

Theatre

Faith worse than death

Bash

Almeida Theatre, London

★★★★

Anyone who saw Neil LaBute's movie *In the Company of Men* will know that he has a penetrating eye for the heartlessness of corporate America. In this highly impressive trio of one-act plays he takes the process a stage further to suggest that America masks its darkest impulses under the guise of faith, fate and social orthodoxy.

The first two pieces, *Medea Redux* and *Iphigenia in Orem*, are monologues that take their titles from classic examples of child-murder. In *Medea Redux* an institutionalised woman talks into a tape recorder about how, at 13, she was seduced and impregnated by a science teacher and how she ultimately got her revenge.

In the next piece, a travelling businessman describes to a stranger the strange circumstances surrounding the death of his baby son. And in the two-hander, *A Gagle of Saints*, we hear how a reunion of high-school students in New York turned into an occasion for Central Park queer-bashing.

What is unnerving about LaBute's world is that none of his people is an overt monster. Reared as a Mormon, he gives his characters a background of religious indoctrination. He also shows how people justify terrible acts in the name of corporate advancement or social conformism. The busi-

nessman in *Iphigenia* is driven to child sacrifice by the fear of losing his job. And the college jock in the third play is outraged by the overt gayness of Manhattan and a belief that it defies scriptural rules and social decency. "I mean," he says, "it's as much our park as theirs."

I prefer the two monologues to the two-hander, if only because in each case the real villain is kept off-stage: in one instance it is the absconding teacher who pompously talks of "the tragic nobility of sea creatures" and in the other it is the office joker who cruelly misleads the panicky businessman.

What is remarkable about LaBute is the way, not unlike Mamet (whom he admires), he paints a devastating picture of American values while also implying that individuals finally have to accept responsibility for their actions. The system, he suggests, is tainted but in the last analysis one cannot hide behind abstract notions of fate.

The point comes across clearly in Joe Mantello's clinically precise production and in the performances of the three American actors. Mary McCormack's modern *Medea* is a fine study in disintegration. Matthew Lillard is interestingly equivocal as the collegiate gay-basher. Best of all is Zeljko Ivanek as the businessman, slapping his knees when he announces "I consult for our regional branches" as if to boost his self-esteem.

The image one takes away from these three deeply disturbing plays is of desolate and lonely souls corrupted by a sick society.

Michael Billington



Neil LaBute's vision: desolate souls corrupted by a sick society Photograph: Henrietta Butler

Classical

Smudging the contour

Britten Sinfonia/
Nicholas Daniel

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

★★★

The title of John Woolrich's *A Litany* for oboe and strings

disguises its dramatic gestures and melodic fragments. Nicholas Daniel, who performed the solo role as well as directing the Britten Sinfonia, emphasised the music's ritualistic circling. Daniel was both impassioned cantor, leading his congregation of strings in song, and plaintive declaimer.

As Woolrich describes it, *A Litany* is a "creative transcription" of his 1998 Oboe Quintet, also composed for Daniel's

effusive talents. The metaphor of rewriting runs through *A Litany*, which continually reveals and recomposes the same ideas in different contexts. An emphatic string swoop morphs into a dusky rustle, while a sinewy melodic line distorts into an abrasive, grating tug across the strings. This orchestral richness is an obvious bonus over the possibilities of a quintet line-up. But Daniel's emotive performance could not

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