Looking For Ways To Ruin A Perfectly Good Day: Masculinity in bash: the latter-day plays by Neil LaBute

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LOOKING FOR WAYS TO RUIN A PERFECTLY GOOD DAY: MASCULINITY IN
BASH: THE LATTER-DAY PLAYS BY NEIL LABUTE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CHAPTER 2 GREEK ROOTS AND MODERN BRANCHES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CHAPTER 3 MASCULINITY ON THE PAGE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A CALCULATED RISK: IPHIGENIA IN OREM</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GIGGLING LIKE SCHOOLBOYS: A GAGGLE OF SAINTS</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SMILING, BUT SAD: MEDEA REDUX</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CHAPTER 4 MASCULINITY ON THE STAGE</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SETTING THE STAGE: IRONING OUT THE KINKS IN THE PRODUCTION PROCESS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAKING THE TOUGH CHOICES: PLAYING JOHN IN BASH</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: STAGING MASCULINITY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CHAPTER 5 THOUGHTS ON PRODUCING BASH</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A PRODUCTION PHOTOS OF BASH: THE LATTER-DAY PLAYS</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

LOOKING FOR WAYS TO RUIN A PERFECTLY GOOD DAY: MASCULINITY IN BASH: THE LATTER-DAY PLAYS BY NEIL LABUTE

By Daniel F. Devlin, Master of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Neil LaBute is one of the most prolific and challenging playwrights in America today. My thesis will explore his work bash: the latter-day plays through the frame of the performance and use of masculinity by his characters, and will create a vocabulary through which the remainder of LaBute’s works can be studied, both in terms of academic scholarship and the practical application of that scholarship to the process of theatrical creation.
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Neil LaBute is one of the country’s most challenging playwrights. His works routinely examine, often in painful and revealing ways, the condition of the American individual – how he (or she) lives, exists, and interacts within the boundaries of a society whose rules change with alarming frequency. Definitions that once were clear cut and black and white become blurred, and LaBute challenges the deepest, darkest desires inside of us – when faced with a defining moment, how a person acts defines what sort of person that individual is.

LaBute follows in a great tradition of American playwrights in terms of structure, plot and subject. Like Sam Shepard and David Mamet, to whom LaBute has dedicated plays, LaBute concerns himself with the American man – or, more correctly, American masculinity. LaBute challenges the way we think and feel about masculinity, challenges the traditional definitions and boundaries of masculinity, challenges, above all other things, a notion of binary opposition – that is, since the introduction of the Feminist Movement, is masculinity being defined only in opposition to feminism? The characters in LaBute’s work seem to think so – and so we find many males at a crisis point in their lives, trying to define precisely what it means to be a man, both in terms of personal definitions and in the larger social definitions; when they find their masculinity challenged, the lengths to which
a character is willing to go to prove their manliness often unveils violent and frightening means to an end.

As subaltern groups seek to reclaim terms which have traditionally been used by the white male power structure to practice hegemony over them, language has become a weapon of destruction and denigration. Often, it’s difficult to keep up with words and phrases that are no longer allowed to be used, unless by those being prejudiced against – LaBute’s characters often find themselves in similar situations.

LaBute does not write traditional characters that easily fit into the definitions of protagonist and antagonist – his characters are not that simple. He doesn’t write heroes and villains – he writes people, and that is, perhaps, what makes his plays, his characters, and his characters actions so provocative, so unsettling. Without the traditional definitions of heroes and villains for his characters to hide behind, he forces the audience to question their own moral code – no character is either good or bad. Characters are defined by their words and by their actions, and, like many people, they live in moral gray areas. The audience can see both sides of any given coin. He does not write characters that are bigger than life, characters that are charming, kind, funny, lovable – while certainly, some characters have these traits, they often belie a malignant inner morality. Instead, LaBute writes people, regular people – the scariest, most grotesquely engaging part of any LaBute play is that the character onstage could be anyone – your brother, your neighbor, yourself.

Why does LaBute choose to write such characters? In a Time Magazine article, LaBute says “A good relationship equals a shitty story. Drama’s fundamental building
LaBute is one of the country’s most prolific playwrights. He came to prominence in 1997 with his film *In the Company of Men*. *In the Company of Men* began life as a play for which, in 1993, LaBute won an award from the Association of Mormon Letters. The 1997 film version, starring LaBute’s college friend, and frequent collaborator, Aaron Eckhart, won several awards, including the Filmmaker’s Trophy at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival. (It was also nominated for the Grand Jury prize, but lost to *Sunday*.) *In the Company of Men* would be an opening shot towards what would become familiar themes for LaBute – two men, co-workers in an office setting, both dealing with negative feelings towards women, co-decide to seduce the most innocent woman they can find, specifically to hurt her, thus exacting revenge against the female sex. While *In the Company of Men* seems to be an open/shut case of modern misogyny, LaBute resists this. As he says, “It’s all just name calling. The premise that these guys work on — let’s hurt a woman — O.K., that was misogynistic. But to say these guys were just misogynistic was very limiting. Don’t stop there. At least give me misanthropic” (Farouky). Since that film, LaBute has continued as a director of films, often adapting and directing his own work for the screen, but just as often directing other work.

His first “hit” play, *bash: the latter-day plays* premiered in 1999, LaBute has seemed to release *at least* a play a year, sometimes more. He is a concept-machine: always working, always creating output, always challenging himself, his characters, and the people in different, exciting ways. Additionally, LaBute is a cross-Atlantic sensation – in
the summer of 2005, he had two plays playing in the West End at the same time – *Some Girl(s)* and *This is How it Goes* – both of which eventually made their way across the Atlantic to New York City.

LaBute’s writing has landed him in hot water. In addition to being called a misogynist, LaBute had “a bit of a falling out” with the Mormon church over the controversy surrounding his play *bash*, which concerns stories about people who commit atrocities against each other, themselves, other people, who just happen to be Mormon. LaBute took it in stride. LaBute concerns himself, often, with a list of social “-isms”; racism, sexism, classism. With his confrontational style, it’s no wonder he’s been called the “bad boy of American theatre” (Farouky).

In addition to thematic similarities between his works, LaBute’s collection also has several identifying structural similarities. Often, his plays are less based on the sort of traditional model of plot-heaviness and instead are more like a collection of scenes based around a central premise. His dialogue is characterized by a Mamet-esque stop and go style, which belies the point that LaBute’s dialogue can be confusing, not only for the audience, but also for the characters involved. Often, when a character is out of power in the scene, his or her part of the dialogue becomes more and more fractured, while the stronger character’s language becomes inversely *less* fractured – some of LaBute’s most powerful words are delivered monologue style at quite a stretch.

In a paper entitled “Twist Endings and Devaluations: Violence and Spectatorship in the Works of Neil LaBute”, I put forth the argument that additionally central to LaBute’s aesthetic is a practiced emotional violence against his audience in the form of what I have
coined the “LaButean Twist”. The Twist is found in almost all of his plays – certainly, all of the plays that comprise *bash*. The Twist is vital to the reading of LaBute’s work, and ties in well with his use of gender and gendered acts. It is often when a character of a certain sex performs an act socially considered to be against the stereotypes of that sex that the audience feels the most violated.

With a propensity for a large output of plays, and with his plays constantly challenging the way we think and feel about ourselves and each other, the time is ripe for an examination of LaBute’s works. This paper is going to take a critical look at the use of gender in LaBute’s works – specifically the way masculinity is used as a weapon, in terms of language and actions, against the feminine. My thesis examines the way in which the gender roles can be reversed to devastating effect, the way some men use language to subjugate or, simply, to hurt women, or, as the case may be, as Robert Vorlicky called it in his excellent examination of masculinity in American drama, *Act Like A Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama*, the times during which men revert to the “differently masculine” (55).

LaBute’s plays teach, or reinforce the idea, that nothing is black and white – everything exists in shades of gray. To that end, no play can be given a *definitive* gender examination – ultimately, the reader shapes the way the script is interpreted. Additionally, the role of gender as power is fluid – it can change at the drop of a single line, and often does.
CHAPTER 2 GREEK ROOTS AND MODERN BRANCHES

Greek Roots and Modern Branches:

*bash: three plays* by Neil LaBute

Neil LaBute’s *bash*, alternately subtitled *the latter-day plays* and *three plays*, is comprised of three one acts – *iphigenia in orem, a gaggle of saints*, and *medea redux* – each of which can stand on their own as a confined piece of theatre, or can be performed together in service of a larger thematic thread. *Bash* is one of LaBute’s earlier pieces, and premiered on June 24th, 1999 at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre in New York City, New York, on the heels of LaBute’s cinematic expeditions of *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*. All three works have the similar theme of horrific acts being committed by superficially decent people. These acts, both emotional and physical, often come as a shock to the audience because very little in the respective scripts prepares the audience for what they are about to experience.

*Bash*, however, differs greatly in terms of structure for either *Company* or *Friends and Neighbors*. *Bash* is, essentially, a collection of three narrative monologues performed sequentially. *A gaggle of saints*, published, but by no means necessarily performed, as the center piece is a break from the monologue format, incorporating two actors – however, even this is only a superficial difference, as the characters, John and Sue, never truly
interact or listen to each other – the script clearly implies that they are telling essentially the same story from their individual points of view.

*Bash* has been performed at theatres all over the world, from its opening production at Douglas Fairbank, to its latest professional incarnation at the Almeida Theatre in London last year – and it plays to usually very good reviews. In his review for the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley says “Mr. LaBute shows not only a merciless ear for contemporary speech but also a poet’s sense of recurring, slyly graduated imagery”, and that, despite some “clunkers” in terms of dramaturgy, the production was “darkly engrossing and as impeccably mounted.” He finishes by saying, in what may be the most succinct, exacting statement about LaBute, that he “find[s] the acid in the blandest substances” (Brantley, “The Faces of Evil, All Peaches and Cream”).

At the center of *bash’s* themes is the idea of a power struggle – people put into incredible situations, in sharp contrast to the mundanity of their normal lives, and finding themselves impotent and unable to deal in a rational and considered way, and – in one form of desperation over losing their power – choosing to act in violent, and unexpected ways, and then, later, in recounting those acts of violence, attempting to justify their actions and exonerate themselves from guilt. This theme runs throughout – the Young Man in *iphigenia* choosing to kill his daughter as a “calculated risk”, John murdering a homosexual stranger in *a gaggle of saints* because the man’s lifestyle conflicted with John’s religious beliefs, and the Woman, in *medea redux*, murdering her son Billie to get back at an estranged lover.
The “gimmick” behind *bash* is relatively simple. In the introduction for a later play that followed, more or less, the same format – 2007’s *wrecks* – LaBute states that both plays – *bash* and *wrecks* – are “an…investigation into the Greek theatre and, more specifically, how themes and plots of those amazing plays might be utilized in a contemporary way” (ix). In updating the plots and particularities of two plays – *iphigenia* and *medea*, and then linking them together with an undeniably contemporary examination of modern religious and personal morality, LaBute forces the audience not only to confront their own systems of morality, but to come into conflict with these characters’ sense of morality – and to give credence and complicity to the horrific choices that the Young Man, John and Sue, and the Woman make.

Forcing this sort of complicity on the audience is a strong example of the way in which LaBute twists the expectations of the audience. *bash* is not the type of play where the spectator is allowed the freedom to sit back and watch passively. LaBute manipulates the audience into an emotional investment with the Young Man – so much so that the spectator, once fully invested, forms a meta-emotive sympathetic response to the pain through which the Young Man goes. In his moments of excitement, the spectator feels a similar excitement; in his moments of despair, anger, vitriol and justification, the spectator feels similar moments of despair, anger, vitriol and justification.

This mirrors some of the most essential qualities of the Grecian tragedy, and the audience involvement therein. One of the most important markers in Grecian tragedy is the notion of the Gods interfering in the lives of mortals; we often see Gods using their divine powers to change the course of a mortal’s life. What LaBute does, however, is effectively
remove God from the equation; by taking away God, LaBute leaves his characters with nothing but their own actions and moral codes to dictate the course of their lives. While Medea, in the original text, was valorized and vindicated for her Godly heritage and had her crimes forgiven because of divine intervention, the modern audience, watching *medea redux* cannot ascribe those divine qualities to the Woman, and thus find it in their conscience to forgive her.

In taking God out of the equation, LaBute cuts to the collective audience’s quick – why do we forgive Medea, yet feel uncomfortable about the admission of the Woman in *medea redux*? Without a Godly heritage to vindicate her crimes, the Woman is made reflective not of Grecian notions of justice and righteousness, but simply of humanity. Medea was not one of us – the Woman entirely is. The same is held true for the Young Man in *iphigenia in orem* – why do we forgive, in the original Grecian myths, Agamemnon and villanize Clytemnestra? Clytemnestra, in murdering Agamemnon, at least had a “reasonable” motive for her actions – revenge. Agamemnon, in killing Iphigenia, did it simply to ensure his safe arrival home. Yet the hero is undoubtedly Agamemnon – and, in subsequent familial generations, his son, Orestes, takes on the heroic role, while Clytemnestra – the feminine force – remains the villain. The moral compromises we are willing to make in the service of forgiving characters that we – either the individual “we” or the collective “we” – like is influenced by a socially constructed code of behavior ascribed to both sexes.

I propose the reasons that we are able to forgive some iterations of these characters, while being unable to come to the same conclusion for a different version are three-fold.
Firstly, the ancient approximations of these characters have, through the centuries, been made into something larger than their original characters. We socially valorize these characters, and the authors of their stories, so much so that we’re performing these works thousands of years after their creation. The Greek texts are considered the basis for Western drama, and so are considered some of the most important things written, especially in consideration of the theatrical community. Because we valorize these works and their characters, and because we’re given the convenience of historical consideration in light of the flow of time since those plays, we can ascribe modern sensibilities to these characters – Medea, then, becomes a rallying point for the feminist movement in the theatre community.

