

*Bash takes me to dark places in myself I do not like to visit.
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SABBATH SCHOOL BASH

By Neal Chandler

THE GREEKS PLACED THE DRAMA AT THE CENTER of religious experience. Not because it was faithful history. Certainly not to make Oedipus or Medea role models, nor because such figures embodied familiar Greek virtues. It was the very uncharacteristic extremity of both their aspiration and transgression that riveted audiences in what Aristotle calls catharsis, and which not everyone will shrink from calling spiritual experience.

It is good to see Neil LaBute's *Bash* in print. Yet on the page, this alien rendering of an elite, upscale church party provokes question, analysis, defensive reflection. Well performed, it is—like all really powerful theater—as intense and ephemeral as great sex or terrible pain, and as resistant to retrieval or dissection. When I first encountered *Bash* with my wife and oldest daughter at a performance in Chicago, I was stunned. I recognized the characters, these two attractive children of impressive parents. They possessed the precise jargon and careful boundary awareness of my own suburban Mormonism, laced with the rising generational sophistication that in some form confronts every parent. They were young, still vain, still unmatured by disappointment, but I did not want to see in them any horrifying capacity for evil. Mormons are not like that.

Mormons are, however, grimly like most other people in their propensity for missed connection. Just last night, my wife read to me statistics from a study in *SUNSTONE* suggesting that even in solid and committed Mormon marriages there is a widespread sense of emotional isolation.¹ *Bash* shows us the roots of such failures, even spectacular failures, in our very idealism about love. The initial stage directions tell us that though the protagonists, Sue and John, appear side by side, "it is obvious neither is hearing what the other says." This is, in fact, not altogether obvious. They have been together for six years, and like long-established couples, they pace and play off one another with familiar ease, responding, amending, elaborating. They do not argue. They are, to be sure, not quite yet engaged, and hence still bound by the etiquette and insecurities of ro-

matic love, but they have also established rigid boundaries of discourse that separate their shared account into two discrete and necessary and mutually exclusive stories.

Sue's is, in some ways, the more terrifying story, precisely for its studied superficiality. Her plot references are generic: dating, the party, an anniversary, a pending engagement and planned fall wedding. Everything else devolves to setting: Boston College and New England as setting; Manhattan, the Plaza Hotel, and the "silver" and "gold" and "shimmering" ballroom as setting. Even John is, in Sue's telling, principally scenic: "cute, nice body, . . . kind of long hair," looking "really nice" in his tux. Nor can she see herself in different terms: Taffeta dress, shoes dyed to match. New lipstick. Crimson. She knows her perceived value, wants "to look nice for him," imagines herself walking barefoot in a "wave of taffeta" into the Amoco, imagines the attendant's mouth hanging open at the sight. What she cannot recount or accommodate are the issues of character, the self-revelations that constitute the counter-story John is telling, and that, if accommodated or recounted, would ruin everything. She lets the savage act of acquisition that began their relationship pass with almost no comment: "I'd never seen this happen before . . ."; she trivializes the breakup with her former boyfriend, trivializes every difficult relationship—John's with his father ("I thought it was funny"), her own with John ("Sometimes we fight, we do, like anybody else, or break up . . . whatever"), and passes over the threat or unpleasant implication in virtually every other confrontation. Not only that she fails to question John's violence, but that, classically, she finds it exciting; not merely that she dismisses the two "middle-aged guys" in the park as "no big deal," but that she fails to recognize John's over-alertness, his deep preoccupation with such men; not just that she morally disengages from the incident of violent abuse they encounter on a train, but that she sees John's subsequent disengagement as positive, as hopeful. One thinks of good girls, good sisters advised by well-meaning counselors to marry or to continue with someone despite or even because of certain dark, unaccommodatable things, things it then becomes their duty to cover over with a mantle of love and forgiveness. By classical standards,

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Sue is a very, very good girl, a trophy woman, a candle-lit virgin, who has learned her place and what is needful—that is, if she is to be married to somebody with John's deeply rooted conflicts and dangerous propensity for self-revelation. A certain vacuousness is her comforter, her shield. After all, only those with ears need hear.

And John, whose story the play both recounts and resists, has all the threatening internal complexities to which Sue's impermeable surface is a kind of epidural block. No statement has face value. Though we accept his pride at showing up with "a girl like that" on his

arm, his protestations of love, poetic and oft repeated, soon begin to ring like too much protest. We begin to wonder what buried absence in this young man is compensated by pride in the girl on his arm. His violence, appalling as it is, refuses to be merely that. His openness is not bragging. This is no redneck fag-basher. Nor, however, is this confession, not in any remotely repentant sense. Ineluctably, we come to wonder if the victim whom John has brutalized and left for dead on the filthy floor of a public toilet is not, in fact, also himself. And if he is both perpetrator and victim, where then should he look for retribution? Where find remorse? When his friend asks why he touched the deviate before he hit him—let himself, in fact, be kissed and fondled by him—John has no answer. How does one formulate such an answer? Does anyone suppose, even for a moment, that Sue, with her taffeta dress and her wedding plans, could help him with such a formulation? The deep silence lodged resolutely between the stories each tells in such companionable counterpoint is, as it turns out, a sort of crippled, institutional version of grace.

