

Makeover

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

With *The Shape of Things*, filmmaker Neil LaBute returns to his earlier status as a "nasty piece of work." After taking a moral hiatus to direct the uneven black comedy *Nurse Betty* (2000) and the dreary love story *Possession* (2002), he is back to the severe old tricks he exhibited in his first two films, the upsetting but challenging *In the Company of Men* (1997) and the less successful *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), where he exposed the underbelly of men's emotions and insecurities, especially in the ongoing and always escalating battle of the sexes.

The Shape of Things originated as a 2001 play which LaBute wrote and directed. He admits the play was a partial response to the charge that he had portrayed men as cruel and heartless in their pursuit of sex and control. LaBute wanted to show that women could be just as insensitive, but with a twist.

He suggests that while men tend to showboat and "score" for the approval of their male peers (jock mentality at its most overt), women are more solitary in their conniving and cruelty, gleaning a more personal satisfaction from their psychological and physical manipulations. (When I interviewed LaBute I asked him about his penchant for unlikable characters behaving in despicable ways. He maintained that he has shown nothing onscreen that he doesn't see in real life on a regular basis.)

The Shape of Things centers on the relationship between Adam (Paul Rudd), a slightly chubby and disheveled English major at small (and allegorically named) Mercy College in California, and Evelyn (Rachel Weisz), an art student who is deadly serious about the power of art. Accordingly, they first meet at a campus art museum, where Adam is working part-time as a guard. Evelyn is there not to observe but to protest--spray paint in hand--the puritanical addition of a "fig leaf" on a nude statue. Adam is smitten with this dark and daring beauty, despite the fact that Evelyn (note the biblical names) would seem to be out of his league. They soon become a couple, much to the chagrin of Adam's good buddy, Philip (Frederick Weller). Philip is planning on marrying the sweet and unassuming Jenny (Gretchen Mol), whom Adam has long adored from afar.

Most of the first act resembles a standard romantic comedy (except with slightly sharper dialogue). Adam jumps through hoops to hold onto the unpredictable Evelyn, starting with a few tutorials in the bedroom. But as the story unfolds, it takes on darker dimensions. His desire for Evelyn is so intense that he eventually stops seeing Philip and Jenny, since they feel Evelyn is "bad for him." Or could it be that, like the original Adam, he has changed after nibbling on forbidden fruit?

In fact, Adam changes a lot. Under Evelyn's tutelage, he loses weight, adjusts his diet, sharpens up his wardrobe, buys contact lenses and even gets a nose job. He does all this to please the alluring but demanding Evelyn, who seems to garner great satisfaction from making Adam her personal project.

As the third act approaches, and we witness the suddenly desirable Adam in a series of "before and after" situations, we sense that LaBute is exploring the question of how and when people are willing to change, adapt or compromise within a relationship. When does one lose self-respect? Can one's personality be altered? One's politics? Even one's morality?

Since it is LaBute at work, we sense that a grim conclusion awaits us, and sure enough, the end of the third act reveals an element of this one-sided relationship that is every bit as unpleasant and controlling as the ugly male posturing in *Company of Men*.

The performances are all solid (the cast is from the original stage production), which is vital to the film's success, since LaBute, mostly for financial reasons (the film was shot in 19 days), chose not to adapt the stage version very much, except for adding a few exterior shots near the California coastline. It's up to the characters and the dialogue to give the film its weight and guide it to its disturbing conclusion.