Secondly, these stories and characters are so far removed from our modern consideration, that we are willing to grant them clemency for their actions. They are kings and Gods. The tone of these stories are so unreal, and are set in so specific a time period, that it is impossible to grant them the realistic consideration that we have to grant other, more contemporary stories – Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*, for instance. In that play, we are forced to deal with very realistic language, setting, and characters – so much so that we are unable to distance ourselves from what we are seeing. Many elements of the Greek plays contribute to this distancing effect, not the least of which in the poetic language of these pieces.

Finally, it is impossible to strip more contemporary stories of their social background. We are a society largely dependent on media; consequently, it is all too often that, on the evening news, we hear stories of mothers killing their children, of hate crimes
being committed against homosexuals, of fathers killing their daughters. With this onslaught of horrors, we’ve become almost anesthetized to hearing about the act of horror itself – which is where LaBute’s dialogistic aesthetic comes into play. Though we may be numb to the considerations of acts of horror, it’s rare we are given the opportunity to speak to these individuals, and to hear their side of the story. By giving the audience the opportunity to hear out the stories, reasons and justifications of the committers of these horrible acts, we are not granted the freedom to distance ourselves – we are forced to give as much credence to their morality as we are to our own.

This is precisely where my thesis picks up. In investigating these pieces, I will be examining the characters’ justification of their actions through the lens of gender studies. I’ve arrived at this frame of reference for many reasons – primarily because I believe that the power struggle I’ve mentioned above has more to do with gender inequality than anything else. Additionally, the play is pervaded with linguistic quirks – obvious bits of monologue that seem out of place, but, in fact, create a through-line of very subtle misogyny and misandry. All of these characters acted the way they did because they found themselves in situations in which they were not in control – and they reacted violently. Where does that violence come from? My belief is that the violence stems from a need for control – and finding themselves in an out of control situation, these characters all made choices that would put themselves back into control – violent choices. The wrest for control will be considered an extremely masculine tendency through this examination – and so this play, bash, becomes less about the act of violence itself and more about
justifying that violence – finding the control, then, not in the situation, but in themselves, and in their language.
CHAPTER 3 MASCULINITY ON THE PAGE

A CALCULATED RISK:
IPHIGENIA IN OREM

*iphigenia in orem* might be the most morally challenging play in the *bash* series. While John in *a gaggle of saints* comes across as almost petulant and self-serving in his justification for killing the homosexual man, and the Woman in *medea redux* is difficult to grant moral clemency due to the revengeful and unforgiving nature of her justification, the Young Man in *iphigenia* makes a relatively strong argument for his actions, and is neither revengeful – at least, not outwardly – nor self-serving and petulant. This probably has to do with his age – while both John and the Woman are in their very early, and mid-to-late, respectively, twenties, the Young Man is obviously older, having at least three children, a career, and his Master of Business Administration.

*iphigenia in orem* is about the Young Man, on a sales trip, staying in a hotel room, with a great deal of guilt on his conscience. To assuage this guilt, he finds an individual in the hotel bar, and invites them back up to his room, where he begins to describe the events that led him up to the hotel. In describing these events, the Young Man begins to detail the death of his youngest daughter, Emma, and eventually reveals to the other individual, who, for the purposes of this paper, I will call the Stranger, that he advertently caused Emma’s death in order to ensure a high standard of living for the rest of his family – his wife and
his two other children. Wrapping the story up is the reveal of a tragic twist of fate, which, in essence, made his sacrifice entirely pointless. Throughout the monologue, the Young Man is side-tracked by a story about a woman at work who he didn’t like because she didn’t participate in the traditional “boys’ club” of the office, and the Young Man’s growing resentment for that woman, and how that resentment for women more than likely was the flip in his decision making process that made him choose to kill Emma.

LaBute never reveals the identity or sex of the person to whom the Young Man is speaking, but notes that the individual shares a similar professional career as the Young Man. In effect, the audience necessarily becomes this unseen character, as the Young Man delivers his lines directly to the audience as a whole, without regard for a fourth wall. This makes the audience complicit in the Young Man’s actions, making them a party to Emma’s murder.

Initially, the Young Man seems like a fairly likeable guy, asking repeatedly the Stranger and, therefore, the audience, if “your drink’s okay?”, and telling them that “there’s plenty over there on the counter…really, feel free” (LaBute, *bash* 13). Right away, LaBute creates an identity for this character. We’re meant to relate to him as an Everyman, if a somewhat nervous Everyman. He’s jumpy, and repetitive, and his dialogue circles back on itself multiple times – but he’s nice, and accommodating, and so the spectator forgives him for these social quirks.

Probably the first element we need to establish in this analysis is the inherent masculine nature of the office job. This is essential in understanding the Young Man’s character and actions. The office as masculine area is well explored in terms of the
American stage – consider David Mamet’s Pulitzer and Tony prize winning *Glengarry Glen Ross,* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman.* Both plays depict businessmen, who are, in one form or the other, willing to compromise their morality for the betterment of self and family. It is a subject LaBute, too, has previously explored, in his 1998 film *In the Company of Men,* which featured two office mates seducing and betraying a deaf female co-worker – essentially for the sport of it. Considering LaBute’s own tendency towards office-based misogyny, it’s easy to use the office as a metaphor for masculine adeptness in the terms of this analysis. Essentially, the higher up the corporate ladder a man goes, the more successful, thus, the more masculine he becomes. In a binary fashion of thinking, the higher up a *woman* goes, and the less feminine she becomes – the Young Man makes continual references to “the old boys at the top”, creating the hegemony of masculine power in the office – the inherently *less* successful a man becomes, and thus, the more effeminate he becomes – this binary opposition of thinking is vital in understanding the Young Man’s self-perceived loss of masculinity, and, therefore, his actions. (LaBute 22)

The Young Man is, more or less, throughout the course of the script, defined in terms of his job – and by the problems he faces at work. This presents a unique problem to the reader/audience – the Young Man never explains exactly what it is he does at work, or what it is his work does. The audience is left entirely in the dark – to what end? By not describing precisely his line of work, the Young Man sets himself up as more of an Everyman. We don’t have to ascribe socially constructed notions of what a “salesman” is, or what an office “executive” is. The Young Man, terrifyingly, can be any individual person we bump into on the street.
The theatrical connoisseur is also free to draw allusions to Willy Loman, the main character in Arthur Miller’s 1949 masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*, who similarly never explains what he does and is, instead of being a man, representational of an era of men. If Loman is the kind-hearted Everyman being passed by in a world that has turned cold to his sense of justice, kindness, and the American Dream, then the Young Man is a bitter reflection of that American Dream; obsessed with making money to participate in rabid consumerism, the Young Man is unafraid to make the desperate choices that both he and Loman faced.

He describes his enjoyment of the office environment in an almost child-like fashion, saying “it’s like being a kid again, playing at ‘war’ or that type of thing” (LaBute 14). Interesting that the Young Man chooses the words “war” in this case – “war” has an inherently violent connotation, and instantly assumes that there are battles to be fought. Of course, it’s easy to consider that these battles are simply the process of doing whatever job it is the Young Man does – and that argument would be given considerable weight, except for the fact that, later on, while speaking of the 1979 film *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the Young Man references his respect for Ted Kramer’s “[fighting] that battle with his wife over the child…” which instantly connects the war metaphor of the office with the personal life between man and woman (LaBute 25). This ties into the larger plot – wherein the Young Man kills his daughter Emma, in the service of providing for his wife and family – and indelibly connects the office with a violent, personal, masculine sensibility.
Almost right away, after he gets past speaking of the “war” like nature of the office, the Young Man betrays his misogynistic streak, mocking the increasingly important in the office work place politically correct speech when he says,

and I don’t mean just guys, either, because there’s plenty of women in the filed, too, obviously, but I mean ‘guys’ like in…well, ‘guys.’ You know, how it’s used these days. All encompassing. (LaBute 23)

It’s impossible to consider this a simple slip of the tongue, because the Young Man continues to purposefully point out this issue throughout the rest of his monologue – often breaking away from a story to deliver a biting and misogynistic aside to the effect of how women are ruining the fun of the office.

It’s also difficult to accept the plausibility of the Young Man’s initial statements of remorse and sadness when Emma is found dead in the bedroom, especially in light of his feelings involving women in the workplace. How can the Young Man justify feelings of remorse for Emma’s death, especially considering the fact that, as he later reveals, he was the one who caused it? This forces the audience to consider that the entire story is a performance – nothing the Young Man says can be taken at face value, because everything he says is colored by his personal feelings towards women, towards work, towards family, and towards his understanding and definition of masculinity.

This is as much a symptom of the narrative monologue form play as it is purposefully constructed on LaBute’s behalf. The monologue jumps back and forth
between discussions of the Young Man’s job, and the problems he has with a woman,

a few years younger than me…just plain vicious, I mean, talk about clichés and all that, she was a walking one…the business suit and the blunt cut hair thing going on… (LaBute 23)

The problem stems from an assertion the Woman made accusing the Young Man, who had “grouped her in with a ‘you guys oughta’…” of having a “chauvinist male lexicon and all this other crap that she fired off” (LaBute 23-24). The battle, here, then, is two fold. Firstly, the Young Man is intimidated by the woman – he describes her in fairly masculine terms, citing a “blunt cut hair thing” and a “business suit” in his preliminary description of her. In considering that the world of business is “just hot”, in his own words, the Young Man sets up the competitive nature of his work – you’re only as good as, it seems, your last sale. While he feels a genuine sense of camaraderie with his fellow males at the office, it seems the Young Man likely considers loss to a woman, in sheer terms of numbers, to be entirely unacceptable.

It’s important to consider, here, that the “numbers” aspect of the business at which these characters work is vital to understanding the overall definition of masculinity. The Young Man, our primary, and, in fact, only source through which to view the world of this play, utterly links economic capital – essentially, money – with masculinity. He enjoys being able to provide a certain standard of living for his wife and his children, going so far as to make the hour commute from the suburbs out in Orem, Utah, downtown to Salt Lake City. Later on, when justifying his actions, the Young Man describes,
...standing there, just taking in the VCR, and our big screen TV, and one of the kid’s bikes, I can see through the front window, the pathfinder... I was...looking at the house, at hour things, I mean, all the things we’d gathered in our ten years together, and at the house itself and, well, just all of it...what was I gonna do? How could I possibly keep it all going, the lifestyle we’d made for ourselves, without my seniority, the benefit package, jobs all over being tight like they are? It just wouldn’t be possible... (LaBute 25)

The ability to provide a certain style of life for his family is what is most important to him; when faced with the possibility that someone from his office is going to be fired, and when a Friend, “a guy from school, actually” calls the Young Man from the home office and tells him that he is the one who can expect to be fired, the Young Man doesn’t think rationally. How can he? The single defining part of his persona – his job, as has been set up throughout the script – has been taken away from him. He is without an identity, without his masculinity – and so he panics, and uses that panic as a justification for aiding in the murder of his daughter, Emma, hoping that

this calculated risk for my family...would play out in our favor, give me that little edge at work and maybe things’d be okay, or they’d change their minds because of, you know... (LaBute 27)

The sort of dead-pan, absolutely cold, calculating way in which the Young Man justifies murdering Emma is, in effect, probably the way the Young Man conducts business at his work. This sort of convergence of his two separate lives – office and home – has been set up throughout the structure of the script, as the Young Man jumps back and forth between discussing the two areas.

Ultimately, what the convergence of his two worlds means is that the Young Man inherently, and, perhaps, unconsciously, equates money with masculinity; any perceived
slight against him, in terms of his work – because work, in this case, equals money – is inherently a slight against his masculinity. To that end, it is almost an inevitability that the Young Man and the woman at work are going to butt heads. She perceives the office environment one way, he perceives it another – both are unwilling to compromise their visions and beliefs.

Perhaps the most interesting reversal in this script – and there are many – is that of the relationship between the Young Man and the Woman at Work battle, and the Young Man and Emma battle. There is a through-line in *Iphigenia in Orem* based on the Young Man’s sense of self. If he defines himself primarily by his work, then, at the arrival of the Woman at Work, the Young Man begins to lose his sense of self, his sense of power and control – his personal sense of masculinity.

Reacquiring that sense of masculinity requires drastic means. It is not until the intervention of a former friend from school – a “really big joker when we were at schools, in the dorms together” – calls the Young Man, and tells him that the cutbacks hanging over the Salt Lake City office would likely include the Young Man that he is given the freedom to act. (LaBute 24) The call was the last hit to his masculinity – with that, he was rendered entirely emotionally, thus, fiscally impotent. Unable to provide for his wife, for his family, worrying about his “things”, the Young Man, floundering without the thing by which he defined himself, finds his youngest daughter, the five month old Emma, trapped and struggling to escape from under the comforter on his and Deborah’s bed – and he commits an act of unadulterated horror, describes in a brutal, in terms of LaBute’s tendency for circular dialogue, eerily efficient rationalization.
Remember when I said I hated to waste things? Well, when I looked at it, I mean, rationally, for even half-a-second there in the hallway, I realized that’s what this was. An opportunity and I wasn’t going to waste it… (LaBute 27)

The Young Man goes on to describe the way in which he used his foot to nudge Emma down further under the cover, went into the living room, and took a nap. When Deborah and her mother returned home, they found the baby dead, having suffocated to death.

After this description, the Young Man returns to the discussion of his job, describing how he ended up keeping his job, and that, best of all, the Woman at Work was the one who, in the Young Man’s words, “got it right between the eyes” (LaBute 28).

It seems that murdering Emma acted as a sort of masculinity kick start, as the Young Man, whose language seemed circular, nervous and stilted to that point, attacks the description with a renewed vigor, and stops second guessing his telling the Stranger. There are, more than likely, several reasons for this renewal.

