Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

How To Fight Loneliness
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Brian Vaughn as Brad in How To Fight Loneliness, 2017.
# How To Fight Loneliness

## Contents

### Information on the Play
- Synopsis 4
- Characters 4
- About the Playwright 5

### Scholarly Articles on the Play
- How To Fight Loneliness 7
Synopsis: *How To Fight Loneliness*

Brad and his wife Jodie are anxiously awaiting the arrival of a guest to their home. They are both in their mid-thirties and have been married for a number of years. They have been through a lot together, especially recently. Jodie looks fatigued and she indicates as much as they try to calm each other’s nerves.

Tate, a slightly older man, finally arrives for a brief visit. Upon introductions, Tate points out that he and Jodie knew each other years before, though not very well. Brad and Jodie are at a critical crossroads and are looking to Tate for help. What follows is a candid and raw conversation about what it means to make hard choices and the resulting consequences to those we love.

Characters: *How To Fight Loneliness*

**Jodie Reynolds:** Wife of Brad, Jodie is in her mid-thirties.

**Brad Reynolds:** Husband of Jodie, Brad is in his mid-thirties.

**Tate Miller:** Now in his late thirties, Tate knew Jodie in high school.
About the Playwright:
How To Fight Loneliness
By Vanessa Hunt

With credits to his name in the categories of playwright, screenwriter, director, and actor, Neil LaBute has filled his career with artistic experiences across the spectrum. LaBute was born on March 19, 1963 in Detroit, Michigan, to Richard and Marian LaBute, a long-haul truck driver and a hospital receptionist, respectively. He grew up in Spokane, Washington, where he acted in a couple of his high school theatre productions, and then he eventually found his way to Provo, Utah, where he attended Brigham Young University, studying theatre. It was here that he met and formed a friendship with fellow student and now Hollywood actor, Aaron Eckhart. As a student, LaBute continually pushed the envelope with the work he wrote and produced, causing some of his productions to be shut down. The themes of his work dealt with issues that attacked subjects people didn’t necessarily want to talk about, especially at a school known for its conservative nature. Despite the controversy LaBute encountered while focusing on his undergraduate studies, he was ultimately named one of the BYU Theatre Department’s most promising undergraduate playwrights.

Turning to his graduate studies, LaBute attended the University of Kansas and then graduated with a master of fine arts degree in dramatic writing from New York University. He furthered his education at the Royal Court Theatre in London as a recipient of a literary fellowship.

Never one to shy away from themes that cause his audiences to not only rethink the world around them, but also face controversial issues such as homosexuality, abuse, sex, murder, and suicide, LaBute has had the nickname of “Mr. Nasty” bestowed upon him by some audience members (Emma Harwood, “Playwright Neil LaBute in Profile,” www.theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/articles/neil-labute-playwright-in-profile/). He takes the title in stride, saying that it’s part of his makeup to ruin a perfectly good day for people, at least regarding his stories (Pat Jordan, “Neil LaBute Has a Thing about Beauty,” www.nytimes.com/2009/03/29/magazine/29LaBute-t.html).

After receiving his graduate degree, LaBute turned to film. His first major cinematic piece was released in 1997 and titled In the Company of Men. He continued his theme of creating art that was controversial as this film followed two businessmen who plotted to romance and emotionally destroy a deaf woman. LaBute’s college friend, Eckhart, starred in the film, playing one of the cruel businessmen. The film won the Sundance Filmmaker’s trophy at the Sundance Film Festival that year, and LaBute also won an award for his screenplay. In addition, the film was awarded The New York Critics’ Circle Award for Best First Feature.

LaBute’s next film was Your Friends & Neighbors, released in 1998. Much like his earlier work, this film was met with conflicting reviews. The next year, LaBute returned to playwriting with a run of his show Bash: Latter-Day Plays, which was a set of three short plays. The show ran off-Broadway at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre. One of the plays in the set, Medea Redux, contributed to LaBute being disfellowshipped from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He later formally left

Those who have worked closely with LaBute in the theatre describe him as smart, funny, and generous, but his personal life is never a topic of conversation. Those who know him best refer to him as elusive and mysterious. He enjoys talking about his work, but he is not as open to talking about himself.