BUT what about those of us whose lives and torments have been less dramatic, less sensational? Asked once if Mormon thinking and theology didn't actually condone some sort of "blood atonement" violence toward apostates and deviates, I was able to report that the nearest thing to violence I have encountered among Mormons is the danger of boring one another to death in sacrament meeting. Neil LaBute's *Bash*, however, did not leave me much room for clever rejoinders. For one thing, the performance provoked in me memories of my own angry, adolescent homophobia.

When I was a teenager and ordained priesthood bearer, I worked for the Salt Lake City Parks Department in Liberty Park, where homosexuals were "known" to cruise and to conduct their assignations. My co-workers and I bragged about what we would do if ever we encountered such a pairing. I assure you that our anticipation, if less articulate, was no less

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graphic or vicious than what confronts the audience in *Bash*. Fortunately, we never found a victim for this or any other of our various bravados. Our singular act of violence occurred when a hapless seagull fell prey to a burst of competitive rock throwing. Quickly, we hid the wounded bird, still bleeding and flapping in wide-eyed terror, behind a large clump of bushes. In pious Utah, where one could blow rabbits and pigeons and magpies to smithereens for pleasure, killing seagulls was against the law.

I remembered, too, a time when my sons and I armed ourselves with golf clubs and cur-

tain rods and went after a rat that somehow had eluded the traps and poison set out in our basement. It had lost a leg to one of the traps, was hobbled, but so crazy for life that it required the four of us, chasing wildly back and forth across the basement, flushing it out then cutting it off again and again and again, to trap it behind a stray sheet of drywall in the corner. There, panting, we kicked and bludgeoned the rat to death through the disintegrating paper and gypsum. Afterward, we congratulated ourselves loudly and began, already, to retell the story of the kill. When we climbed the stairs, the women came out of hiding to celebrate. We were heroes. Oh, my wife made jokes about men and hunting and testosterone bonding, but she also made sure we disposed of the corpse discreetly and absolutely. We laughed a lot. But I did not sleep much that night and awakened several nights thereafter. I had been praised and kidded and congratulated. I had helped dispose of a rat, a particularly incorrigible member of a particularly repugnant species, the very thought of which made skin in my household crawl. I knew that. But I also knew that I had just participated wildly, enthusiastically in a killing frenzy.

THE play and such memories take me to dark places in myself I do not like to visit. I have been blessed that the practical consequences of my own excesses of violence have been mostly trivial. These are, admittedly, trivial stories and only begin to address the weight and complexity of LaBute's drama, where other, less easily confessable self-revelations await: there remain, for instance, the vanity and teasing that accompany our clannishness, our deeply ingrained classism; erotic fascination with power and the associated role of trophies, including trophy women, in our culture; the resolute patriarchy that all too easily turns the hearts of children from their fathers and the hearts of fathers from their children; the explosive self-hatred, resulting when honest self-discoveries are hopelessly, institutionally cross-referenced to depravity and

sin; the cautious non-conversations all of us have correlated tightly along the magic iron wand of *all is well in Zion*. These are just some of the strands in the warp and woof of the net cast by this play, and in whatever complex way it draws you in, draws out your own dark places and unresolved experience, it will make a difference.

On the way home from Chicago, my wife and daughter and I talked a long time about *Bash* in that testing and contesting way in which the genders and generations try sometimes to approach one another. My daughter Michael, then still in high school, had had a very different, much more immediate experience of the play, and one she could not get past. She later wrote about it:

Right away, I was drawn into the play because I recognized the characters. . . . They attended a school that many of my friends have applied to. They shared my religious background. They dressed, acted, talked, and joked in much the same way that my friends and I do. If I had known them in real life, these characters would probably have been my friends, and I was excited with them as they road-tripped to New York. I had fun with them as they danced at their party. I laughed with them at their silly humor. I sighed with them at their romance.

Because I identified so clearly with these young people, I did not realize I had begun to share emotions with them that I had never associated with myself. I, too, felt shocked at the two homosexual men. The scene was such a sudden intrusion into what had been a light, fun atmosphere, that I was taken completely by surprise. I, too, was upset, even disgusted. The way the men were described embracing made me very uneasy. The picture was very vivid, and up to this point in the play, I had felt everything the characters felt. But when the boys became violent, my connection broke, and I was appalled.

I was appalled most of all at the undeniable prejudice I had just seen in myself. I had always looked down upon people I had thought to be racist or prejudiced. Through my education, my community, and my family, I had come to believe that I was completely accepting of other races, cultures, ideas, and human behaviors. That is what has always been expected of me and what I have always expected of myself. For a long time I congratulated myself with the idea that I was not judgmental or homophobic. But on this evening my emotions crossed over a line that I had never thought they would cross. This play was not

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your life."² If you can leave a performance of *Bash* such as the one we witnessed in Chicago without needing to change, however inchoate and shrouded your repentance, I suspect that either your calling and election has already been made sure, or you are beyond redemption. ☒

about me. It was about a few fictional characters. Somehow, however, I felt directly involved in it. Sitting in the audience, I felt a kind of blood on my own hands. I left the play a different and far less comfortable person.

In the most famous line of a famous poem, Rainer Maria Rilke gives an operational definition to powerful art. There is, in such work, "no place that does not see you. You must change

NOTES

1. See "Trend in LDS Marital Disruption," *SUNSTONE* 18:1 (Apr. 1995), 17.
2. The translation is mine. Compare "Archaic Torso of Apollo" in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. David Young (Field Translation Series 20, 1994), p. 60.

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