The first, and most obvious, is that, simply, the Young Man has removed the guilt from his chest – with the truth out there in the world, with the Stranger now every bit as guilty as he, the Young Man feels freer than he previously had. Secondly, the Young Man’s gambit has paid off, at least, superficially. He’s kept his job, and the Woman at Work has lost hers – his masculine ability has won out in the end over hers, and so he feels vindicated. Thirdly, the Young Man has managed to move on with his life, and his wife has given birth to a new child – conceived, according to the Young Man, on the night of Emma’s death and, appropriately enough, a son, named Joseph.
The addition of the son to the family is of vital importance. There is a subtle reference in the script that implies that Deborah and the Young Man’s other children are two girls:

You know, I’d feel everybody was just smiling and pretending to be all understanding, but they really think that you’re like some crazy Chinese family getting rid of the daughter to get a son… (LaBute 21)

Thus, the birth of the son ensures a continuation of the Young Man’s family name, and thus his family itself – which has always been the Young Man’s primary concern, in this script. It also connects Joseph’s birth forever to the death of Emma – the son, being born in violence, will likely experience a lifetime of violence. The Young Man will never be able to separate the death of Emma and the life of Joseph. Finally, it sets up a parallel to the original Grecian myth of the House of Atreus, and to Agamemnon, whom the Young Man mirrors in terms of murdering his daughter to ensure personal happiness and safety. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra had two daughters – Iphigenia and Electra – and one son – Orestes. Orestes, much as Joe will have to, was forced to bear the brunt of his father’s sin. As the House of Atreus was marked with blood, so, too, is the family of the Young Man.

If nothing else, the renewed vigor and masculinity the Young Man experienced after Emma’s death also serve to set up the true tragedy of *Iphigenia in orem* – the Young Man, at a sales conference with the Friend, finds out that the entire thing was a prank – the Young Man was, in fact, never in danger of losing his job. The Friend had pulled a prank on him, doing exactly the sort of thing he would have done in college.
The nature of the prank is a time honored tradition between friends, and especially between males. In general, males tend to relate to each other through somewhat cruel and violent means – the one who has, with greatest adeptness, a penchant for cruelty and violence is given more recognition, and more respect. The Friend, who was a big practical joker in college, was doing just what a “friend” would do in seeking to relate to another man – giving him a hard time by playing a practical joke on him. Unfortunately, the “practical joke” sent the Young Man over the edge, precisely because he wasn’t able to react to such a joke with what would most likely being his over-the-top masculine posturing and bravado – because the Woman at Work had stolen it from him.

Without that masculine shield up to protect himself, the Young Man found himself almost destroyed, confused, and needing something to take his self-loathing and aggression out on – which is exactly when he heard Emma crying out. The Young Man, who had previously said he “hated to waste things” was tricked into doing precisely that – he wasted Emma’s life – for no good reason at all.

Somewhat strangely, the Young Man doesn’t even seem to blame the Friend for what he’s done at all.

See, he’d heard the real truth about what was coming and just couldn’t let it go without a little razzing and so he’d given me the call, let me stew about it over that weekend…he was going to buzz me back Monday morning with the truth, but by then…yeah, he’d gotten me alright, he got me good, just like the old days. (LaBute 29)

Instead, the Young Man blames the entire situation not on himself, nor on his Friend, but on his wife, his mother-in-law, and Fate.
But it didn’t have to be like that. If Deb had just hurried a bit, if she hadn’t stopped to look through *People* magazine, or her mother hadn’t gone next door to fill a prescription, then who knows? Maybe they would’ve got back in time and Emma would still be…all I’m saying is, it was fate that took her, just the whimsy of a lingering red light or a prolonged chat with one of our neighbors… (LaBute 27-28)

This, too, begs the comparison to the original myth. Why is it the Young Man places the blame on Fate? It seems the simple answer – by placing the blame on Fate, the Young Man is essentially exonerating himself from guilt. Clearly, however, this is not the case, because he’s chosen to expiate his guilt through the telling of the story to the Stranger – so why place the blame elsewhere?

Placing the blame on the Friend would be a violation of the unspoken Masculine Code – it would place guilt on another man, and, while cruel, the Friend truly had no knowledge about what his practical joke would do – so how can he be held responsible?

The truth is, because the monologue is colored by the Young Man’s point of view, it’s impossible to dispel the idea that, while he may be attempting to cleanse his soul of the guilt he’s put on it, there’s also an inherent performative aspect to the telling of the story – to the relationship between the Young Man and the Stranger, and, by extension, the audience. He may be trying to salvage his image in the eyes of the Stranger.

One way or the other, the blaming of Fate parallels the original myth. The *Orestia* is probably inherently more misogynistic than the story LaBute has told here, because the *Orestia* very clearly makes Agamemnon, despite the fact that he sacrificed Iphigenia, a victim of Clytemnestra’s machinations. In *□phigenia in orem*, the Young Man is a victim of his own level of masculinity – the machinations are his very own. With the blame
placed squarely on himself, the Young Man, still, tries to shift blame to his wife, to his mother-in-law . . . to what end? The shifting of blame to women is an act of misogyny – it may very well be that the character LaBute has created isn’t nearly as likeable as we were first led to believe. To blame Fate, too, is an act of misogyny – especially in light of the fact that the Fates which hounded Orestes, due to his father’s actions under Clytemnestra’s machinations, were female personifications of vengeance. It seems the Young Man, desperate to retain his masculinity, will shift the blame everywhere but himself – so long as the recipient of that blame is a woman, and for that blame, the woman will suffer.

The Young Man is comprised of a series of contradictions and complications – there is, simply, no easy answer to the problem of figuring him out. He is, at once, a providing father, and a calculating murderer; “just one of the guys”, and an office misogynist. However, by removing God from the question of morality and ethics, and replacing it with the pursuit of money, LaBute is commenting on the inherently masculinized pursuit of the “Almighty Dollar”, and the depths to which an individual is willing to sink in the pursuit of that Dollar. Does this mean the Young Man is a victim of circumstance? To say that would take away some level of personal agency – but would also relate the Young Man back to Agamemnon’s quest for a safe travel for himself and his crew to Troy – a victim of the Gods, Agamemnon did what he felt he must for the greater good – and to continue on to war.

The name Iphigenia, somewhat ironically, means “born to strength” (e.g., Liddell and Scott “A Greek/English Lexicon”). Clearly Agamemnon was a strong individual, a legendary fighter and warrior. It would be impossible to not consider the Young Man in
relationship to his own personal Iphigenia in light of this. Is it possible that Emma’s murder was less an act of selfishness, and more a display of masculine strength? Doubtless, these are the questions LaBute intended his audience to ask upon seeing this play – questions which are inherently colored by the individual’s personal code of morality. As with the rest of *bash*, LaBute offers no easy answers here – and allows these haunting questions to stay with the audience long after the lights have come back on.
GIGGLING LIKE SCHOOLBOYS:
A GAGGLE OF SAINTS

*a gaggle of saints ’ existence in *bash* is unique, due to two elements. Whereas the surrounding pieces, *iphigenia in orem* and *medea redux* are monologue pieces, *a gaggle of saints* is essentially two monologues, interrupted by one another. Too, while *iphigenia* and *medea* have their plot clearly freely adapted from those respective Greek myths, *a gaggle of saints* is an original work that fits in with the other two in terms of thematic similarities.

*A gaggle of saints* features two junior year college students, John and Sue, who are studying at Boston college, but have elected to go to a Mormon Church sponsored youth group dance at a hotel in downtown New York City. John and Sue are described by LaBute as “a young attractive couple…dressed in the popular evening fashion of the day” (LaBute 35). Instantly, LaBute sets up the binary opposites of these characters, and essentially ascribes them to their individual gender based roles – John, in the tuxedo, is clearly the man; Sue, in the backless black dress, is the pretty, quiet woman. The set-up of these gender roles in such a traditional and efficient manner is of primary importance in examining the twists and turns that LaBute leads us on, in terms of the individual character’s actions, choices, and morality – by giving us a firm base from which to begin our exploration, the sometimes unexpected and horrific choices these characters – John, especially – make become a much more understood matter of traditional masculine ethos and politics.
LaBute continues a subtle thread of class as a means of determining masculinity. While in *iphigenia*, the ability to provide a certain kind of lifestyle for his family drove the Young Man’s actions, in *saints*, John and Sue come from, clearly, very well-to-do upstate New York families. It seems these two have never wanted for anything in their lives – this sort of pampering provides for an overly superficial John, who goes to length to describe the tuxedo he bought for the party, as well as his ’73 VW. This superficiality is in stark contrast to the kind of person John is – as we see during the first time when John breaks the superficial veneer and describes, with almost as much passion as the tuxedo and his car, beating up a former boyfriend of Sue’s.

The cause of John’s anger and detachment from any meaningful social interaction is likely the latent feelings of homosexuality with which John is dealing. John’s overt performance of masculinity owes much of its genesis from his sexual orientation. Ostensibly heterosexual – he has a girlfriend, after all – John’s sexuality is, in actuality, probably a source of great internal conflict for him. Associating himself with a female partner is a performative act – if he has a girlfriend, socially, he must be straight. However, there are numerous references in the text that imply that John is a homosexual – which makes the acts he describes perpetrating in the text of the play even more heinous. John is a character who covers a deep well of rage and hatred with a social performance of what it means to him to be a man.

This is the first real indication we get that there is a bubbling anger that sits just below John’s comfortable station in life. Too, it also sets the stage for the entirety of John and Sue’s four year long relationship. Sue sees John jogging one day – “running, really
running, blistering by people who are just jogging or walking” – and decides to run with him. It seems like this would be an indication of a lean towards a decidedly more masculine side of Sue, but she belies this possibility almost as quickly as she tries to keep up running with John, saying “I can’t keep up with him.” This admittance of being, essentially, of a lower physical caliber than her decidedly athletic boyfriend instantly creates the social construct of the man as physically dominant. In addition, Sue mentions that, in order to run with John, she had to “put down my pom-poms.” These are almost absurdly traditional gender roles – John, the athlete who “likes to keep in shape” and Sue, the cheerleader, who describes her initial attraction to John in purely physical terms. (LaBute 46)

These gender roles, and the gender roles John and Sue continue to play throughout the rest of their relationship, are cemented when an ex-boyfriend of Sue’s drives onto the track and physically threatens John – and John responds in kind. Up to this point, LaBute gave us absolutely no indication of the truth of John’s character, so the violence John commits comes as a bit of a shock. The tone of the monologue, too, changes – whereas previously, in consideration of his material goods, John seemed altogether more enthusiastic and engaged, upon discussion of the violence, John’s tone changes to detachment – almost as if he is the audience to his own actions.

The violence of “pounding on his head” acts as proof of John’s physical and masculine worthiness to Sue – thus, when John walks Sue home and kisses her on her porch, blood still flowing freely from his nose, it comes as no surprise – Sue, defined entirely in binary opposition to John’s overarching masculinity, takes on an extremely
feminized role in the relationship – and stays that way throughout the majority of the script. When, later, after the dance, John and Sue are on a train ride back home, and she sees a man hit his girlfriend, Sue implores John to “let it go,” choosing the path of least violence. (LaBute 46-48)

Like John, Sue’s personal concerns tend to be extremely superficial. Unlike John, LaBute doesn’t take care to develop her character far past that superficiality. Sue, who opts to stay in her backless black dress throughout the entire ride down to the hotel from Boston, through the dance, and into her sleep that night, essentially wears the utterly “feminine” on her sleeve -- or lack thereof, I suppose -- throughout the entire script. Paralleling John’s dedication to material goods, Sue goes to length talking about the difficulty of applying make-up in a hotel bathroom, but forgives the difficulty by saying she “want[s] to look nice for [John]” (LaBute 53). She plays a certain role – the girlfriend – and seems to genuinely enjoy playing that role.

Sue’s enjoyment of playing the girlfriend role gives John a great feeling of self-worth. As Sue is defined in opposition to John’s masculinity, so, too, is John defined in opposition to Sue’s femininity – the more feminine she is, the more masculine he then becomes. An example of this is when John describes how walking down the stairs of the hotel, both individuals dressed in their formal wear, “makes me strong, you know? Powerful…” (LaBute 54). John, then, equates power with masculinity; he defines masculinity by the attractiveness of his girlfriend, and Sue attributes her femininity to her physical attraction. The superficiality of these characters is overwhelming.
If physical violence, as a performance of masculine worthiness, is a way for Sue to have picked John to be her boyfriend, then it’s reasonable that John wouldn’t have to commit further violence – this, however, is not the case. In the event of masculinity being threatened, the Masculine Code is to meet that threat – essentially a threat of violence, where the violence is less physical and more psychological – with an even greater level of violence. The cyclical nature of this violence means, essentially, that a male individual who is seeking to “protect” his masculinity will never find a peaceful solution to the problem, and will be locked in a battle of increasing violence between himself and the agent of threat.

John’s problem is he embodies both these things – his own masculine ethos is both fed by, and feeds, his own conflicting feelings of masculinity and self.

In addition to a commitment to the superficial, John spends a disproportionately large amount of time – especially considering the main thrust of each monologue, John and Sue’s both, is intended to be centered on the dance – discussing his physical appearance. This sort of vanity is indicative of an inner femininity. While, historically, there have been a period during which it was socially acceptable for men to preen and be vain, in the Northeast, in contemporary America, in a Mormon family, this sort of inner femininity isn’t acceptable. Why does John, then, ostensibly the paragon of masculinity in this play, spend so much time concerning himself with what we can consider, largely, to be a feminine practice?

The answer is simple: John is not as masculine as he initially portrays himself to be – which ties nicely into a larger question inherent in performance theory. Gender is
performative. Certain acts, then, carry a socially constructed notion of whether they equate to masculinity, or to femininity. Thus, no one act is inherently one way or the other – so why would John, then, place so much importance on committing outwardly, violently masculine acts, but then contradict those acts by concerning himself with things that may be considered feminine?

If gender is performative, and the performance is given credence through social consensus, and John’s personality has been made to concern himself with worrying about superficial materialism, then, clearly, John’s primary personal concern is less with being actually masculine, and with appearing to be masculine.

As mentioned above, John is clearly dealing with feelings of latent sexuality. However, in addition to the obvious creation of an ostensibly and overly masculine outer appearance, John makes reference, after he and his friends murder a homosexual man, to having let the man kiss him, but not being sure why he did so.