Combining his work in the theatre and film industries, LaBute wrote and directed the play The Shape of Things. It debuted in London, starring Paul Rudd and Rachel Weisz. After its run on the stage, he adapted the play into a film in 2003, keeping the same cast he had used on the stage and staying on as director. Subverting the balance of power in the theatre is something LaBute is constantly looking to do, mainly by adding different types of experimentation into his work to see how the audience will react. One such means came about during the run of The Shape of Things as he would play loud music between scene changes so that audience members could not talk to each other during that time. A technician was brought in to make sure the volume of the music was within health and safety standards but still loud enough to be uncomfortable for the audience. Also during this run, LaBute did away with the curtain call at the end of the show to take the feeling of “everything is really okay” away from the audience (Gilbey).

Between adapting The Shape of Things from the stage to the big screen, LaBute presented a response to the September 11 attacks in the form of a play called The Mercy Seat. The play focused on a man who was working at the Twin Towers when they fell but was not at the office that day. The LaBute spin on this situation was that the man was away from the office because he was with his mistress. The man then contemplates starting a new life with his mistress and allowing his family to believe that he was killed in the attacks. Despite the controversial subject matter, the play was a critical success.

In 2010, the Chicago Shakespeare Festival presented a production of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew. For this production, LaBute came on board to write a new Induction and new scenes for the Shakespearean classic. His additions to the play added an element of meta-theatre, and he even went so far as to add in a lesbian romance subplot.

LaBute’s most recent work, How To Fight Loneliness, was staged in 2016 for a reading as part of the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s New American Playwrights Project. At the beginning of their 2016 season, the artistic directors for the Utah Shakespeare Festival announced that How To Fight Loneliness would be presented as a full production world premiere during their 2017 season.

Neil LaBute’s film credits also include Tumble, Possession, Nurse Betty, The Wicker Man, Lakeview Terrace, Death at a Funeral, Stars in Shorts, Some Velvet Morning, and Dirty Weekend. In the realm of theatre, his credits include The Distance from Here, The Mercy Seat, Autobahn, Fat Pig, This is How it Goes, Reasons to be Pretty, Some White Chick, Lovely Head & Other Plays, Money Shot, and The Way We Get By.

LaBute’s film, theatre, and television credits are not limited to those listed, and
he continues to create, bringing his thought-provoking, controversial, and intellectual work to audiences around the world. When asked about his subject matter, LaBute says, “I write things on a page I don’t want to have to deal with in life” (Jordan). LaBute has two children and lives in New York City.

How To Fight Loneliness
By Elaine Pearce

When is the right thing to do the wrong thing to do? Life is not easy. Each day we make choices that define us, shape us, make us who we are. We try to make the right choice—marrying our high school sweetheart to live happily ever after, working hard, earning a graduate degree, delaying children until the time is right, buying a nice home in the suburbs. Choices that should pay off, that should garner happiness. By and large, we follow the rules, written and unwritten. Follow them to the letter. Even the social niceties like offering a guest party snacks and drinks, making small talk to avoid conversations of substance. We take care of each other, make sacrifices for each other. We form alliances, make commitments, promise to love, honor, and obey. We endeavor to exert control over circumstances, to be the masters of our own existence.

But life does not respect our efforts. Life has a way of shifting the tables, pulling the rug out from under us, upsetting the perfect balance we struggle to create. In How To Fight Loneliness, the happily-ever-after couple finds themselves divided, husband and wife on opposite sides of a chasm that cannot be bridged. Each wants to make a choice that would prevent the choice of the other. Life is not easy.

Death is not easy. It seems there comes a time when you feel “the life sliding out of . . . [you], / a drum in the desert, harder and harder to hear,” when you ask, “How do you know when you are going to die?” and are answered, “When you can no longer make a fist” (Naomi Shihab Nye, “Making a Fist,” ll.2-3, 7, 11), when you no longer have the strength to fight the emotional and physical pain of life. There comes a time when the blessing of hope left in Pandora’s jar as solace for the evils of life is not enough. But death is terrifying. Just like Everyman in the medieval morality play, we want someone to share our final journey with us. When is the wrong thing to do the right thing to do? Who decides?

