says. “He wrote through the woman’s character. He’s done that before. He also knows the locker room talk because he’s a man.”

Voris, however, could only imagine the other side of the story. “Being overweight I knew guys talked behind my back, but I didn’t know what they said.”

When the actors revealed to their peers the project they were embarking on, they got a variety of reactions.

“For me,” says Voris, “friends and family were like ‘You’re really going to do a play about that?’ They wanted to protect me. Another reaction I got was ‘Wow, thank you for doing the show.’”

Caroll and Marcello got a different kind of reaction.

“I apologize in advance,” Caroll says to Voris. “A lot of my guy friends asked, ‘So, did you get a fat chick to play it?’”

“People asked me how big is the girl,” Marcello says.

“It’s the number one question,” Caroll says.

“I’m curious about the terms they use,” Voris asks. “What’s the word they use?”

“Some of them ask, ‘Are you talking orca fat?’” Caroll says. “I apologize.” When asked how he responds, he says, “I tell them she’s overweight, but losing weight.”

Voris has been on a regimen that’s helped her shed much weight, which has played havoc with the production as well as her own self-image.

“When I cast her,” Clapp says, “she was 100 pounds heavier. We have to pad her.”

“When I was overweight, guys didn’t open doors for me,” Voris says. “They didn’t start conversations with me. Now that I’ve lost the weight, I’m weilded out by guys’ attention. I’ve been overweight my whole life.”

As the actors and their director talk at length, it becomes increasingly obvious they have inhabited the material of the play and have lived inside it.

“This one gets you thinking. Some people go to a show and they don’t want to think,” Clapp says.

“And this is something that people can take something away from,” Voris adds, “and can use it in their own life.”

Fat Pig plays at 7pm Thursday, 8pm Friday and Saturday, 2pm Sunday. MPC Studio Theatre, 980 Fremont St., Monterey.

\$15/general; \$10/25 and under; \$12/season ticket holders. 646-4213, www.mpcboxoffice@mpc.edu.

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