

TS

Several modern US playwrights construct dialogue on a paradoxical premise: in order to sound natural, one must use stylised, unnatural speech patterns. It's rather like the computer programmes that generate images of forests and other natural landscapes for film scenery, by using geometric patterns to create the illusion of randomness.

David Mamet, a prime example of this manner of playwrighting, has his characters speak in patterns of incremental repetition: "If you listen - if you listen closely."

Neil LaBute, on the other hand, uses clichés to simulate natural speech. We see this in his play *Bash: Latter-day Plays*, which premiered off-Broadway in New York last year and has now been adapted for television. (Showtime. Monday, August 28, at 8pm ET/PT.)

The play is in three acts, each beginning with an insipid and boring anecdote. The characters seem almost to be apologising for the writing, saying: "I know this sounds like a cliché, but the music sounded like angels . . . I just stood there, frozen in time . . . The business world is really dog eat dog."

Collectively, these clichés illustrate LaBute's larger, overarching cliché: that, in the words of Hannah Arendt, evil is banal.

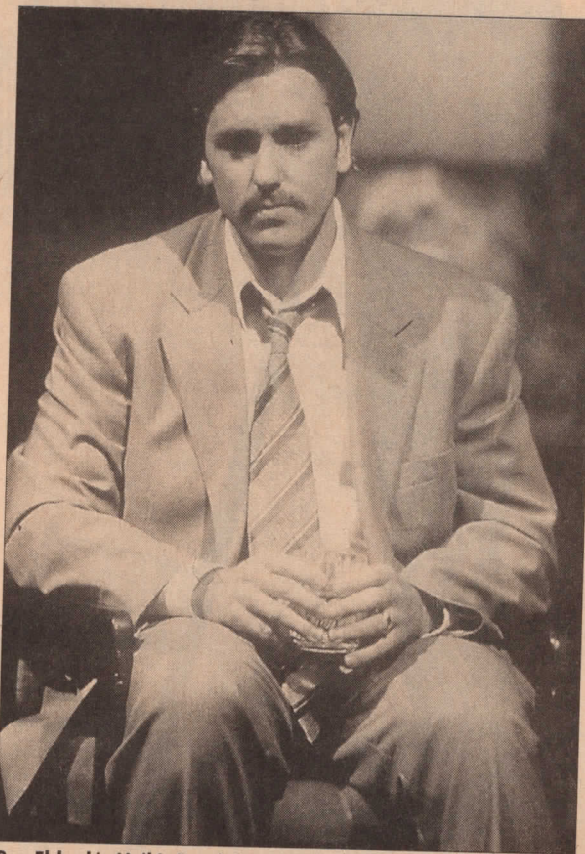
The first act of *Bash*, entitled "A Gaggle of Saints", begins with giddy college sweethearts telling a soporific story about a formal dance.

Their voices inflect in flighty fashion: "I just thought it would be great? Coming out of the car with all this taffeta? At an Amoco station? In Connecticut?" But then we learn, oh so gradually, that after the dance, the boy and his friends killed a stranger in the park and picked up their girlfriends to get breakfast the next morning.

It is amazing to consider that *In the Company of Men* (1997), which LaBute wrote and directed, is his most subtle work to date. Its protagonist Chad (played by Aaron Eckhardt) devises a

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Stories more suited to a chamber of horrors



Ron Eldard in Neil LaBute's 'Bash: Latter-day Plays'

"She'll be calling her mom, she'll start wearing make-up again. Then we pull out the rug. She'll be reaching for the sleeping pills within a week."

Chad is just a garden-variety malevolent figure. It is his spineless friend Howard who shocks us. Howard is a lackey, going along with Chad's plan, but he genuinely grows to like the deaf woman, Christine. When he confesses his affection, Christine - the intended butt of the joke - cocks her head in pity, weeping: "I'm sorry for leading you on." Howard cannot countenance this. He lunges at her with an engagement ring, screeching: "You can't have men throw themselves at your feet!"

cruelty can rarely come out on top. Christine can turn the tables on Howard, but he can then pick up the table and throw it at her. She cannot fathom the evil of which he is capable, and this is her undoing.

With this film debut, LaBute became Hollywood's new *wunderkind*; The New York Times hailed him as one of "the only unique voices [in film] to have emerged in the past few years".

After *Bash*, however, LaBute deserves to be stripped of this title. The stories in this play have been told many times before by people far smarter than he, which he basically admits through his choice of titles: the second act of *Bash*, about a woman and

The classical allusions are something of a red herring. LaBute has stolen the plots of Greek drama, but has abandoned the other attributes of that genre that might have saved these stories from their tawdry shallowness. *Bash* has no pathos, no remorse, no irony.

There is a feeble stab at irony in "Iphigenia in Orem", the story of a salesman who hears from a co-worker that he is to be laid off his job. He kills his daughter, hoping this will make his company take pity on him and spare him, but he then discovers his job was never in jeopardy; the co-worker had been playing a practical joke. I don't think that the irrational deductions of a deranged psychopath count as true dramatic irony.

Another thing LaBute did not pick up from the Greeks, to his great detriment, is a sense of that which should take place off-stage. The audience is left with the shame of having just listened to detailed instructions - a veritable step-by-step manual - on how to smother one's infant and make it look like crib death.

Maybe I'm just narrow-minded, but I don't think it's so very impressive that LaBute understands cruelty really, really well at the interstitial levels. He needs to demonstrate a deeper insight, formulate a big picture out of the information he has gathered.

I'm not quite ready to give up on him, given the promise he showed with *In the Company of Men*. (It is strictly out of charity that I have not said anything about his second film, *Your Friends and Neighbours*.) But *Bash* makes me question whether he's really