

**KILLING NEIL LABUTE
AND OTHER PLAYS**

by
David Robson

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

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KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

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Contents

Killing Neil LaBute

Death of America

The Speech

Goons

You Rang

Mel and Mee

Ed Rex

A Necessary End

Someone Else's Life

The Stronger

KILLING NEIL LABUTE

Killing Neil LaBute was first produced by the Intentional Theatre, Waterford, Connecticut, in 2006. It was subsequently performed at the Great Plains Theatre Conference in 2007.

CHARACTERS

JAMES—*in his 30s*

LOWELL—*in his 30s or 40s*

LABUTE—*in his 40s*

PLACE AND TIME

A house; a restaurant. The recent past.

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

Lights rise on JAMES. He speaks to the audience.

JAMES. Let's get this straight: He started it. Okay, technically, I started it. See, a month or two ago I posted a customer book review on one of those internet book-buying sites. Alright, it was Amazon—okay—and it was about a play by Neil LaBute. You know who I'm talking about? He writes plays and they're controversial and he's pretty hot right now. No? Well, it doesn't matter really. But, anyway, I posted a review about this guy's play. Now, I like LaBute's stuff. It's funny; it's cruel. I love that sort of shit, right? But this new play...well, I'm not as crazy about it. It's good, I guess, but it didn't float my boat quite like the others. So, I wrote a review. It went like this, verbatim: "I'm a fan of LaBute's. I loved *In the Company of Men*, *Your Friends and Neighbors*, and thought *Fat Pig* was pretty darn good. But this latest play seems a retread—and a dull one at that. This interracial love triangle with its unreliable narrator is too clever by half. I'm not the kind of reader who thinks we must 'like' the characters, but don't we have to find them interesting, at least? How about a rewrite, Neil. Did a little deeper and stop relying on the "surprise" ending to make it all work. You're becoming the M. Night Shyamalan of plays, without the cool special effects." A couple of months later I get a call: (*James' cell phone rings; he pulls it from his pocket and answers.*) Hello. (*Lights rise on LOWELL wearing an old ball cap.*)

LOWELL. James?

JAMES. Hi honey! (*To audience.*) It's the wife. What's up?

LOWELL. Did you see you got an e-mail from Neil LaBute?

JAMES. What?

LOWELL. Did you review one of his plays or something?

JAMES. I...uh...yeah, on Amazon—his last play.

LOWELL. You didn't like it, huh?

JAMES. It was alright. I like some of his others better. Read it to me.

LOWELL. I can't right now.

JAMES. Okay, I'll see you soon. Bye.

LOWELL. Bye.

JAMES. Love you.

LOWELL. Love you too. (*Lights out on Lowell.*)

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

JAMES. *(To audience.)* When I got home, I ran to the computer and checked my e-mail. *(Lights rise on LABUTE, with bushy hair and glasses.)*

LABUTE. James: Sorry you didn't like my recent play. But those who can't *do* teach. I'd rather be a doer. Maybe you'll like my next one, or the next one.

JAMES. *(To audience.)* Signed...

LABUTE. Neil LaBute.

JAMES. *(To audience.)* I clicked "reply": "Dear Neil: Everybody's a critic, I know. Then again, who cares what I think? I wish you continued success with your stellar career. I truly admire your writing. You do what I dream of doing—you write for a living." So, I waited. In the meantime, I forwarded the LaBute e-mail to my friend, Lowell. *(Lights rise on Lowell. He's eating a piece of toast and talking to James on the phone.)*

LOWELL. Wow! You really zinged him in that review, huh?

JAMES. I guess.

LOWELL. That was rough—the M. Night Shyamalan thing. I laughed out loud.

JAMES. Yeah.

LOWELL. Think he'll write back again?

JAMES. I don't know.

LOWELL. My friend, Libby, knows him—met him at some kind of gala. I'll have to send his e-mail to her.

JAMES. You don't have to.

LOWELL. Why? It's so cool. Hold on, I got a call on the other line.
(Blackout on Lowell.)

JAMES. *(To audience.)* Then, on the third day after I wrote him, LaBute responded... *(Lights rise again on LaBute.)*

LABUTE. Apology *not* accepted. What the hell gives you the right to comment on *my* work, you no-talent, pea-brained motherfucker. I could buy you and sell you. I've worked with Renée Zellweger, you fuck. Renée Zellweger! *Nurse Betty* was unrecognized genius, and so is *This Is How It Goes*—the play you hated. And you have the fucking gall to take your cheap shots? I'm going to find you, no matter how long it takes. I'm going to hunt you down, find your house, and torch the fucker. You got that?! I

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

want to watch your corpse burn. Hear me, pal? Nobody fucks with Neil LaBute! And you ain't gonna be the first. (*Lights out on LaBute.*)

JAMES. (*To audience.*) It's here I should tell you that not everything in this play is what actually happened. I'm not married to Lowell, for number one. But my wife refused me permission to use her name or her likeness. And LaBute didn't really threaten me. I made that part up. Guess that makes me an unreliable narrator, just like the one in that play of his I'm not so crazy about. Still, he really did write me back. (*Lights up on LaBute.*)

LABUTE. James, thanks for the note. Hey, no hard feelings. You can't like everything, but you seem like a pretty smart guy. That's why your review stung me. I've been rather fragile lately. My marriage is falling apart, my kids are out of control, and the *Times* has been kind of tough on me lately. That Ben Brantley is a certified monkey's asshole. By the way, you mentioned that you wrote plays too. I'd love to read one. I can't promise anything, though. This would just be one writer to another. We've got to stick together, don't you think? (*Lights out on LaBute.*)

JAMES. (*To audience.*) This was bullshit. I was onto him. He was doing to me what his characters did in his plays: fuck other people over. You know, like *In the Company of Men* when those two corporate schmucks try to get a pretty but deaf young thing to fall in love with one of them. One of the guys—the good-looking one—wins her heart and fucks her over. Or like in *The Shape of Things* in which a sultry Svengali convinces a kind of dweeby guy to change his looks and appearance for her. Once he does, you know what happens? She fucks him over. He was going to take my play and rake me over the coals, fuck me over somehow. I wrote him back. “Thanks, Neil, but I better not send my play.” (*Lights on LaBute.*)

LABUTE. Come on, James. What are you so shy about?