Tim pulls me aside, asks me, wants to know one thing. ‘what?’ I say. Wants to know why I touched the guy. Let him kiss me. See, he’d seen it happen, glanced inside and seen it. But I didn’t know, didn’t have an answer, isn’t that strange?... I couldn’t answer him, and you know, he never asked me again, he didn’t. (LaBute 65)

Clearly, John is harboring feelings of confusion, and, likely, self-hatred. This self hatred is informed, no doubt, by having been raised in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.¹ The LDS teaches that homosexuality has little to do with natural occurrence or genetics, and is, instead, comprised of “feelings and inclinations”; further,
the LDS teaches that these feelings and inclinations, if not controlled, result in sin. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, LDS Newsroom) Having been raised in the Mormon Church, John’s moral code is, obviously, colored by the Church’s teachings and beliefs. He even uses this as a justification to committing the murder, saying, while watching the two homosexual mean kiss, “I know the scriptures, know ‘em pretty well, and this is wrong” (LaBute 60). The conflict between John’s personal desire, colored by his sexual attraction towards men, and his outwardly masculine performance of gender, informed by the moral code with which he was raised, causes the self-hatred in John – John, unable to reconcile this hatred for self, takes his aggression out on those who challenge his performative, masculine appearance.

This outward appearance of masculinity, creates a sort of emotional disconnection from the rest of the world – explaining, perhaps, John’s attachment to his material goods, and to his personal appearance – and going a great distance towards explaining the process behind committing an unforgivable act of violence.

While walking through the park previous to the dance with his friends, John and company spot two homosexual men engaging in intimate acts. The experience throws John for a loop, and despite the fact that he claims Sue is “as stunning as she’s ever been,” he “still can’t get that image, the picture of it of my mind” (LaBute 56). The incident disturbs him so much that, when Sue and her girlfriends go upstairs to take a nap, John convinces his male friends, Dave and Tim, to take a walk in the park with him. Free from the balancing nature of Sue’s femininity, and feeling his own masculinity has been slighted,
John and crew walk back into the park. His intentions are clear – he has vengeance on his mind.

John’s description of the murder of the homosexual man is some of the most brutal, affecting writing LaBute has ever done. Divergent from *iphigenia*’s Young Man’s straightforward, no frills attached language, John describes the murder similarly to his descriptions of his tux, his car, and his physical appearance. Whereas he speaks about Sue in a relatively utilitarian manner – he seems altogether more concerned with himself than with Sue – he describes the murder in what is essentially an uninterrupted three and a half page monologue, a sharp break from the established back and forth form of the previous monologues.

The murder itself serves as a form of masculine bonding. Perverse as it sounds, the three men – John, Tim and David – find a common understanding through their collective actions. We see, here, the way in which violence acts as a means by which to measure masculine worthiness. As John notes,

> Us together, Tim, myself, that’s one thing. It’s unspoken, our bond, but we don’t know David. Don’t really know him…what’s he thinking? And then, as if to answer us through revelation…he grabs up the nearest trash can, big wire mesh thing, raises it above his head as he whispers, ‘fag.’ I’ll never forget that…‘fag’. That’s all. And brings that can down right on the spine of the guy… (LaBute 64)

John reforms his previous opinion of Dave, whom he had written off by telling the audience “he does gymnastics”, not the most masculine of sports, enough so that by the time the group is saying their goodbyes the next day, John and David hug goodbye.

(LaBute 38) David’s willingness to participate in the murder of the homosexual man, and
his ability to be every bit as violent as either Tim or John proves his masculinity to John –

bonding the three men together for life.

The most perverse moment of male bonding occurs when Tim, standing with the
other two men over the dead or dying body of the homosexual man, starts offering up a
eulogy for the man. John describes this experience as “delirious,” saying that “halfway
through…we all start giggling like schoolboys” (LaBute 64).

If we can consider the office as an inherently masculine area, as we did for

*iPhigenia in Orem*, it’s equally prudent to ascribe a similar masculine quality to the Church.

Obviously, the greatest support for this argument comes from the social practice of some
Mormons as polygamous – a sort of ultra-patriarchal family society wherein one man
marries several women. While true for some fundamentalist branches of the LDS Church,
it’s unfair to use this as blanket reasoning, as neither LaBute, not his characters, seem to
subscribe to that particular branch of the LDS Church.\(^2\) However, even in less fundamental
sects of the Church, the Mormon view of women seems to be extremely conservative and

traditional. In *Mormon Doctrine*, Bruce R. McConkie states that “a woman’s primary place
is in the home, where she is to rear children and abide by the righteous counsel of her

husband” (844).

To that end, it seems safe to apply a masculine label to the Church and to the
Church’s teachings – which renders the eulogy all the more disturbing. Clearly, these men
have perverted the teachings of the church, using scripture and religion to further their own

ultra-masculine ethos. That they would then stand and deliver a false eulogy over the body
of the man they have just murdered, while “giggling like schoolboys” suggests that these men have little regard for the spiritual teachings of the Church. While they may outwardly perform that regard, this, too, becomes a sort of shell to distance themselves from actually feeling emotions – emotions, after all, have no place in the social make-up of men.

Perhaps the most disturbing image of all, though, is the image of Sue gushing over the ring John has given her for their anniversary – a ring he pulled off the finger of the dead homosexual man. Interestingly, the very act of giving the ring implies an inherent reversal in gender. In her analysis of David Auburn’s *Proof*, Carol Schafer notes a similarity between the passing of Catherine’s key to Hal and author/psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s analysis “of an active Cinderella slipping her phallic foot into the vaginal slipper as it is held by the prince” (Schafer). This metaphor can additionally be applied to the ring John gives Sue, and Sue’s finger. The ring acts as a metaphorical vagina, while the finger, stiffened and extended, acts as the phallus. In the performative act of giving the ring to Sue, John has totally reversed his gender; Sue, in accepting the ring, reverses hers in kind. This process will likely be repeated when John proposes to Sue, who continually mentions that “we’re getting engaged this summer” (LaBute 69). While a simple enough gender reversal, this act is complicated by the fact that the ring is, probably very literally stained in blood. While John may be willing to break his masculine veneer, he does so in a subversive way – maintaining, if only for the benefit of the audience, although equally possibly for himself – a performative act – a semblance of that overt masculinity.

\[2\] Granted, LaBute no longer subscribes to any of the tenets of the Mormon Church.
For her part, Sue stays oblivious to all of John’s violence – or does she? She was present during the first fight John got into, with her ex-boyfriend. John remarks that she was “just standing there,” and Sue says “I’ve never seen this happen before…” (LaBute 49). Sue is perfectly aware of John’s more violent tendencies – the question is does she care? If, as McConkie writes, “a woman’s primary place is in the home, where she is to rear children and abide by the righteous counsel of her husband,” perhaps Sue was raised with similar values. (Mormon Doctrine 844) She seems to fall squarely in the “feminine” gender category – she gets better grades than John, she worries about her looks, she seems very subservient to John’s desires. This subservience manifests itself in what I believe to be a willing ignorance involving John’s more undesirable traits.

It is impossible to argue that Sue isn’t aware of John’s aggression – it has been there since the first time they met. However, as long as John performs his duty as a boyfriend, so long as she gets to reap the benefits of being his girlfriend, Sue seems content. When she sees John, nose bloodied and bleeding outside of the hotel the morning after the dance, she waves off his broken nose as a “silly game” (LaBute 66). In reality, John had Tim punch him in the face and break his nose to cover the dead homosexual man’s blood on his tux. Sue never even questioned this – she took John’s explanation at face value.

The lack of asking questions implies a certain amount of subservience. Perhaps, however, more than subservience is the possibility that, while John performs his superficiality as a distancing method, Sue is simply superficial, shallow, and blinded by her feelings for John. This analysis, however, seems altogether too simplified – but it’s
vital to consider, especially because a gaggle of saints relies more heavily on John’s part of the monologue, especially in consideration of bash’s larger thematic threads.

Shallow or willfully ignorant, Sue maintains a level of moral culpability. By subscribing an entirely feminine point of view – that of subservience and the lesser sex – she is cheating herself of the truth. What truth? Obviously, the truth of John’s character. Of course, there’s the very real possibility that, knowing John’s true character, she would stay with him, anyways – although this question is left purposefully open for exploration.

More horrifying, perhaps, is the distinct possibility that John and Sue will get married, and that, before long, John’s anger, self-loathing and aggression will be taken out not on an external slighting of masculinity, but on the individual who expects and demands the most masculinity on a consistent basis – Sue herself. It’s difficult not to draw allusions between John and Sue’s relationship and iphigenia’s Young Man and his wife. These relationships are less based on a mutual need or desire for companionship, and are more based on social expectations and necessities.

A gaggle of saints continues many of the thematic threads set up in iphigenia in orem – especially issues of class, as well as power struggles, and characters fighting to maintain a semblance of their masculinity – and going to horrific, unimaginable extremes to do so. While the Young Man justified his actions through the necessity of providing for his family, John’s came across as much more selfish – but perhaps more ingrained in his character, and less intention. Either way, again, we see a character, who really ought to have, and probably did, know better influenced by a subtly ingrained and necessary masculine code of ethos.
SMILING, BUT SAD: 
MEDEA REDUX

LaBute returns to the monologue format in his third one-act in the *bash* series, *medea redux*. The monologue bears many striking structural similarities to *iphigenia in orem*; both are narratives about parents killing their children, both feature a solitary character, in direct address with the audience, discussing and attempting to justify their actions, both inherently grant the audience as a whole the identity of the Other Party.

The main difference between two otherwise relatively similar monologues is that, while *iphigenia* featured the Young Man, *Medea* features the Woman – which radically changes the way in which we will discuss the use of masculinity in these plays. Whereas the Young Man, and, even, to some extent, John, were subscribed to what can be called a more traditional form of masculinity – they were, after all, men – the Woman in *Medea* falls under what Robert Vorlicky, in *Act Like A Man*, refers to as the “differently masculine” (55).

Differentiating the two is vital to my analysis of *medea redux*, because it ties into the overall theme of justification through following the Masculine Ethos, and where and how that justification fails. It additionally nicely ties into the absence of God from these plays – and how that absence creates moral vacuums for these characters to exist in – especially considering the historical Medea character’s greatest justification for her actions – and, because of that justification, absolution – was due to her divine heritage.

In modernizing the *Medea* myth, LaBute seeks to create a character with whom the audience will identify – so that, by the end of the monologue, when she reveals, in typical
LaButean fashion, the depth of her intents, the audience is thrown into conflict with its own sense of right and wrong. The Woman, in *medea redux* is cast as a late twenties woman who has a son, named Billie, who is fourteen, and she discusses, after being arrested, and while being interrogated in a police interrogation room, her illicit relationship with her teacher at the age of fourteen, the subsequent dissolution of that relationship, when the teacher skips town, and the process of finding and meeting said teacher fourteen years later, all in the service of getting revenge against him – by killing their son. While she initially creates sympathy for her character, by the end, the audience finds itself hard pressed to be able to forgive the cold, calculating actions taken by the Woman.

The question, however, is why does the audience find itself at such a moral impasse? In considering the two previous one acts, we see LaBute attempting to do essentially the same thing – manipulate the audience’s expectations in such a way that they will be unable to traverse the gap between right and wrong. However, that gap is far, far larger in *medea redux* than in either of the other two – why? I submit that it is because we have created a certain social construct in exploring what it means to be a man – and from that construct we expect, and thus accept, a certain level of aggression. While neither character – the Young Man or John – can rightfully be forgiven for their actions, we, the audience/reader are somehow better able to come to terms with those actions – thus working towards a form of forgiveness.

However, when we find a character that exists outside of our spectrum of expectation, we instantly take a disliking towards that character. The Woman is a victim of her “otherness” and we instantly stand ready to condemn her for her actions – simply
because she is a woman. The gap between what we expect, and what we receive becomes a form of violence against the audience – and we feel our morality and social sensibility slighted and insulted. Even in the writing of this analysis, I found myself hesitating to call the Young Man’s actions tantamount to murder – that specific term seemed overly simplified and combative. However, I find myself with no such qualms in considering the Woman – clearly, I am a victim of my own analysis.

The genesis for this masculinity is important – what drives the Woman towards the masculine? By the time of her confession, she’s already fairly masculine – in control of her situation – and seemingly has very little to lose. She blames her introversion on her family, saying “I just ended up more inward than anything,” and says that “I found that a lot of times, when you ask for stuff, or, like, have maybe questions to things…there’s not always an answer out there” (LaBute 77). The search for an answer begs us to ask – what is the question? In answering what question the Woman is looking to answer, we can discover the source of her masculinity.

The Woman professes to have been “genuinely interested in things, I wanted to learn…” in middle school. (LaBute 83) As we’ve already seen, certain areas – geographic locations – contain certain masculine qualities – and the academic world is no different. The Woman equates formal education with a form of power, and puts her teacher, who “was really smart, had, like, two college degrees” over her in terms of power. (LaBute 79) The student/teacher relationship is inherently one of power, and is, additionally, one of performance – another theme I’ve covered in my previous analysis. Therefore, the
performance of power is wherein the true power lies – and we can ascribe that statement to any of the Woman’s actions.

Placed in an inherently masculine area – the school – the Woman finds a connection with her teacher. They relate over common interests – marine biology. The masculinity of the school serves to aid and empower the teacher, who comes onto his student, and to strip the Woman of her power. The teacher, socially accepted as the one in power in this situation, uses that power to achieve his own ends – he eventually gets the Woman, fourteen years old, into bed.

The seduction, and subsequent relationship, however, have markings of feminine performances from the Teacher. While driving her home after a field trip, he’s playing Billie Holiday, and when the Woman asks him about her, he says, “she’s all I ever listen to…you kind of remind me of her, you know? You always seem just a little bit sad. Smiling, but sad. I like that” (LaBute 84). Whereas the overtly masculine decision might have been simply to take what he desired – something akin to what John did in concerns to Sue in saints – the Teacher instead finds a subversive and destructive way to seduce the Woman; destructive in an emotional sense, as opposed to a physically violent sense. This sort of violence is far, to some degree, far worse than physical violence – had he raped the Woman, he clearly would have been the villain in this story; it’s the Woman, after all, who makes the masculine choice, later on, when achieving revenge against the teacher.

