

Your Friends & Neighbors, written and directed by Neil LaBute

## Marketable despair

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Neil LaBute's *Your Friends & Neighbors* is about a group of six men and women who for the most part treat each other shabbily. One man attempts an affair with a friend's wife. A second man reveals himself to be something of a sociopath. The women are scarcely more generous or enlightened. One complains bitterly about her partner's propensity for talk during sex. "Let's just do it, I don't need the narration," she snaps. Sexual dysfunction generally prevails and the remedies proposed are perhaps worse than the problems. In the course of the film a marriage breaks up, another relationship shatters, friendships come to an end. Everyone ends up unhappier than or as unhappy as he or she began, having learned nothing.

LaBute (the director of last year's *In the Company of Men*) seems to feel strongly that something has gone wrong with modern relationships. Who would argue with that? And certainly brutality, psychic or otherwise, is a legitimate subject for a film. ("What other subject is there?" asks one of Fassbinder's characters in *Beware the Holy Whore*.) But human relationships and their failings are serious matters and demand that one adopt a serious approach to them.

The writer-director calls his work "A Modern Immorality Tale." His characters are essentially nameless. (For the purposes of the credits they are given similar-sounding names: Mary, Barry, Terri, Cheri, Cary and Jerry.) They are ostensibly contemporary Everymen and Everywomen.

How much can be gained from this sort of abstract study of human relationships? Cruelty is not the natural condition of humanity and is, in fact, difficult to sustain. In general, people must have either an overriding, material stake in mistreating others, or a steady source of provocation. Central characters in each of LaBute's films have neither. Do coldhearted, entirely

self-absorbed creatures exist? Yes. But they exist for a reason. They are, as unfashionable as this may sound, the products of social and psychological circumstances. They can be explained. Other films (as well as novels and plays) before this one have, with varying degrees of artistic success and social insight, associated selfishness and ruthlessness in personal relations with the specific character of American life in the 1980s and 1990s. There is no extraordinary mystery about the proliferation of such personalities.

LaBute's interest, however, does not seem to lie in a condemnation of the conditions that create unkindness, but in a blanket and superficial indictment of his fellow creatures. It is hard not to associate his notion of abstract, *causeless* Evil with the prevailing hostility toward tracing serious problems to their source in social life. Pragmatism, intellectual laziness and (lucrative) accommodation to a foul atmosphere come together here.

Make no mistake, while *Your Friends & Neighbors* is a relatively restrained piece, it is ideologically driven. LaBute became a Mormon while at Brigham Young University. He told a *New York Times* reporter, "It's a crazy thing about faith. Whether it makes scientific sense or logic, at some point it takes over and you say yes it's right, or not." The dramatically and intellectually pivotal scene of LaBute's new film takes place in a restaurant. The ineffectual Barry and the sadistic Cary are discussing good and evil. The latter admits that he is not a good person. Barry asks him whether he believes in God, divine punishment and such things. Cary replies: "If there ends up being a God or an eternity or anything like that ... we'll see. Until then, we're on my time."

Many great artists, including filmmakers (Bresson, Tarkovsky, etc.), have held religious beliefs. That is not

the issue. But there is something about LaBute's outlook that fits too seamlessly into the current political and cultural picture. Why, for example, has this extraordinary moralist struck such a chord in Hollywood and with the media? Why has his outlook proven no hindrance in building up a successful career? His "darkness," his cynicism do not go against the stream in any significant sense. "People are all pigs, anyway!" is the self-serving, quasi-official watchword of the American political and media establishment. For its members this serves as the justification for past, present and future swinishness. Whatever LaBute may have had in mind, and one can even give him the benefit of the doubt here, many of his admirers are simply drawing malicious satisfaction from his work: "See, that's what everyone is like."

The essentially opportunist character of *Your Friends & Neighbors* finds its sharpest expression at the dramatic and aesthetic level. If one were to take seriously that a deeply spiritual sensibility was at work here, it would be difficult to explain the glib dialogue (which inflicts on us more of the generally unfortunate influence of David Mamet), the often clumsy acting (Ben Stiller and Amy Brenneman are not good; the talented Catherine Keener and Jason Patric are misguided; Nastassja Kinski is given little to do; only Aaron Eckhart shows any depth) and the bland images. There is very little in the look or feel of the film that hints at human tragedy, or even conditions of isolation and loneliness. It is, for the most part, rather brightly and cheerfully put together.

LaBute would have to produce a far different, far more difficult work to convince me of the sincerity or depth of his disgust with modern life; at the moment, he seems rather comfortably at one with it.



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