

LaBute stages a gripping debate

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Theatre

The Shape of Things

ALMEIDA AT KING'S CROSS, N1

AFTER the damp squib of Anna Friel in *Lulu*, the Almeida has come up with a fascinating and provocative new play that is likely to cause almost as much argument as David Mamet's *Oleanna*.

Its author, Neil LaBute, is an acknowledged admirer of Mamet, and the older dramatist's influence is strong, both in the edgy dialogue of *The Shape of Things* and in its contentious subject matter. There is also the suspicion — not uncommon with Mamet, too — that there might actually be rather less here than meets the eye. But while the play is in progress you are too caught up in the characters and the developing plot to notice.

LaBute, who is fast becoming a very hot name indeed, is an American Mormon who came to notice with low-budget — and worryingly misanthropic — films such as *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*. I loathed his last play at the Almeida, *Bash*, a pitiless series of monologues for Mormons that seemed to take a deeply unattractive pleasure in the hideous violence the characters described.

The Shape of Things initially seems a more appealing and more conventional work, though the punishing soundtrack of American grunge rock group the Smashing Pumpkins that prefaces and punctuates the action had Harold Pinter and Lady Antonia Fraser scuttling out of the theatre before the play had even started.

The story begins in the campus art gallery of a small-town university where Adam (Paul Rudd) helps finance his studies by working as a security guard. When an attractive post-grad art student, Evelyn (Rachel Weisz), enters the gallery, he is immediately smitten, even though she is intent on spray-painting a penis on to the fig leaf of a large sculpture of a naked man. The reason she offers for this cultural vandalism is that she



Perfect couple: Rachel Weisz and Paul Rudd in Neil LaBute's play, *The Shape of Things*, which explores the nature of truth in art

dislikes "art that isn't true" — a phrase that is to reverberate throughout the play.

The couple start dating. Adam, an engagingly geeky innocent, becomes as clay in Evelyn's manipulative hands. At her urging, he changes his hairstyle and his wardrobe, has a nose job and finally dumps his two closest friends — though not before having sex with the fiancée of his best mate. He becomes more fanciable, more confident — and rather less likeable. In particular he starts to tell lies.

I don't want to give too much

away, though LaBute provides plenty of clues. As early as the second scene, Adam is comparing himself to Eliza in *Pygmalion*, and you don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to guess exactly what Evelyn has in mind for her "big sorta installation thingy", though the scene when she finally unveils her magnum opus still packs a hefty dramatic punch.

What initially seems a touching study of student romance develops instead into a passionate discussion about the way art feeds on life, the responsibility of the artist, and the nature of art itself.

Is the current fashion for confessional, conceptual art — one thinks of Tracey Emin's *My Bed* — actually art at all? Not according to Adam. "When Picasso took a shit, he didn't call it a 'sculpture'." He knew the difference," he insists. And by now he has every reason to feel mightily aggrieved.

LaBute directs a gripping production of his own play, neatly and ingeniously designed by Giles Cadle. Weisz is excellent as Evelyn — as sexually enticing, as enigmatic and as entirely heartless as the role demands — while Rudd is hugely sympathetic as her

hapless prey. There is strong support, too, from Frederick Weller as Adam's unappealingly aggressive friend and from Gretchen Mol as his fiancée who has the hots for Adam.

The play is a touch too neat and schematic for its own good, the denouement too predictable. Nevertheless *The Shape of Things* is undoubtedly both thought-provoking and highly entertaining — just so long as you can stand the din of grunge.

Tickets: 020 7359 4404

Charles Spencer

Shape Spencer Telegraph

Clipped By:

ianlharris

4 May 2026