In describing their first kiss, the Woman says it was like “when they first invented it, like back in the days of myths and shit, when…men were heroes…” (LaBute 84). At the inception of their relationship, then, the Woman clearly considered her Teacher to be the
definition of what it means to be a man – which creates an interesting mirror to the earlier mentioned expected violence; if we, the audience/reader feel violence when a woman doesn’t act in the way we have grown to expect her to act, can we hold any lack of regard for the violence the Woman must have felt when her Teacher – the definition of “man”, to her – didn’t act the way she expected him to?

It’s impossible to read about their relationship without realizing that this is all being considered fourteen years after the events, and by the woman the Teacher jilted – too, that, even if we can give her the benefit of the doubt in terms of memory of feelings and happenings, this relationship is being experienced by a fourteen year old girl. Perhaps the expectation she had didn’t match up with the way the world actually was because she was fourteen and had unrealistic expectations. Her welschmerz aside, this by no means exonerates the Teacher’s actions. The breaking of expectations occurs after the Woman tells the Teacher she is pregnant. Initially, he takes this positively – she describes him as “excited! Not yelling, or all adult and shit, and said he loved children…” (LaBute 86).

It’s difficult, especially in hindsight, to label this as either an honest reaction from the Teacher – this is, as I said earlier, all being told from a point of view with an agenda, and with a large amount of time between the event and the recounting – or if it is a performance on his behalf. Upon a first reading/viewing, the audience might like to think that the Teacher is going to “man up” and be an adult – but the Woman clearly notes that he is not acting “all adult” – which tends towards the act being performative – the Teacher telling the Woman exactly what she wants to hear.
Several months later, the Woman finds out “by a fluke” that the Teacher has left his position at the school, and has moved to teach in Arizona. (LaBute 88) Clearly, she was unaware of what his plans were – he left town without dealing with his responsibilities. Was this always his plan? It’s difficult to say, but one way or the other, what it amounts to is a fairly devastating, calculated maneuver – one that has emotional, not physical, violence written all over it.

LaBute covers, in his canon, some fairly masculine and horrifying ways to deal with an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy – particularly in his play *The Distance From Here*. So why does he forgo the physical in favor of the emotional in this case? The answer is because LaBute was feminizing the Teacher, and, in effect, because of the binary opposition between the social constructs of man/woman, more importantly, masculinizing the Woman – or, at the very least, setting up the justification for the impending masculinization of the Woman.

Interestingly, the Woman glances over much of the history following the event, simply remarking that “I don’t want your sympathy” (LaBute 89). This is an exertion of power, as the Woman asserts her power over the reader/audience/police officers in controlling the flow of the conversation. In taking the power away from the audience/reader, the Woman becomes the masculine force in the text, and is then able to exercise that violence against us, when she admits to her actions involving her son and the Teacher.

We tend to forgive Medea in Euripdes’s play, owing to many facts – not the least of which is a feminist view of the character – a woman, scorned and left by her husband,
takes her revenge on him in order to escape from the oppressive patriarchy. Medea, being the granddaughter of the Sun God Helios has divine justice on her side; she slaughters her children as a way to force her husband, Jason to atone for his sins. We feel pathos for her; taken that way, we can almost forgive the Woman, here, for committing filicide. Almost, but not quite.

It’s horrifying, but it’s also something we’re used to seeing on the evening news – a mother killing her children in cold blood. When the Woman admits she dropped the radio, playing Billie Holiday, into the tub in which her son was bathing, the audience is (to risk a pun) shocked – that shock is trumped only by the revelation the Woman makes near the end, when she admits “yes, I planned it, yes. But…maybe longer than you thought, huh? Lots longer…” (LaBute 93). The fact that the Woman, clearly, has done this in cold blood erases any semblance of forgiveness from the audience’s cognition – this isn’t some tragic hero – this is a murderer, plain and simple.

So why is it we assign that tragic hero status to the mythical Medea? Is it due to her divine status? Her oppression by the male hegemony? Or is it simply the gift of hindsight, the thousands of years between then and now, that allow us to distance ourselves from the story, and to make characteristic judgments on a somewhat higher plane of consideration – the plane of literature vs. the plane of the all too familiar? One way or the other, it certainly casts LaBute’s consideration of the Medea character in a stark light – does this mean we can assign the label “misogynist” to LaBute’s work? The argument can be made, certainly – I personally feel that would be a limiting and simplistic way to read his work.
There is a subtle thread being woven throughout *medea redux* about the issue of balance – or the lack thereof. I used a word earlier – *weltschmerz* – that comes from German romantic poets, and, loosely translated, means “the feeling one gets when one compares the way the world is to the way the world should be.” LaBute uses a term from Greek with a similar meaning – “adakia…the world out of balance” (LaBute 93).

The issue of balance takes on a prime role in this play, as we have many characters that are out of balance morally, but also on the scale of social construction. If we consider that women and men are supposed to abide by a basic social code – one we’ve created – then we can consider that anyone who operates outside of those constructs can be considered out of balance. By the same token, anyone that abides *entirely* by that code, to the point of denying their moral code, also has to be out of balance. The art of finding that balance is the art of finding one’s own middle ground – the balance of being both entirely masculine *and* entirely feminine – or, at the very, very least, coming to terms with the inherent “otherness” within ourselves, that part of ourselves we may reject in favor of following the socially constructed codes of gender –and operating within a set of social, moral codes of ethics. For a time, it seemed that both the Teacher and the Woman were able to do this – but they faltered, being knocked out of balance.

The Woman’s actions, then, become cast in a new light. Yes, it was revenge, and yes, it was cold blooded murder – but her youth and innocence was *robbed* from her by the Teacher – by a man. Prior to that, she had, by all indications, existed happily in the Feminine Code. Perhaps she had not even matured enough to consider herself truly a woman by that point in her life. Getting pregnant, however, has a way of aging a young
girl – as the Woman says, “sometimes you can go along, years even, and not feel like you’re growing up at all, and then there’s times when you age a ton, like, in a couple ‘a seconds, you know?” (LaBute 87). Having that period of maturation taken from her left a gaping hole in the Woman’s life – the period where she should have transitioned from girl to woman. Instead, she was left with no transition time at all – she was left out of balance. To that end, she reacted violently. Not knowing how to be a woman, she retreated to a more masculine sensibility and plotted revenge. Because she became, so fast and so fully, a woman, the only way to find balance was to swing back entirely in the other direction – thus, socially, at least, becoming a man.

Too, if it is possible to consider that the Teacher “stole” her girlhood away and made her into the Woman, than perhaps killing Billie was a way for her to take away the Teacher’s boyhood. If the sins of the father are passed onto his son, then Billie carried with him the his father’s transgressions against the Woman.

In that consideration, her act of revenge was, to some extent, the ultimate way for her to find balance again. Earlier, we’ve considered that physical violence is inherently masculine, while emotional violence in inherently feminine. Killing Billie was an act of physical violence – killing Billie to get back at the Teacher was an act of emotional violence – an act in perfect balance, both sides of the gender equation equally represented. Perhaps that’s why the Woman feels no remorse for having done what she did – she achieved her end. She got what she wished for.

The Teacher, meanwhile, is thrown from a position of balance to a position of imbalance. Prior to the Woman finding him and getting in touch with him and sharing
some of Billie’s life with him, the Teacher had made it off scot-free from the situation – even when the Woman and Billie meet him, fourteen years late, the Woman notes that the Teacher seems “satisfied, I could see that, satisfaction on his face…because he’d gotten away with it all” (LaBute 92). That satisfaction is him in balance – so that, by the time the Woman has killed Billie and is fantasizing about the Teacher, her fantasy includes him probably wandering around on some playground at school, a Saturday, and he’s just stumbling there by himself near the monkey bars. Can’t be consoled, right, the truth all spilled out now like it is, and all these tears running down, yelling up at the sky, these torrents of tears and screaming, the top of his lungs, calling up into the universe ‘why?! Why?!’ over and over. But you know what? In my fantasy, there’s never an answer, uh-uh, there never is…” (LaBute 94)

Her biggest fantasy, then, is to knock his world out of balance – and she does that through a binary opposite – by bringing her world back into balance, by murdering her son, Billie. If her world is in balance, his world cannot be in balance, and so must be out of balance.

To that end, whatever the reader/audience’s perception of the Woman may be, based on their individual moral code, they have to grant her this – she got what she wanted. By manipulating her son, and her sense of morals, and, eventually, by manipulating her code of gender performance, the Woman was able to come to terms with her “out of balance world” and, through coming to terms with it, was able to put her world back into balance.
CHAPTER 4 MASCULINITY ON THE STAGE

SETTING THE STAGE:
IRONING OUT THE KINKS IN THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

I was, at first, somewhat hesitant to start the process of performing *bash*. In the beginning part of the semester, I was staring down the barrel of twelve credits, plus working in the box office almost twenty hours a week. My days were booked solid, from 9:00 AM until 6:00 in the evening, at least. From 6:00 until who knows when was time reserved for homework and reading, for grading, and for precious moments of quiet and solitude; I was incredulous as to how, exactly, I was going to fit not one, but two rehearsal schedules into my daily life – one for acting, one for directing. The prospect alone exhausted me.

I conceived of producing *bash* in the spring of 2006. Earlier in the academic year, during my first semester at VCU, we read *medea redux*, the third part of *bash*, in Tragedy class, and I was reminded how affecting the piece was, the way it got under your skin and crawled around, how “too close to home” it hit. I liked everything about it, and it reawakened an appreciation for LaBute that had started several years prior, when I had seen his work *The Shape of Things*. I fished out my copy of *bash* and began to reread it over the break that winter. The play was (and is) imperfect; it was littered with misspellings, dramaturgical problems, issues of structure and style – but reading it was still visceral -- like getting punched in the stomach.
The gulf between reading and performing dramatic literature had always been a wide one in my consideration. I appreciated both forms of interpretation, but, of course, found reading to be infinitely easier. It is, I suppose, indicative of this appreciation for the literary value of dramatic work that informs my deep appreciation for turn of the century realistic works – Ibsen, Strindberg, and those they influenced, O’Neill and Miller. The language is deep and rich, rife with subtext and begging for close readings. In my mind, these characters were desperate, needy people driven to make extreme choices. In my head, these pieces soared. On the stage, however, what I often saw in these productions were wonderful, elaborate sets and some of the most drop dead boring acting ever done. It’s not hard, then, to imagine why I felt an attraction to studying and considering the literature over the performance.

It was not until Modern Drama, in the spring of ’06, that I began to understand – or, I suppose, rather, appreciate – the other disparate elements of the nature of production aside from the text. Studying the code of meaning inherent in everything from language, to space, to body, to text, to movement began to open my eyes to the larger considerations of production. In addition, co-teaching a section of Introduction to Drama with Boone Hopkins made me consider my own aesthetic, as well as my own pedagogy. The idea in my head was: how can I encourage my students to form their own ideas about theatre if I’ve limited my ideas about theatre? In my Statement of Teaching Philosophy, I state that “to do [the students] a disservice, above all other things, is the worst thing a teacher can do.”
My pedagogy begs most of the teacher continual forward progress, by the teacher and, so, by the student. If Modern Drama turned my view of the world one hundred and eighty degrees, it necessarily shifted my belief in the fundamental nature of drama, and, by extension, of the classroom: theatre is not meant to be read, theatre is meant to be performed. With that in mind, I was able to overlook the problems inherent in LaBute’s script, and appreciate, instead, the spirit that the words informed.

I decided early on that, in order to best articulate the spirit of subversion in LaBute’s work, a collaborative process would be best suited. This choice served a number of functions: it took a great deal of pressure off of myself, it served a belief that the theatre is a collaborative process, and, no doubt most selfishly, it freed me up to perform a piece I really wanted to perform. I make no secret of it: first and foremost, before teaching, and directing, and dramatic criticism, I am an actor. I read plays for their literary appeal, yes, but on a deeper level, I am reading these plays as an actor would: I make choices, I infer subtext, and I examine character relationships. It is difficult, sometimes, to read and be affected by plays, to want to perform a piece – and to realize that any attempt to stage said piece would, no doubt, come across as an act of sheer vanity.

The structure of *bash* afforded me an opportunity to hide that vanity beneath a consideration of my aesthetic: by creating a collaborative process, I was freeing myself from the responsibility of being a full time director, and I was allowing myself the freedom to perform.

I approached Paul Wurth and Sarah Yount in the spring of 2006. I had known both personally, but over the course of that semester, had gotten to know them professionally
and academically, as well. Most important to me was that all three directors had a similar aesthetic base from which to work. Watching both Paul and Sarah’s work in Dr. T’s *Pedagogy of Directing* class, I began to notice a similar sensibility among the three of us.

I saw Paul’s production of *Orphans* in the Shafer Street Playhouse that spring. I was struck by one thing in particular: the set, while elaborate, had relatively little to do with the acting. If the set had been stripped away, and all that had been left were the basic scenic elements, I’m confident the acting would have remained specific and focused. The blocking, too, remained safely in the realm of the very necessary. It has become evident that directors of our general age allow their actors the freedom to shuffle about too much, which leads to a lot of distracting wandering on-stage. It’s unspecific, sloppy, and lazy. Paul’s blocking, however, was justified, assured, and sharp. The basic elements were in place and they were strong.

I got to know Sarah’s work through class and through production of *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress* with the Richmond Triangle Players. Her directorial sensibilities were markedly different from my own – Sarah seemed more willing to allow her actors to dictate the pace and necessities of her rehearsals – more collaborative, perhaps, than my decidedly more controlling – one would not be incorrect in saying “cynical” – style of directing. Which may, in fact, be what I was attracted to: Sarah let her actors make the call, and then helped them to define their actions in the world she was striving to create.

One way or the other, any aesthetic considerations aside, what I knew I could expect most from both Paul and Sarah was professionalism, dedication to creation, and a personal accountability – they would get their work done, by hook or by crook.
In striving to keep the number of individuals involved in the production to a minimum, thus making the production about the work on stage, and because I had already planned to do it myself, I asked Paul if he would be willing to take on the dual role of actor/director, and he agreed, casting his girlfriend Madolyn Smeltzer in the role opposite mine.