JAMES. I'm not shy. It's just that—

LABUTE. What's the worst that can happen?

JAMES. You hate it.

LABUTE. Like you hated mine?

JAMES. I never said I hated yours. You're blowing this way out of— (*To audience.*) And then you know what? I thought about it. Yeah, he's right. What's the worst that can happen? He hates my play and that's that. So, I

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

sent him one of my plays. And guess what? He liked it. No, he loved it. And not only that...

LABUTE. Listen, here's my home number.

JAMES. *(To audience.)* Bullshit, I thought. But he went on:

LABUTE. I'm serious about this. The play was right up my alley: smart, incisive dialogue—the two doctors, you know. I had some problems in the second act, but I was kind of surprised. I wanted to hate it. But I'd love to talk about it with you.

JAMES. I told the wife. *(Lights once again rise on Lowell with the ball cap, shaving his legs.)*

LOWELL. That's amazing, honey. You think he's serious?

JAMES. Why wouldn't he be?

LOWELL. Well, you know, some of those plays of his...

JAMES. Yeah, I know. His characters trick each other.

LOWELL. They fuck each other over.

JAMES. But he gave me his home number.

LOWELL. You think it's for real?

JAMES. I called it ten minutes ago.

LOWELL. And?

JAMES. He answered.

LOWELL. How do you know it was him?

JAMES. It was him.

LOWELL. How do you know?

JAMES. It sounded like him. I've heard him on the radio before.

LOWELL. So, what did you do when he answered?

JAMES. I hung up.

LOWELL. Are you going to call him back?

JAMES. In a couple of days, maybe.

LOWELL. Maybe.

JAMES. I want to play it cool.

LOWELL. He probably knew it was you. You know, when you called and hung up.

JAMES. How could he?

LOWELL. He could guess. He just e-mailed you his number.

JAMES. Everybody gets hang-ups.

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

LOWELL. You're being kind of weird about this.

JAMES. How am I being weird?

LOWELL. It's like you're in tenth grade and some senior girl asked you to the prom.

JAMES. Well, how would you feel? There's no etiquette for this kind of thing.

LOWELL. Are you going to try to sound chummy?

JAMES. What's chummy?

LOWELL. Like you've been pals for a long time—like, “Hey Neil, I'm just checking in to see what's doing.” Then again, you could be really formal, I guess: “Hello, Mr. LaBute, this is James Crawford, the Amazon reviewer who berated you and your play.”

JAMES. I didn't berate him—

LOWELL. You kind of did.

JAMES. Whose side are you on, anyway? (*Blackout on Lowell. Then, to audience.*) Well, I did call. He really did give me his home phone number. He sounded like a great guy—self-deprecating, funny. He had a great laugh, too—kind of high-pitched, almost a giggle. All he wanted to talk about was my play—where it was produced, what the reviews were like, why wasn't I shopping-it-around more. It was un-fucking-believable. And then, it happened. (*Lights again rise on LaBute.*)

LABUTE. I'm coming to see you.

JAMES. (*To audience.*) I almost shit my pants.

LABUTE. It's not a big deal, so don't make it one. A theater's doing *Distance from Here*, so I'm looking in on the production, but I thought, since I was in the area—

JAMES. Come to dinner. Come to my house.

LABUTE. We hardly know each other. But what about a restaurant in Philly?

JAMES. Sure. (*To audience.*) So, I gave him the name of a place where I'd meet him. I was positive he was screwing with me. (*Lights rise on Lowell, now dressed as a waiter and setting a small, intimate table. He pours wine. After a moment, James enters dressed in black. He acknowledges Lowell.*)

JAMES. Thanks.

KILLING NEIL LABUTE AND OTHER PLAYS

LOWELL. Anything else, sir?

JAMES. You're all out of hand towels in the bathroom.

LOWELL. Thank you, sir. *(Lowell exits. James sits and sips his wine, but he's antsy and gets up, looks at his watch, and briefly paces before sitting again.)*

JAMES. *(To audience.)* This is so gay. Got the intimate table, got the wine. Why did I order wine? Does he even drink wine? Do Mormon's drink wine? Did you know that about LaBute? He's Mormon. Seems kind of strange with the kind of shit he writes. I always imagined the Mormons being a bit more strict about stuff like that, but— *(Lowell reenters.)*

LOWELL. Would you like to see a menu while you're waiting, sir?

JAMES. Yes, thanks. *(Lowell presents James with a menu and exits.) (To audience.)* Do I look okay? It was really hard to figure out what to wear. Formal was no good. I was going more for the artist in black thing, but it might be over the top. What do you think? Maybe she's right—this is so 10th grade getting asked out by a senior— *(LaBute enters. He catches Lowell, who is folding napkins, and the two speak inaudibly. Then LaBute walks to James.)*

LABUTE. M. Night Shyamalan, I presume.

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS –
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