

Neil LaBute's 'Fat Pig' on MPC's studio stage reveals just how many people can squeeze into a relationship

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We talk often about emotional baggage couples can drag with them into new relationships, but rarely about the baggage of others, technically outside the relationship, that adds to the pile.

In Neil LaBute's 2004 play "Fat Pig," Tom's (Todd Stone) and Helen's (Jessica Voris) relationship is going somewhere.

Office buddy Carter (John Carroll) and ex-girlfriend/ co-worker Jeannie (Camille Marcello) have something to say about that.

What could Tom see in her? He's handsome, well-liked and successful; she's funny, attractive, and ... overweight.

With one preview tonight (Thursday) on Monterey Peninsula College's studio stage, "Fat Pig" continues Fridays though Sundays in a limited three-week run.

The way director Kirsten Clapp has gone about interpreting LaBute's script, weight as a theme actually takes a secondary role to issues such as fear, intolerance, friendship and the pressures from

outside that a duo must live with, fight off, or cave to.

"I think we focus on those," Clapp said.

Nonetheless, the director doesn't intend to stray from the playwright's notoriously edgy portrayals of humans doing what they do.

"LaBute is my favorite writer. It's really important for me that I honor the script, honor what he was trying to do."

She merely sees weight as a vehicle to reach other points of discussion, such as "exposing intolerance and society's idea of what beauty is."

If the play were a horror movie, the murderous villain might be society itself and its intolerance of anything out of rigidly defined norms.

Imagine all of us calling out "Look behind you!" and "Don't do it!" to the screen/stage to try to warn Tom and Helen as it lurks in the dark waiting to strike.

Carter and Jeannie, with their chiding of Tom and dismissal of Helen, get to represent several of society's less-honorable leanings.

Clapp says Carter, with his aim-to-kill insults, is her favorite character.

"We get to be a fly on the wall in the locker room," noted the director.

As for Jeannie, once-girlfriend of Tom's, willing soldier in the war of woman vs. woman, Clapp finds empathy.

She and Jeannie are similar ages, both out there dating and coming up frustrated. It's a positive, this connection.

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"If I can relate to the characters, then I can direct the show better."

"If you just look at the words on the paper, they are very two-dimensional," she said of the supporting characters. The challenge was digging out of her actors "the reasons they purge their opinions so blatantly at people."

For instance, we discover Carter grew up with a fat mother; his father abandoned the family, an experience that has hardened him to such a degree his uncensored taunts can simply stun the audience.

And what of the scapegoat for all this baggage?

"She (Helen) is the strongest one in the play," said Clapp. One of her most fool-proof defenses, however, is her self-deprecating humor, which she uses to let others know she's aware of how she looks.

She beats them to the punchline so that she doesn't have to hear the abuse from anyone but herself.

Unfortunately, she overdoes things to the point that it becomes one more impediment for Tom.

Clapp has done all the tech work herself for the play.

"I've really rolled up my sleeves on this one," she said. Her set is a collapsible contraption that folds up into itself, negating the need to push furniture on and off the small stage between scenes.

The MPC drama department grad has found a venue for her art in the studio theater for three Septembers now (having directed Eric Bogosian's "Suburbia" and Suzan-Lori Parks' "365 Plays/365 Days" in past seasons) and is grateful for the support from co-chairs Peter DeBono and Gary Bolen.

Clapp is attracted to LaBute's "dark, edgy, thorny, dialogue stuff." Her own writing definitely includes the style as well as relationship-based scripts, but she has her hand in farce, science fiction, and lots of other areas, too.

This spring she'll enter film school at CSU-Monterey Bay to see how that genre appeals to her, although the stage is still never far from her thoughts.

"I have three or four plays on the back burner I'm dying to do."

Proceeds from the Sept. 11 preview night of "Fat Pig" will go to benefit the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund.

Kathryn Petrucelli can be reached at montereybound@yahoo.com . GO!

THEATER OPENING ·What: Monterey Peninsula College Theatre Company presents Neil LaBute's "Fat Pig" ·Where: Studio Stage, Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey ·When: 7 p.m. preview Thursday, Sept. 11 (proceeds benefit the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund), opens at 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 12 and continues at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Sept. 28 ·Tickets: \$15, young adult (16-25) \$10, available by calling 646-4213 from 3-7 p.m. Wednesday-Friday or online at www.ticketguys.com ·Information: 646-4213

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