The production was envisioned with an absolute minimum of stage craft and technical elements involved. This was every bit as pragmatic as it was to serve the story. Neil LaBute very specifically leaves his scripts free of any description of setting, save for the absolutely necessary. To follow that aesthetic, I asked the other directors to keep the settings as absolutely simple as possible – tables and chairs, at a maximum. Too, I believed the most indelible element of the script was undoubtedly the language. LaBute took such pains to create characters and language that lulls the audience into a false sense of security – and then pulls the carpet out from underneath them. In that way, I incorporated a lesson from Modern Drama – if space can be text, can text, then, alternately, be space?

After all, all three of these plays are characters discussing the past – I felt very strongly that any overtly sturdy anchor in the present would detract from the story being told – it would allow the audience the freedom to escape the violent language by reminding themselves they were only hearing a story – that this violence had already occurred, and, so they could reconcile that fact with their own sense of morality.

Without, however, a sturdy anchor, the audience would be forced to relive the horrific acts along with the characters. We would take the freedom to detach – by paying attention to the set, to the lights, to whatever they chose other than the language -- away
from them – itself an act of violence. The aesthetic owes much to Jerzy Grotowski’s notion of a “poor theatre”.

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, communion. (Towards a Poor Theatre, 19)

Obviously, our production didn’t fulfill every necessity of the Poor Theatre, but it was strongly influenced by it – specifically the idea that any extraneous theatrical elements outside of the story being told were detrimental to the story itself. That was my artistic choice.

The pragmatic choice, simply, is that I don’t have any technical talent at all – I have no affinity for lighting, for sets, for sound design. With the idea that we wanted to keep the production as low maintenance as possible, it seemed easiest and, indeed, most prudent, to make ourselves work with the rep light plot, to create the barest essentials for staging from items readily available to us backstage. It aided us artistically, gave us anything we needed at an arms reach, and, to boot, made strike terribly easy.

With all the disparate parts in place, it seemed we were ready to hit the ground running, to get, proverbially and somewhat literally, this show on the road. So why was I doubtful?

Events transpired over the beginning weeks of the fall 2006 semester and we kept having to push back our start date – Sarah’s actor became academically ineligible, Paul took on directing a production of The Pillowman, an extended run of Dracula took the
dates on which we had previously planned to perform. With so many elements seeming to work against us, in addition to the expected mounting work of a brand new semester, I began to lose faith and interest in the project.

Since I was a child, however, into my mind has been pounded the following sentence: “Devlins aren’t quitters.” It’s a maxim by which I’ve chosen to live, and by which I’ve chosen to be a theatre artist. It came to me, then, that despite my lack of interest and faith in the project, I would have to suck it up and dive in head first – I would fight my way past my feelings of inadequacy and find something in which to trust. This, after all, if nothing else, was my thesis – that was enough to motivate me.

This isn’t, by any stretch of the imagination, to say that I was less than enthusiastic about my work – quite the opposite. Above any feelings of faithlessness or a lack of interest, I love to perform; I do not take performance lightly. Once I made up my mind that I was in, I was in one hundred per cent. A large part of my pedagogy is a strict belief in the responsibility of the individual to make education work for him or herself – personal responsibility of the student trumpping the sole placement of responsibility on the educator. Once I began the process, I stuck by my belief – the other individuals involved in the project had put their trust in me, and it was only right to reciprocate that trust.

The primary issue we faced was simply an issue of time. We simply didn’t afford ourselves the time for a lot of book work. Our rehearsal process lasted a scant three weeks – it was, paralleling the production design, pragmatic as well as artistic. The text requires a freshness with the language, and I feared over rehearsing the texts – long monologues,
essentially, all – would create boredom and complacency for the actor, and thus for the
story.

This was an area, however, in which the minimalist setting paid off – we were set
to run for the first three nights following the Thanksgiving Break – giving us just one night
in which to all meet, for the first time, run our pieces together to get a running time, and
tech the show in its entirety. This didn’t pan out so well, as we couldn’t get into the booth
to run the light and sound boards – consequently, we ended up teching the entire show
thirty minutes before we opened Monday night. The show, thankfully, is well served by a
“lights up/lights down” sensibility – which was, thankfully, precisely what we had
planned.

With, however, a strong cast and production team, we were ready to begin our
frantic, frenetic process. *bash* was going to happen – it was up to us to make the experience
a positive one.
MAKING THE TOUGH CHOICES:
PLAYING JOHN IN BASH

Originally, I had intended to perform the role of the Young Man in *Iphigenia in Orem*.

Somewhat egotistically, and somewhat arrogantly, I believed I could perform the entire thirty page monologue – it was an acting challenge I wanted to undertake, as I had never had that sort of responsibility in performance.

However, upon giving *Iphigenia in Orem* another read, I found that I couldn’t perform that part. Both of my brothers had recently given birth – to baby girls. I couldn’t bring myself to turn myself off from the obvious parallels between the script and my life…not a murderous urge in the name of a standard of living, of course, but the presence of my new nieces in my life prevented me from making a moral compromise with myself in order to play the Young Man. The dialogue exacted its violent edge against me.

John, however, was a disturbingly easy character to play.

I say disturbing only because of the violent nature of the character. The truth is John is one of those characters that I as the actor had to do relatively little work to marry. With some characters, the actor has to inform the script. Sometimes it’s the opposite way – the script informs the actor. One way or the other, the performance comes across onstage as imperfect – the audience can see the actor working to be the character, and it reads as falsified, forced. Once in a while, however, the actor and the script find ways to inform each other an equal amount – the marriage of the actor and the character. It’s these times when the performance onstage reads as present, engaging, and interesting.
Which isn’t to deny the agency of either the script or the actor – there is always work to be done. I state the above simply to illustrate that the work was entirely enjoyable in this case – never so much a struggle for me as a continual pleasure of discovery.

Since my education in theatre at the university level began, I’ve found myself continually cast in a certain type of character – the romantic interest. The good guy. The charming sort of guy. I don’t mind this – I just like to work, mostly – but I’ve also found an enormous amount of pleasure, mostly in Scene Study classes, in playing the bad guy.

I understand I have a certain look – I’m young, and relatively handsome, and charming – that leads me to the parts I play. But a large artistic interest of mine is subversion – the bad guy that will smile while he stabs you in the back. More than anything, I like characters that resist the one dimensionality of a countless number of scripts where the good guy is the good guy, the bad guy is the bad guy, and the good guy gets the girl in the end. Such writings can hardly be called characters – caricatures, maybe. There is a time and place, certainly, for these sorts of roles. Some of the roles are even enormously enjoyable to perform – but there is a distinct difference between enjoying performance, and enjoying the process of performance. John was a character with which I enjoyed the process of performance.

Paul and I decided early on that LaBute had purposefully written dialogue that indicated John’s sexuality was not as straightforward as it appeared. Despite an obvious hyper-masculine language identity construct, LaBute included not-so-subtle clues to John being unable to explain why, before violently murdering the homosexual man, he had allowed the man to touch him, why he had responded back.
Initially, in exploring these themes, I overplayed the homosexual parts of the character, portraying him as a caricature himself. This is a conscious choice I made, and make, as an actor, early in the rehearsal process. The theory here is three-fold.

Firstly, making large, broad, bold choices makes me, as the actor, feel free to continue making large choices, cutting away any amount of self-consciousness. In being so large, approaching silliness, I’ve laid myself bare – without anything else to hide, I was free to explore all the facets of the characters to extremes. It is, as my acting professor in undergrad was fond of saying, “much easier to pull yourself back than to push yourself forward.”

Secondly, by making large choices, I can almost instantly figure out what doesn’t work for the character, in broad strokes. The quicker I can eliminate what doesn’t work, the quicker I can, then, find what does work. This ties into another aspect of Grotowski’s work which I’ve taken to heart: via negativa.

Thirdly, bold choices are necessarily built on moments of great tension – in finding those moments, I find the playwright’s intentions. By finding the playwright’s intentions, I hone in on what I consider to be the single most important aspect of drama – telling the story.

Obviously, the large choices didn’t work for telling the story, but they did help me to explore the areas of the character. In so doing, I found ways to highlight those areas in an effective and realistic way – giving special consideration to, as Paul and I discussed, the areas where John compromises his masculinity.
Once I was able to discern the masculine vs. feminine aspects of John, I concentrated on the dichotomy between the typical frat boy and the violent murderer. The problem, or more accurately, the issue, with this dichotomy is that it is the central most fundamental split of the character. I knew, I knew going into this character that the violent turn he takes would lose its edge if the audience saw it coming. I played John in such a way that there was something just the littlest bit off about him – a preoccupation with the superficial. This “off”-ness represented the characteristic split.

They way I came to understand it was the John dealt with his homosexual tendencies in perhaps the worst possible way. Instead of embracing them, or even dealing with them, on whatever level, John suppressed those feeling entirely – for reasons of social acceptability, religious pressure, familial “responsibilities.” This repression became a sort of scar on his very being, a never healing wound that needed something to fill it in.

Into this wound, John pours his self-loathing. Festering there, this self-loathing is masked by John outwardly in a very physical manner. To combat what must, to him, be feelings of masculine inadequacy, John dedicates himself to rigorous exercise, to overt, violent displays of masculinity, to superficial consumerism, to his appearance. He creates an outward expression of his masculinity through these things, while never dealing with the issue that is at the core of his character – his homosexual tendencies.

Physically, I addressed this issue by committing myself to a certain characteristic stillness. John, to me, seems like he is the type of character who is perpetually in what Patsy Rodenburg calls “Third Circle”, or an outward and upward display of social engagement – a sort of “party mode” of interaction. By physically representing John in
Third Circle, I was able to create a façade – I made certain the audience, at first, at least, liked John, but felt slightly uncomfortable about liking him. John was always participating in a certain assuredly male social posturing. I played around with a certain nervousness in his movement, but it never felt right – John was telling a story, ostensibly to a group of friends, and he was deeply enjoying it. Too, keeping the character more or less still, at least in terms of extraneous movements, created, I hope, an eerie sense of calm. The overall stillness also tied into the minimalist approach to the production.

Vocally, I typically kept John very much in the Third Circle. Here, too, I purposefully made large choices early on. One of the issues I’ve had with my vocal work is a reluctance to go to extremes – breaking my voice very very high, or going very low with it. By forcing myself to go to these extremes early on in the process, I was able to find a more natural range for the character that still hit these points – in moments, especially, of talking about the superficial consumerism – when talking, for instance, about the cut of my hair, or the tuxedo I had managed to purchase, or about the corsage I bought for Sue, I pitched my voice just ever so unusually high – marking a clear discomfort with the subject at hand … discomfort which stemmed from John’s use of superficiality as a way to ignore his homosexual tendencies.

At the same time, I was happy to explore the lower depths of my voice, as well. These I used in precisely the opposite manner – I used them when discussing moments which highlighted the ultra-masculine façade. Most specifically, anytime I cut off or corrected Sue, or made a fairly harsh judgment call on something, or someone, I dropped my voice low and made the remark quick and biting. Anytime I discussed my relationship
with Sue, I did the same thing, taking what might have superficially read as feminine lines and read them with the ultra-masculine façade. In doing this, I was hoping to, again, create a disconnection with the audience. I wanted them along with the ride, I wanted them to stay with me, in the moment, and I wanted them to question John’s stranger proclivities.

However, by creating these vocal rules, I was afforded the opportunity to break them – creating an instantly heightened situation when I did. In many ways, the vocal extremes I explored only really paid off when I stripped away those extremes. During the moments when I was describing the violent acts I had committed, I kept my voice totally flat, widening the disconnect. By keeping my voice and my affect flat, I turned John from a benign frat boy into a true sociopath. There is nothing more terrifying than an individual who truly feels nothing when committing heinous acts – I was done with leading the audience on and was ready to reveal exactly what sort of person John truly was.

I broke the flat affect only in one area. Again, by setting up the rules of the flat affect, I was able to break them, pushing the stakes even higher. I broke the flat affect only when describing the utter sacrilege of reciting a eulogy over the body of the man John and his friends had just beaten to death. Already an extremely heightened moment, by breaking that affect just the tiniest bit, with a smile, I pushed the stakes and the emotional fervor just that much higher.

Emotionally, John was a bit of a rollercoaster. In creating the façade of consumerism and masculinity, I paid specific attention to areas of the text in which he discussed things of material value. The idea here – creating an emotional disconnect through connecting more strongly with material goods – was vital to the creation of the
character. If I could convince the audience that, in John’s worldview, his Volkswagen had more emotional affect on him than did his girlfriend, I would make them feel uncomfortable. That also afforded me the opportunity to literally objectify Sue, displaying another measure of masculine power over her – she was just another one of the “things” that John owned.

Inversely, but similarly, John also distanced himself whenever describing the acts of violence themselves. While remarking that a fingernail, digging into my nipple hurt me may have come across as funny, I didn’t hear anybody in the audience laughing when I described flipping the young man over and “pounding on his head” (bash, LaBute 49). In creating a sort of emptiness regarding the violence, especially so early on in the piece, it created another level of façade, making the audience doubt their preconceived notions about John.

To that end, I also knew that I had to explore the opposite side of the spectrum, as well – I had to create a notion by which the audience could judge me instantly. In the spirit of subversion, I strove to create a character the audience would like, would be attracted to. If I could make John the sort of person that the audience wanted to be friends with, the amount of violence I could then enact against them would only get larger. So I made John very close to Danny – knowing that the majority of the audience would be people who were familiar with me as a person.

It’s a dangerous acting choice, I believe, because it sounds lazy and slightly sloppy, and can often fail. However, I believed strongly that due to the inherent unrealistic nature of the piece – two people not looking at each other, but telling the same story and
occasionally referencing something the other had said – I had to imbue a strong sense of \textit{reality} in the character to make the story pay off.

So John was a generally charming sort of guy – nice, handsome, a little bit funny – a friend, more or less, to everyone he met – just, at the risk of sounding arrogant, like me.

