



Autobahn: A Short-Play Cycle

By Neil LaBute

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"Sitting in an automobile was where I first remember understanding how drama works...Hidden in the back seat of a sedan, I quickly realized how deep the chasm or intense the claustrophobia could be inside your average family car." -- Neil LaBute

Be it the medium for clandestine couplings, arguments, shelter, or ultimately transportation, the automobile is perhaps the most authentically American of spaces. In *Autobahn*, Neil LaBute's provocative new collection of one-act plays set within the confines of the front seat, the playwright employs his signature plaintive insight to great effect, investigating the inchoate apprehension that surrounds the steering wheel. Each of these seven brief vignettes explore the ethos of perception and relationship--from a make-out session gone awry to a kidnapping thinly disguised as a road trip, a reconnaissance mission involving the rescue of a Nintendo 64 to a daughter's long ride home after her release from rehab. The result is an unsettling montage that gradually reveals the scabrous force of words left unsaid while illuminating the delicate interplay between intention and morality, capturing the essence of middle America and the myriad paths which cross its surface.

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Editorial Review

Review

“There is no playwright on the planet these days who is writing better than Neil LaBute.” ?*John Lahr, The New Yorker*

“Neil LaBute is the first dramatist since David Mamet and Sam Shepard--since Edward Albee, actually to mix sympathy and savagery, pathos and power.” ?*Donald Lyons, New York Post*

“LaBute [is] our American Aesop, a mad moral fabulist serving stiff tonic for our country's sin-sick souls.” ?*John Istel, American Theatre*

About the Author

Neil LaBute is a critically acclaimed writer-director for both the stage and the screen. His recent plays include *The Shape of Things* (Faber 2001), and *The Mercy Seat* (Faber 2003).

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Autobahn

funny

A YOUNG WOMAN *sitting in the front seat of a car. An OLDER WOMAN seated next to her, driving.*

YOUNG WOMAN ... it's all the same, you know? How it looks out there, along the highway. It is. That's funny. I mean, not funny-ha-ha but the other kind of funny. What would you call that? Funny-strange, I guess. Or odd. Funny-odd. It's just ... I mean, I didn't expect that. That stuff would seem so ... familiar. It is funny. To *me*, at least. (*Beat.*) So ... how's Dad? Good, probably. I'll bet he's good. Dad is always good. He's a *good* dad. I'm surprised he didn't come, that he left all this up to you. That's kind of unlike him. Unusual, anyway. That he'd do that. Oh, wait ... he's out of town, isn't he? Didn't you say something about that on the phone, can't remember now. I think you did. Said he wouldn't be able to make it--not that he called me, told me himself, that would be very, you know, "un-dad-like" of him, but--I guess I do recall that now. He's not home. Where'd he go again ... Milwaukee? Is this a Milwaukee week? Yeah, guess it must be. Huh. I just don't get that, not at all ... why he insists on driving himself up every other weekend, going up there to see Grandma and Grandpa. They don't care if he does, don't even really want him to, I can tell, times I've been up there with him. They sit there, on that floral couch of theirs, and just stare at you. Through you, really, that would actually be a more accurate description of it. Them staring *through* you. Maybe it's her cataracts or whatever, or that blood-thinning medicine he's on, but it's like you're there, they can sense someone's in the room, but they can't completely make them out. I mean, specifically. (*Beat.*) Or ... they're just not very nice people. That could be it, too. They could just be crabby, old, mean people who don't give a shit about anybody, and just because they look frail and cute and all that stuff doesn't mean a thing. Because we age, right, we get older and all that, but it doesn't change who we are. Does it? No way. It doesn't ... I mean, just because some guy, some Ku Klux Klan guy grows too aged to put a rope around some black kid's neck, that don't mean he doesn't want to. True? That's what I think, anyway. Just 'cause we can't doesn't mean we wouldn't like to ...

The OLDER WOMAN glances over at her daughter. The YOUNG WOMAN flashes her a serene smile.

