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Review: 'Shape of Things' pushes boundaries of art, love

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By the final curtain, the first line in "The Shape of Things" could be directed at every character: "You stepped over the line."

The Neil LaBute play, which opened Friday in the Studio Theatre at the University of Illinois Springfield, follows four college students testing the boundaries of love and life — and each other.

In that opening scene, Adam is working as an art museum security guard when Evelyn crosses a velvet rope to approach a statue with a can of spray paint.

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 a plaster fig leaf. The neutering is an abomination that Evelyn — an art major — intends to rectify by painting back what the townsfolk had hidden.

Adam, an English major who works two jobs to get through school, is frumpy and self-conscious. Evelyn, who has a full scholarship, is sexy and self-assured. Improbably, the two begin dating, and Adam begins to change.

Every time he comes on stage, he's a little different — friends notice he's lost weight, he changes his hair, trades glasses for contacts and stops biting his nails.

Phillip, Adam's former roommate, is suspicious of Evelyn and the changes in Adam she seems to be inspiring. When Adam donates a favorite corduroy coat to Goodwill, Phillip is incredulous: "I begged you to throw out the farm coat our freshman year, I mean, you've lost both of us a lot of dates with that thing on."

Then there's Jenny, Phillip's fiancée, who we learn early on may or may not have had feelings for Adam.

Saying any more about the story would ruin its surprises. Suffice to say no one is quite who they — or anyone else — think they are.

Any play with such a small cast asks a lot of its actors, and the four UIS students in "The Shape of Things" rise to the challenge.

As Adam, Joey Cruse displays some of the same fecklessness he used to great comic effect as Leo Bloom in "The Producers" this year at The Muni. Evelyn has to be everything Adam isn't, and Carol Schulte plays the role with enough of an edge to make you wonder if everything is as it seems.

Lauren Braden's Jenny blends likability with vulnerability, and Kevin Brownell's Phil steals several scenes with some of the funniest lines in the play.

Directed by Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson, head of the [UIS Theatre](#) program, "The Shape of Things" was staged with a simple, static background of two paintings — art looming over life, Evelyn might say. It also was a relief to hear the actors unamplified and unencumbered. More local companies ought to consider using small spaces like the UIS Studio Theatre.

Additional performances are scheduled for 7:30 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Sunday and 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Nov. 21. The Studio Theatre is on the lower level of the Public Affairs Center at UIS. Tickets: \$14 adults, \$12 seniors, \$10 UIS faculty/staff, \$8 students; available through the Sangamon Auditorium ticket office, by calling 206-6160 or at www.sangamonauditorium.org.

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