Nationally acclaimed playwright Neil LaBute notes that even though How To Fight Loneliness has “a tough subject” at the center, it was “not driven by a thematic choice.” Instead, what he as a playwright finds interesting is “the general moral choice that the characters are placed in, no matter what it is. Characters who find themselves at a place where they need to make big decisions about themselves and others, and it tests their moral make-up and what it will take to cross certain lines, to do things or not do things. Are they willing to change their views or do they stick to their views no matter what the cost? . . . People often don’t know until the moment, like in the heat of battle, if they are courageous or have cowardice in their make-up. . . . Until you’re faced with these things, you don’t really know who you are.” The play is one version of him tackling “those bigger—kind of simple in a way but actually complicated—actions
that human beings make all the time . . . and not providing so many answers (I don’t think that is my job) but asking good questions” (Neil LaBute, Personal Interview, 22 January 2017).

In this play the characters find themselves in a position that “is a catalyst for a lot of choices and a kind of reckoning amongst themselves . . . and it ends up being . . . really a character piece. One is the dynamic between the husband and wife and these two people who have known each other in the past but are re-associated with each other in a very different environment than high school where they knew each other. That dynamic, that triangular dynamic of three people . . . some sort of human triangle that forces people to make choices, one person over the other, or allegiances that are different from what you might have imagined them to be when you first met the people” (LaBute).

Each character in the play is a fully formed, well-crafted individual with strengths and weaknesses. Each has a viable perspective. Because of the complexity of their situation, the nature of their choices, and the results of those choices, the audience can simultaneously agree and disagree with each of them. “I wanted to make sure that everybody was painted in strong, vivid strokes of gray. Everyone could be selfish, everyone could be well-meaning, everyone could be sad. That felt like people to me. I wanted to be fair to everybody. Everybody’s pain is so different. Everybody’s journey is so different” (LaBute).

Watching the characters interactions, how they deal with the moral choices that face them, reminds us that there are no absolutes, that life has more questions than answers. How much do we ultimately belong to ourselves and how much must we sacrifice for the happiness of someone else? What must we give up to satisfy others? Is it possible to balance individual needs against the needs of the people in our lives? Whose needs have precedence—our own or those of the people who love us? What is more important—moral, ethical, and legal principles, or understanding, help, and compassion? No matter how empathetic we think we may be, is it really possible to truly feel another person’s emotional or physical pain? How do we fight loneliness? How can we stay strong in the face of opposition? Does the end justify the means? Is it possible to place oneself in jeopardy for another person and seek nothing in return?

Written shortly before it was presented as a staged reading in New York in the fall of 2015, How To Fight Loneliness appeared in a second staged reading as part of the 2016 Utah Shakespeare Festival New American Playwrights Project. David Ivers, Festival artistic director, believes the play is a good choice for the 2017 Festival season. “It is a huge opportunity to premiere an important voice in the current American theatre,” he said. Producing the work of great living playwrights is “central to the mission of the Festival.” He sees “a great artist, a great story that is told now from a perspective of really well-drawn characters, and it is an important narrative.”

As the director of the Festival staged reading in 2016 and this year’s full stage production, Ivers believes in the play and loves it, saying, “It is a really powerful, intimate story.” For him, it is a “compelling sounding play in terms of the language, so rich and contemporary and colloquial and at the same time heightened.” The
play “raises questions that are important to today’s society. . . . Theatre is not just to make everyone feel good. . . . Part of our job is to help move along the social consciousness of the world.” Discussing the talk back sessions that occurred last year for the staged reading, Ivers said the play resonated with audiences who found it “personal and moving” and related its story to their own (David Ivers, Personal Interview, 20 January 2017).

How To Fight Loneliness deals with “a tough subject. It is one that everyone will have an opinion about and one that everyone will face at some point” (LaBute). This play gives us something “to engage in together, think about, and discuss long after the experience is over” (Ivers).