YOUNG WOMAN Obviously I had a little time on my hands up there to think about stuff ... (*smiles*) Yep. Lots of time. It was an interesting place, a lot different than the last one. Really pretty cool, which I've been meaning to thank you both for, honestly. I even made up a little note-hand-painted and everything in my art class--that thanked you and Dad for getting me set up in such a nice facility. Never sent it, though. Sorry. Meant to, but, you know ... didn't. But it was awesome. Their "campus." And the boys were cute, so you two really did a bang-up job. Thanks, Mom. (*Beat.*) I thought they had a good program, too, you know, maybe a little heavy on the "higher power" stuff, perhaps a bit too much of that nonsense, but overall, very good. Good staff, tasty food, I even liked the name. Twin Oaks. Quite pretty. Like a little bed and breakfast place or something, nestled there in a picturesque setting ... although none of us, when we were walking around the grounds or on hikes and stuff ... we didn't see any oaks. Not a one. (*Beat.*) Oh, you know what was funny, this one night? You'll like this--there was a movie on, in the rec room, this old black-and-white movie on the TV--and you know me, right? I usually run the other way when you and Dad are watching that crap, *Gone With the Wind* or whatever, I'm outthere--but I plop down for a second, just for a minute or so, to sneak a little popcorn, I've really got the munchies from all the restrictions they have me on and everything. Like no cigarettes--you didn't tell me that when you guys shipped me off there. Left that one out, didn't you? Whatever--anyway, this show is on, and as it's happening, we all notice, really quickly, that the movie's taking place at this roadside café called the same thing: Twin Oaks. Isn't that weird? Yeah. It all happens--weii, mostly all--in and around this café-slash-home where this married lady and some drifter guy kill her husband. Basically for love. I mean, they end up taking his establishment and everything, getting his money, but mostly it's just for love. Isn't that cool? Mom? That we were watching it--my "peers" and I--at Twin Oaks and the story's meant to be going on at Twin Oaks. Although, obviously, a different Twin Oaks. (*Beat.*) Well, we all thought it was pretty funny ... and after, we shared a smoke before bed. A *marijuana* smoke. I know that's probably hard for you to hear and everything, but I'm supposed to be more honest now. That's part of my sobriety thingie--to be candid.

The OLDER WOMAN looks over at the YOUNG WOMAN. Silence.

YOUNG WOMAN Yep. And anyhow, that was all before ... before I got things together. I mean, in a place like that--you can get anything you want, or to do, you can do just about whatever you'd like, if you want it bad enough. And that night, I did. But I'm better now. Totally all better. Right? You believe that, don't you ... Mom? I know Dad does. He told me, last family session he came to, he told me that. Looks me right in the eye, which for him is ... (*points to her forehead*) ... right about here. But he looks at me, and he smiles--maybe even tearing up a little bit--and he says, he says in that one quiet voice of his, "Honey, I believe you. I do." Which was just so cool. I mean, like, *moving* almost. I was almost moved by that. I was. And now here I am ... out and clean and feeling pretty great. So.

The YOUNG WOMAN stops for a moment, considering.

YOUNG WOMAN I just think ... I dunno. I think maybe it could be really easy to fit back in at home, in a way. I know the twins are off at school now and all, so that'll be different, but, you know, I just imagine that

it could be an easy fit for me to get myself into the groove. To register down at the community college next semester and maybe get a job even, my old job back, or that sort of deal ... I could do that. Absolutely. I know that's what you're hoping, Dad told me last week, he said that you guys are really "pulling for me." He used that term, which just about kills me ... "We're pulling for ya, sweetie." Which is not even something he ever says, that's Grandpa's phrase, and he knows I hate it, because it doesn't mean anything, not really, it has no meaning, but I guess the fact that he was there, still in his suit from work, and drove up to attend the meeting says something, so it's fine. It's okay that he uses it, but I just can't really buy into it. Not completely. Because, like, what're you guys saying by saying that? Huh? Seriously, Mom, what? (*Beat.*) See, you don't even know, do you? Nope. Not really ...

They drive on in silence for a moment. The YOUNG WOMAN looks out her side window.

YOUNG WOMAN ... No, I think the only way to prove to you guys that your money was well spent is to be honest, like they said. Do my best to become a more truthful person, to say what I feel. Tomean what I say. Yeah. At least with one person ... that's one of their ideas, that you start it small and be completely on the level, always, with one person. So, you know, no matter what else you do, you are always gonna be true to that chosen individual. They stand by it, the counselors up there, say that it's the best way to get yourself back on the road. And I picked you. Mom. Isn't that neat? Out of everybody, I picked you.

The OLDER WOMAN glances at the YOUNG WOMAN, then back at the road.

YOUNG WOMAN And so, that's why, well, I just need to be open with you here ... here in the car where you can't run into the next room or slam the door in my face or throw yourself down on the bed and start crying, this is the place to be honest. Right? I think so ... (*Beat.*) I'm gonna do everything in my power to use again. I know I am, I can feel it. I've done the time there, up there at Twin Oaks, and listened to all the lectures and sat through the groups and whatnot, and I'm telling you ... I can't wait to get my hands on some shit. Whatever kind of shit anybody'll give me. That's what I want. And I'll do whatever that person asks, or whatever it costs for it. I will. (*Beat.*) I know that's not what you wanna hear, Mom, I'm sure that makes you sick and hate me and that kind of thing, but I did learn that at ol' Twin Oaks. To be honest. They impressed it upon us, most strongly, and I walked away believing it. I mean, I told them all that other stuff, too, all the crap they wanted to hear about me getting better and the like, but I do sort of believe this honesty thing. Just sitting here, as we were driving, it came over me. This desire to be truthful. So there it is. The truth. I know I'm gonna relapse. Can't wait to, really, so if that means you wanna turn around and drive me back, then I guess so be it ...

The OLDER WOMAN doesn't turn from watching the road, nor does she turn the car around. She just keeps driving.

YOUNG WOMAN ... figured that's what yo...

Users Review

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