This may be why I was able to make a moral compromise with myself in playing this character – unlike the Young Man, who we will discuss in a moment, John seemed like a generally decent guy who was unable to deal with his feelings of self-loathing. To play him as a straight up sociopath would be flat, one dimensional, and boring; most importantly, it would betray the character Neil LaBute had worked so hard to create. \textit{Drama} is about \textit{conflict} – and that was the absolute central characteristic of John. Conflict within himself, conflict against his religious beliefs, conflict with the audience, conflict with what the audience \textit{expected} of his character. In creating John, I strove always to find the moments of conflict and address them in a straightforward manner, purposefully shying away from obfuscating the conflict in saccharine, overly contemplative, internalized Method-style acting.

In undergrad, my acting professor and mentor, Steven Breese, explained to me that the pedagogy of acting at Christopher Newport University was to apply theory to practice via extensive character work. In so doing, we would internalize the theory into our individualized acting styles; while creating a character may not become easier, it would certainly become more efficient, as we would rely less and less on classroom exercises and paperwork and more on our guts, our minds, and our hearts. I feel that John was an excellent example of an actor following his creative instinct, an instinct honed through
years of extensive training and practice. I did little paperwork for John – I didn’t have to. I knew what to look for, knew to trust my director, knew the broad strokes of the character at a very early point in the rehearsal process, which allowed me to freedom to then whittle down those broad strokes, creating and defining in intimately specific terms, exactly what kind of person John was – in order, as always, to tell the best possible version of the playwright’s story.
FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN:
STAGING MASCULINITY

My undergraduate directing professor, Denise Gillman, once said something to the effect of directing being the art of picking one’s battles.

As an actor, I tend to defer to the director and the director’s vision. I trust that the director wouldn’t be running the show, literally and figuratively, unless they were qualified and prepared to do so. Pragmatically, I understand this is not always the case, and while I try to honor their aesthetic, I sometimes find I have to take the work upon myself to a greater degree – I find, frankly, that some directors simply are not as sharp as I am, I find faults in their vision, in their consideration of my character. In these instances, I tend to agree with director’s notes, to take them under advisement, and, often, to disregard those notes in the favor of attending to the larger telling of the story. I always try to marry their notes with my instincts – sometimes, it simply doesn’t work that way.

As a director, I try to be as collaborative as possible – I try to serve the actor’s needs as well as my own; if I find that to be impossible, I tend to defer to the actor’s instincts. It’s a symptom of being, first and foremost, an actor myself – I want the process to be enjoyable, artistically profitable, and, if not easy, then certainly painless. Sometimes, however, this is impossible – and the director must pick his battle.

The particular challenge of *Iphigenia in Tauris* is simply the sheer demand the text places on the actor. The script is huge, running almost thirty-five minutes – a challenge for any actor to memorize. To help Paul, he and I, in addition to our scheduled twice a week
rehearsals, started meeting Saturday simply to talk through the script. In these meetings, we began to prune the script down. Many elements of the script were necessarily left out – things that aged his character, such as including other children, and references to the length of his marriage, as well as some of LaBute’s more repetitive circular language. These were, as well, pragmatic considerations – I needed to meet Paul halfway to give him the proper opportunity to learn and internalize his lines. It also helped to focus the script significantly.

One battle I did find myself having to choose, however, was based on a suggestion by Paul to cut out a large chunk of the text near the end – the text dealing with the revelation of the Young Man’s friend about the practical joke he had played upon the Young Man, leading the Young Man to make the cold, calculated choice to kill his daughter, Emma. In the interest of memorizing lines, Paul asked to cut this out, making the Young Man not a victim, but simply a cold blooded killer.

This was maybe the one battle I had to pick – cutting that section of the text might, indeed, have made the job easier for Paul, but that was, frankly, something with which I was unconcerned. It would have ruined, in my opinion, the tragic nature of the text. I felt very strongly that the audience needed to be convinced by the Young Man of his reasons for killing Emma – convinced enough that they thought maybe, maybe they could find it in their hearts to forgive him – and then we would commit LaBute’s final act of violence against them, by showing them it was entirely unnecessary. LaBute is not the kind of playwright who lets up on his audience – I refused to let up on my actor.
I’ve never made any secret about my relatively nascent directing abilities. I consider myself an actor, through and through, but recognize the necessity for actors to be directors. To that end, I direct the only way I truly know how – the way I would act the scene. The main goal, then, that I was trying to accomplish with my directing of *Iphigenia* was similar to the goal characteristic I created in John – a feeling of discomfort for the audience.

I achieved this through several avenues, the basest being the setting. To increase the discomfort, I did my best to create a claustrophobic space on the stage, mimicking just the corner of a hotel room – a chair, a foot rest, a side table and a makeshift bar comprised the entirety of the set – the lighting, Shafer Street Theatre’s basic rep plot, provided a rough outline for Paul. He could, obviously, go no further than the light permitted him to go.

The second avenue I explored tied into my overall belief of the theme of primary importance to the story of the play. The play, on a very basic level, is about classism. The Young Man, facing the possible loss of his job, sacrifices his daughter’s life in order to provide a certain high stand of living for himself and his wife. The Young Man, then, makes several references to the superficial consumerism he values more highly than his daughter’s life. To that end, masculinity becomes a by-product of his consumerist nature – if he is able to buy “things”, he is able to properly provide for his family.

It was additionally my belief that my role as a director in this case would be less concerned with some of the traditional trappings of the job – blocking, character
interaction – and more concerned with guiding the basic character creation to reconcile with my ideas about the thematic importance.

Some of the ways I influenced Paul’s work were to encourage him to create a physical palette as early in the process as possible. Going into directing this play, I knew what was most important would be to sell the audience on the Young Man’s rationalization – and to do that, we’d have to hit the audience with cold, hard, solid, irrefutable fact. We needed to create absolute physical stillness in these moments so the actor and the audience both could focus on the logic being presented – any extraneous movement – shifting or nervous energy – would take away from the logic. In order to create and accentuate that stillness, we gave the Young Man a characteristic nervousness everywhere but those moments. Again, I mirrored my acting tendencies and asked Paul, at least initially, to exaggerate the nervous energy, in order to find a more natural level at which to act.

One of the earliest exercises we did, and one I tend to do with any scene or play I direct, was a light/dark run. This concept was introduced to me by one of my acting professors, Gregg Lloyd, at CNU. The idea is similar in practice and theory to the via negativa process of making overtly large choices. Essentially, the actor(s) runs the scene twice – once in a manner that is almost cartoon-ish – humorous, over the top energy, happiness, and eagerness. The actor then runs the piece in a manner that is overly dark, serious, and brooding. These exercises free the actor up from any choice they may have already made about the script and their character, while at the same time forcing the actor to explore, moment-to-moment, the script through a new frame of reference. Much of the exercise is pointless in its discovery – we found that most moments we knew would not
work did not work. But the moments we did find – the discoveries, the moments of opposites, the unforeseen moments of black humor – made the exercises worth it.

I also encouraged Paul to play up certain moments. Just like John, the Young Man has a tendency to disconnect when discussing things of any real, significant emotional value. The much more frightening choice is to be totally empty when discussing these things – using pure logic, the audience is forced to consider the ethical possibilities of what would normally be pigeon-holed as a normally horrific, unimaginable act of violence. So while John talked passionately about things of relatively little intrinsic value, the Young Man talks passionately about his job – and the lengths to which he is willing to go to keep that job. I instructed Paul to speak about his job as if it were his lover, and to defend the job in a similar way. The Young Man genuinely becomes excited when discussing the things he loves about the office, saying it makes him feel “like a kid” (LaBute 14).

Inversely, there’s a deep misogynistic streak in the Young Man, and I asked Paul to play those moments up, as well. In doing this, I was hoping to create a match in the audience’s mind between the passion of the Young Man’s job and the absolute disgust he has for the women at the job. This created the construct of the job as an area of masculinity – and since the Young Man mentions he is in the hotel on business, creates the instant connection about the Young Man’s immediacy of misogyny. The audience couldn’t judge the Young Man right away – it would have ruined the effect of the reveal about the practical joke his friend played on him. We were trying to create a likable character, while also staying true to the character LaBute created. The trick was to be honest about the Young Man – about his likes, his dislikes, his thoughts and feelings – while keeping the
actor in the moment, and not projecting the twist at the end. This, I believe, in central to
the creation of most, if not all, of LaBute’s leading men.

By playing up the moments of both misogyny, and of affection for his job, it
created a reversal of audience expectation. They expected, as they probably expect most
characters, the Young Man to be a relatively decent person. The things about which he
speaks passionately are just that – “things” – while his family, his wife are relegated to
reflections of those things. He cares less about his wife and his family then he does about
providing for his wife and family. Because this was the first act of the play, it was vital that
the audience never feel “comfortable” with having their expectations reversed. I knew that
if we could hold their attention on this piece, they would be with us for the entire night. If
we could keep them guessing here, they would be guessing for both a gaggle of saints and
medea redux.

To further the lack of comfort, I asked Paul to consider a number of things that
went unspecified in the text – to fully flesh out his character. One instance, where the
Young Man blames Emma’s death on his wife and his mother-in-law for taking too long at
the drug store – essentially, on fate – was not making sense to me. It came across as weak
and pedantic, and unjustified. I couldn’t allow the Young Man to turn from a terrifying,
heart breaking murderer into a whiny child, so I had to figure out precisely why he
harbored so much resentment against the women in his life – his mother-in-law
specifically.

Obviously, his mother-in-law isn’t a woman for whom he is required to provide –
which creates a sense of resentment in him. To heighten this resentment – to raise the
stakes, increase the immediacy – I asked Paul to consider that the comforter he explains he got as a wedding gift was a wedding gift from his mother in law, and that he blames his mother-in-law for Emma’s death.

This created, in the actor’s mind, a sense of connection throughout LaBute’s circular and confusing dialogue, hopefully helping Paul to keep his eyes on the prize. Too, it also served the Young Man’s tendency to shift the blame onto anyone but himself. The Young Man self identifies as a man who is, simply, willing to do with he must to provide adequately for his family, so he pushes the blame onto other people – how could he, then, in the pursuit of providing for his family, possibly do anything wrong? He goes to lengths to blame fate, his mother-in-law – but not his friends, who played the prank on him in the first place. Why? He identifies as a man with his friend.

The overall want in this play for the Young Man, we decided, was that he was attempting to achieve salvation. No small order – but to what end? The Young Man, here, was attempting salvation because he knew he could no longer live with what he’d done. The markings are all over the script – a normally uptight man, the Young Man is unwinding here, admitting things to a stranger that he’d never admitted to anybody.

The stranger was an important element in this script, as well. In a gaggle of saints and medea redux the audiences are somewhat more defined – John and Sue are speaking, nominally, to friends, telling two sides of the same story, while the Woman in medea redux is recording her confession for the police. We had to find someone specific to whom the Young Man could speak, and I credit this entirely to Paul. His choice was that the Young Man was speaking to a prostitute – which served the misogynistic streak, the disrespect of
women, and, additionally, added an interesting level to the Young Man’s shifting of responsibility.

In order to raise the stakes even higher, and believing that the Young Man could go on no further, Paul and I agreed that the Young Man, after the lights go out, planned on killing himself. In a last, desperate, disgusting act of misogyny, the Young Man essentially passes on his guilt to the Prostitute, making her responsible, now, in even the slightest marginal way, for Emma’s death.

In a larger sense, knowing Paul’s background in movement, I was less concerned with creating a very specific blocking map. It seemed overkill for the purposes of the production. With a larger cast, with greater character interaction, with, perhaps, less experienced, younger actors, the blocking would have taken on a more necessarily prominent role. Paul, however, is an experienced, talented, subtle actor – I knew I could trust him to discover and develop blocking that worked for his character on his own. I also fully encouraged him to discover new blocking on a performance-by-performance basis.

This ties into a larger overall consideration about performance that I have been developing as of late. While I might not have been comfortable with allowing this sort of subtle improvisation, by an act of fate, I read an interview with Bruce Springsteen in an October issue of Rolling Stone which spoke to my aesthetic, summed up how I felt, and encouraged me to grant Paul the freedom to explore and redefine as the performance dictated.

It's not like a one-on-one dialogue. It's more what you feel back from them. You create a space together. You are involved in an act of the imagination together, imagining the life you want to live, the kind of country you want
to live in, the kind of place you want to leave to your children. What are the things that bring you ecstasy and bliss, what are the things that bring on the darkness? ... That's the dialogue I have in my imagination when I'm writing. I have it in front of me when I'm performing.

It's an organic, living thing. There's something subtly different being said on a nightly basis. But you're attempting to define and have impact upon the world and the life you're living. I can't do it by myself. I need my audience. It'll be a lifelong journey by the time that I'm done. (Levy, “Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Interview”)

Springsteen was discussing his music, but the consideration applies – playing concerts, like acting, is performance. And he’s absolutely right, there is something “subtly different being said on a nightly basis” – there ought to be. No two audiences are alike, so no two performances can be alike. To create and perform in only one way, strictly, is to rob the theatre of its most inherent aspect – the live, in front of the audience performance.

Paul took the advice and ran with it – once the proverbial curtain went up, as far as I was concerned, the play stopped being about the privileged way I saw it, and started being about the way the audience related to the Young Man. On some nights, Paul found his emotional transitions and the text to be at odds – and so found ways to make the text work for him – ways which surprised me, sitting backstage, watching the performance from, literally, the other side.

Above everything else, in consideration of both the acting and directing sides of this project, the thing I stressed was specificity. Specificity of choice, of action, of movement, of production value. That, I believe, is the key to creating good theatre, and the missing ingredient in so much bad theatre. Theatre that makes broad, general choices, in any field, is sloppy, lazy, and burdened. Specific theatre is tight, thrilling and engaging – the kind of
theatre that is necessary to perform LaBute, and, ultimately, the kind of theatre I want to be a part of creating for the rest of my academic and artistic career.
CHAPTER 5 THOUGHTS ON PRODUCING BASH

It’s difficult for anybody to fully qualify a production as a “success”, and so I hesitate to use that term. Ultimately, the question of a production’s value lies in many different considerations – each consideration a reflection of the individuals who participated in the production.

