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Young characters walk fine line in UIS play

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Adam (Joey Cruse) and Evelyn (Carol Schulte) in Neil LaBute's play "The Shape of Things," which opens Friday in a production by UIS Theatre.

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By **BRIAN MACKEY** (brian.mackey@sj-r.com)
THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER
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At the center of "The Shape of Things" is the line between art and life.

The Neil LaBute play, which opens Friday at UIS Theatre, begins with a literal interpretation of that divide when Adam, a college student and part-time museum security guard, finds Evelyn on the wrong side of a velvet rope guarding a statue.

Adam is chatting with Evelyn when he sees she has a can of spray paint. She intends to deface the sculpture — an artistic statement — and he asks why.

"Because I don't like art that isn't true," Evelyn says.

The sculpture is of a naked man, but the people of this conservative, nameless Midwestern town petitioned to have the statue's realistic depiction of the male anatomy covered with plaster fig leaves. To Evelyn's thinking, this is an abomination that robbed the sculpture of its subjectivity as art; she was going to de-neuter the figure, painting back what the townsfolk had hidden away.

Adam soon picks up on the fact that Evelyn is an art student, specifically a master's-degree candidate in "applied theory and crit."

After the encounter, which ends with Adam walking away and Evelyn shaking her can of paint, they begin dating. Evelyn slowly works Adam over, pushing him from nerd to hipster.

"He's just a very nice boy," said Joey Cruse, who plays Adam. "He's from a Midwestern town, a place like

The Shape of Things
Presented by UIS Theatre

When
7:30 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Nov. 19-21; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where
Studio Theatre, lower level of the Public Affairs Center, on the campus of the University of Illinois Springfield

Tickets
\$14 adults, \$12 senior citizens, \$10 UIS faculty/staff, \$8 students; available through the Sangamon Auditorium ticket office, by calling 206-6160 or at www.sangamonauditorium.org.

This production contains adult language and situations and is intended for mature audiences.

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Springfield, and it's awkward for him to meet anyone like Evelyn, from a city, and it takes him out of his comfort zone."

Adam's Evelyn-inspired change manifests itself in everything from his clothes to his mannerisms and the way he carries himself.

Evelyn is a little older than Adam, more aggressive and manipulative, and feels superior to many of the people around her.

At least that's how Carol Schulte sees her character.

"(She) wants to have an impact on these people and teach them something, and get them to think outside of their box a little bit and question their values and ideals," Schulte said.

Enter Phil (Kevin Brownell), a former roommate of Adam's who disapproves of Evelyn, and Phil's fiancée, Jenny (Lauren Braden). What starts out as a humorous play takes a dark turn in the second act, as the four characters' lives become more entangled and they begin to see each other in new ways.

Saying much more about how the story develops would spoil its surprises. Suffice to say that Evelyn's can of spray paint was just a small indication of how dirty she's willing to get smudging the line between art and life.

"In other words, how much should art be infused in our daily living?" director Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson said. "Is art something that should just be seen on the occasional weekend visit to the museum, and keep it over there, safe? Or should we live all our lives artistically?"

LaBute may be better known for the movies he's directed, including "Lakeview Terrace" (2008) and "Nurse Betty" (2000). He also wrote and directed "In the Company of Men" (1997) and "The Wicker Man" (2006).

Thibodeaux-Thompson said that although most people would probably be more familiar with LaBute's movie work, his plays are "formidable."

This year, LaBute's "Reasons to be Pretty" — his first show to be produced on Broadway — was a finalist for the Tony Award for best play.

"The Shape of Things," written in 2000, has been in frequent production in both college and professional theater, Thibodeaux-Thompson said. LaBute also turned the play into a 2003 movie starring Paul Rudd, Rachel Weisz, Fred Weller and Gretchen Mol.

Such small-cast plays are rare at UIS, where inclusiveness is one of the program's goals.

"We realize when we do a smaller-cast show like this, we risk some students feeling like, 'Oh, the doors are closing on my opportunity,'" Thibodeaux-Thompson said. The last show with a cast this small was "Proof" in 2003.

Thibodeaux-Thompson said he had hoped directing a smaller cast would be less hectic than his last production, "As You Like It," which spread 18 actors over 23 roles.

"I had this idea back last summer when we were deciding on the season: 'The Shape of Things,' it's a tremendous play and I'm going to get a little bit of a break because it's a smaller cast," he said.

"And I mean this in the best sense: no break. I feel like I'm working just as hard as 'As You Like It' or anything else. And that's a good thing, I recognize," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

Though a former colleague had recommended it to him years ago when the play was relatively new, it's only in the last few years that Thibodeaux-Thompson picked up "The Shape of Things." He's been using it for scene work in an acting class.

"The students here went nuts for it — they really responded to this play," he said. "I think they think the vernacular in it really speaks their language to some extent, and I think they think the story content of the play accurately depicts aspects of what it is to be 20-something right now, in the year 2009-2010."

Brian Mackey can be reached at 747-9587.

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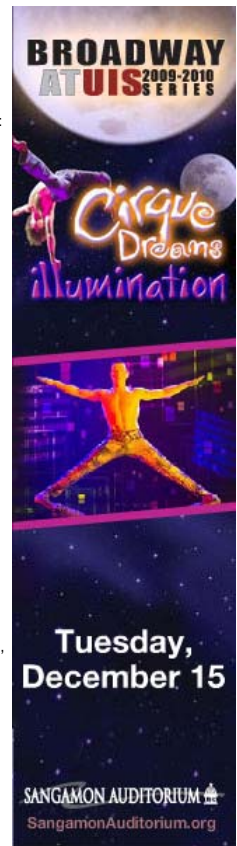
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