As director, I was very pleased with the way *Iphigenia in Orem* came out. But is this pleasure colored by my experience with bringing the production along from the beginning? I was, literally, the only person who could be counted as an audience member for the production from start to finish, and I knew things about the production – private considerations of the actor – that enhanced my enjoyment of Paul’s performance. Invariably, my contentment with the performance was influenced by my contentment with the process. Is this the only measure of pleasure?

Another measure has to be the consideration of the success of the production’s exploration of the main theme of my thesis: masculinity on the stage. In this regard, I feel that *Iphigenia* was definitely a success. The entire directing process was colored and informed by the necessity of displaying moments of masculinity, and, inversely, moments of vulnerability when the masculine façade was lost.

As an actor, I was very happy with my performance of John. It is rare, I believe, in my experience, at least, for an actor to find a character and a production he genuinely enjoys performing every single night. I reveled in playing a character that is subversive of
my general type, and I reveled in the disgust and shock that subversion registered on the faces of the audience.

As a producer, I was most pleased with Sarah Yount’s work on *medea redux*. This was, of course, the piece with which I had the least involvement. Sarah’s process was, from what I’ve been told, as bumpy and as rushed as our own. The actor she had initially cast and with whom she had begun preliminary rehearsals turned out to be academically ineligible to perform. Faced with a rapidly approaching starting date for rehearsal, Sarah made a drastic and definite change to the piece – one which I was generally against.

However, I saw my role as producer in much the same way I saw my role as director – strictly hands off, closer than anything else to a guide. I told Sarah I wasn’t thrilled with her concept for *medea redux*, but said that, ultimately, it was her piece – I asked her to direct and be involved with the process, after all, because I knew I could trust her sensibilities – and that she ought to feel free to direct the piece in a way which would best serve the story.

Sarah’s concept was a drastic change to what I saw as the main importance of LaBute’s writing. Whereas, with both previous pieces, we had stuck to the more traditional staging – one character discussing, in monologue, a single event – Sarah expanded the cast greatly, splitting the one character into three.

What finally sold me on the concept, and what was initially unclear to me, was Sarah’s manipulation of the script – quite frankly, her cutting of it was brilliant. In splitting the role among three actors, she assigned, essentially, one actor to an individual facet of the Woman’s character – Michelle Rogerson played the guilty one, telling the story; Katie
Dingle played the young one, reliving her first and only love; rounding out the three was Elise Edwards as the cynical, bitter, empowered one, who made the decision to kill her son, Billie, in retaliation for a romantic slight from the boy’s father.

In some ways, this improved upon the script. It created a more diverse palette of physical possibilities; it showed, physically, many different sides of the Woman’s personality, and allowed for a rather powerful closing moment, wherein the three aspects of the Woman stand side-by-side in solidarity, affirming their choice to kill the boy. It’s every bit as haunting as *Iphigenia in Orem* and *A Gaggle of Saints* and served as a nice book-end to the overall theme of masculinity by going almost entirely the other way – a play about a woman asserting her dominance in a male dominated world, by resorting to what can be considered typically masculine actions.

It also didn’t hurt that Sarah’s cast was diverse and talented. Elise and Michelle came as little surprise to me, as I had previous knowledge of their abilities as performers. Katie Dingle, however, was a revelation. At once innocent and malevolent, her performance stood up in every aspect to the older, more experience senior actors. In these regards, my decision to trust in Sarah’s instincts and allow her to direct her interpretation of the script paid off.

One of the other elements we changed about the show was the creation and implementation of a pre-show -- almost a prologue of sorts. This idea came late in the game, and came about through my favorite means of creation – collaboration. The prologue was a joint suggestion by Madolyn and Paul, and spoke to me in an artistic
manner, as well. I’ve always enjoyed the notion of a “pre-show” and this afforded me an opportunity to create one.

The idea, too, was simple enough in execution – we would, the actors in each scene – enter our playing area and simply “live” in the space for X amount of time until the show began. We would, too, live according to the rule we had set up – *iphigenia’s* Young Man was existing in a hotel room, *saint’s* John and Sue were at a bar, but were not looking at or speaking to each other, and the three *medea* women were aspects of the same character, patiently waiting in the interrogation room of a police station.

The prologue served many functions. Firstly, it introduced the basic world of the play and the characters, and the rules of that world. Secondly, for a play that we teched barely before the doors opened for our first performance, it provided a sense of comfort and relief for the actors – it gave us a chance to get out on stage and correct any slight oversights we may have made in terms of setting up our set properly, and allowed us to settle more comfortably into the roles we were to play. Finally, and, as far as I’m concerned, most importantly, it laid bare our intentions to the audience. More than anything, in the conceiving and executing of this play, I was interested in tearing down any theatrical surprises. In putting all of the actors up onstage before the show even began, and allowing the actors simply to be in the space, before the audience, we made a contract with the audience – *we’re not going to pull any tricks on you. What you see is what you get.* In reducing any spectacle to an absolute minimum – after all, what’s less spectacular than simply watching people being people? – right off the bat, we essentially made clear that the
audience was simply going to experience people – people in all of their LaButean contradictions, violence, and twistedness.

In the end, though, I was happy with the production – which isn’t to say it was perfect. We were rushed, especially nearing the end. The timing was very awkward – we didn’t meet at all for the majority of the week before opening night, due to Thanksgiving break. Our opening night ran more or less like a final dress rehearsal – which was fine, all things considered. Due to the time rush – we teched the show about thirty minutes before we opened – some elements came across as decidedly less polished than I would have liked. The minimalist aesthetic helped cover up some of these less shiny moments, but I knew, still, that we could have been better in these areas. Specifically, I was never one hundred per cent happy with our transitions.

Although, as I said earlier, it’s all about picking your battles – this was just one I had to let go in the service of the larger considerations of time and pragmatism. The first night’s performance was rocky – all three plays dropped lines, had some new, strange pauses, and, backstage, the actors of both a gaggle of saints and medea redux were running our lines as Paul was performing. We needed a night to run everything – sounds, lights, transitions – with full tech. By the second night, everything was fully ironed out, and bash truly took off. I’m confident, however, if we had even just a few more days, we could have jumped right out of the gate.

I would qualify our production as a success. I believe we specifically examined Neil LaBute’s use of masculinity through the medium of performance, even if some elements of the performance were less perfect than I might have liked. In the end, however,
my belief is that the things I found wanting were just that – elements of the theatrical, and not the basis of it. Transitions, lights – these things do not create theatre, rather they enhance it. Theatre is created in the space between performer and audience.

As I performed, I could feel the audience with me. We were having a dialogue. I influenced them; they influenced me right back. We did what we set out to do. We told a story. We explored staging masculinity. All things else aside, we used the basic elements of theatre in service of producing *bash*. It wasn’t perfect, but neither was the script, and neither were the characters. Perhaps it was all a happy accident. Perhaps it was sheer pragmatism, and perhaps it was a combination of these things – but even the less shiny moments ended up serving the aesthetic.

I’m pragmatic – the show could have been better. But it also, all things considered, could have been much, much worse. Plus, the production as a whole allowed me to flex several different theatrical muscles – acting/directing/producing/literary criticism. It’s rare that anybody be given such a complete role in creating a piece of theatre, but it’s also, to some degree, appropriate for me. I enjoy all these areas of theatrical creation, and I enjoyed, here, exploring and developing all of these areas to serve a production to which I had a mental and emotional attraction – and, truly, a theatre artist, a teacher, and a theatre scholar, all in various forms of development, can ask for little more.
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

In many ways, *bash* was truly the culmination of my time here at VCU. Through this production, I found ways to implement all of the various, disparate elements of theatre that I most enjoy – dramaturgy, directing, acting, script analysis. I applied my theoretical knowledge of theatrical gender studies to the creation of my character – a gap I’ve been bothered with, lately, trying to figure out how to bridge.

I don’t know where I’ll end up – teacher, artist, both? But I know this – *bash* has allowed me to find, similar to *medea redux*’s Woman, my own sense of balance. No, nobody died in the creation of this production – but over my two years here, I’ve found myself wondering about the gap between the academic and the practical, and where I fit into that gap.

The truth is, I think that gap is created artificially by both sides, neither wanting to admit that they belong to a larger community, which is what (or should be, anyways) the theater, in the end, is. We work together in the service of something greater than our individual selves – the story.

*Bash* is a story of people, placed in extreme positions, making extreme choices. Above the theoretical frame of gender studies, I had to keep that in mind. Without that story, the theoretical framework fell apart. However, the inverse is also true – without the theory in place to create the frame, how could I have found a place to start building the character?
It is easy to be pretentious about one’s aesthetic. It’s attractive, even, to believe that one’s personal artistic journey and sensibilities have an inherent level of “betterness” to them. Frankly, if I’ve learned anything here at VCU, it is that that pretentiousness is dangerous to the process of creating theatre. Theatre is not about egos – theatre is about sharing something meaningful with your audience. The moment theatre becomes about the practitioner and the practitioner’s aesthetic, the theatricality is bankrupt.

Which is why this process was so enjoyable for me. John is, genuinely, a character I could feel happy playing over and over again, but not because it satisfied something artistically inside of me – although it did. I would be happy playing John over and over again because, frankly, John is one of those characters that make the audience feel something.

We are a culture of anesthetic. We like being numbed. John – all of the characters in LaBute – expect a certain level of involvement from the audience. They don’t allow the audience to go numb, to zone out, to watch something and be dispassionate about it. They demand responsibility from the audience. Luckily, the play is good enough that the audience tends to respond.

Neil LaBute has written characters that are unforgiving, and unforgivable, and yet he asks neither from us. Instead, it seems that LaBute is far more interested in making us look deep within ourselves for our answers.

It would be easy to place judgment on these characters, and, thus, on LaBute – but he somehow doesn’t allow us to judge them. They are, no doubt, horrible, horrible people, who have made unimaginably difficult decisions – but they never ask for our sympathy.
They are simply telling stories. All other things aside – gender, divinity, morals, ethics, socially constructed codes of meaning – these characters are telling stories; stories which, ultimately, force the audience to look deep inside of themselves for the answers to.

There are no easy answers with LaBute – nor should there be. As he continues to create characters at an astounding rate, he continues to challenge his audience with each new play. I have read his entire canon – there are, certainly, plays that are better than this; plays that are better written, with more compelling characters, with a more interesting plot. So why did I pick this one?

Frankly, this play seemed very easy to me. It seems black and white – good and evil are laid out in stark terms for the world to see. Murderer = bad. Easy, right? It seems that way, and yet... as I reread medea redux in Tragedy class my first semester here, something awoke inside of me. Of course it wasn’t that easy – it was only my ideals that made it that easy. As I often tell my Introduction to Drama students, what is every bit as important as what the text brings to you, is what you bring to the text. medea redux hit a bit too close to home for me. We see this sort of horror on the evening news almost nightly – to the point where, as I said above, we’ve become numb to it. So why did medea redux cut so close to the bone?

It’s the writing. LaBute creates characters that we can almost forgive, and then yanks the proverbial rug right from under our feet. That is engaging theatre – theatre that will leave the audience talking after the lights have come back on.

I have been told that some people don’t like LaBute; some people say there is an unfathomable depth of bleakness to his writing, that LaBute genuinely makes them feel
“icky” about mankind. I agree with that sentiment. It is bleak, and it is “icky.” Not all of his work, certainly, but, yes, the majority of it. Perhaps I’m a cynic, or perhaps I’m just a realist; I take almost no comfort in saying that there is a not insignificant part of me that sees the world in the same way.

It would, additionally, be easy to blame the Mormon Church for LaBute’s bleak outlook. Certainly, the Mormon faith is between every line of *bash* -- LaBute even wound up leaving the church because the Church reprimanded him for writing the piece.

But, again – LaBute doesn’t allow us to take the easy way out – why should we give him the benefit of the doubt? If *bash* is about anything, it is about the fact that *people* are capable of great violence. *People.* Not churches, not communities, not anything in the world but *people.*

But, as we’ve explored LaBute’s use of binary opposites, if people are capable of great violence, so, too, must they be capable of great *good* and compassion – and there is a not insignificant part of me that feels the need to see the world in *that* way, too. We see that in *bash* as well, if we look for it – a Young Man, fighting to provide for his family, a college boy, ostensibly desperately in love with his girlfriend, a Woman spurned, trying to raise an only child. It’s difficult, yes, to see these things, and, no, they aren’t readily obvious – perhaps they aren’t *really* there at all in these pages – but they are there in *me,* and if I bring that positive perspective – about life, about theatre, about learning, and teaching – to the script, then the script will bring it to *me* in return.

*bash,* then, was, finally, a chance to articulate both parts of myself – the cynic and the optimist. Having a fairly good handle on all of his work, I’m confident in saying that
Neil LaBute would approve of that. If he approved of, or agreed with nothing else in this thesis, he would approve of that.


Farouky, Jumana. "It's So Good to Be So Bad." TIME 29 May 2005.


APPENDIX A

PRODUCTION PHOTOS OF BASH: THE LATTER-DAY PLAYS
SHAFER STREET PLAYHOUSE/NEWDICK THEATRE, FALL 2007

Paul Wurth as the Young Man, *iphigenia in orem*

Danny Devlin as John, and Madolyn Smeltzer as Sue, *a gaggle of saints*
From Left: Katie Dingle, Michelle Rogerson, and Elise Edwards, as aspects of the Woman, *medea redux*
VITA

Daniel F. Devlin was born in Arlington, VA on April 14th, 1984, and raised in Fairfax, VA. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Acting from Christopher Newport University in 2006. Past acting roles include John in *bash*, Torch in *Beirut*, Tripp in *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress*, George in *All My Sons*, both the Playwright and the Student in *The Blue Room*, Gerry in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Hal in *Proof*, for which Daniel was awarded an Irene Ryan nomination.

Daniel is also the author of several plays. His first full-length work, *Total Existence Failure* was accepted to, and work shopped at, the Horizon Theatre New South Young Playwright’s Festival in Atlanta, GA in the summer of 2006. His latest one act, *(Pre)Tensions, or, Robots! And! Cowboys!* was presented in competition at the Virginia Theatre Association Secondary School One Act Competition in Richmond, VA in the fall of 2007.