



# The Mercy Seat: A Play

By Neil LaBute

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Set on September 12, 2001, *The Mercy Seat* continues Neil LaBute's unflinching fascination with the often-brutal realities of the war between the sexes. In a time of national tragedy, the world changes overnight. A man and a woman explore the choices now available to them in an existence different from the one they had lived just the day before. Can one be opportunistic in a time of universal selflessness?

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## The Mercy Seat: A Play By Neil LaBute Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“There is no playwright on the planet these days who is writing better than Neil LaBute . . . *The Mercy Seat* is . . . the work of a master.” ?John Lahr  
*, The New Yorker*

“An intelligent and thought-provoking drama that casts a less-than-glowing light on man's dark side in the face of disaster . . . The play's energy lies in LaBute's trademark scathing dialogue.” ?Robert Dominguez,  
*Daily News*

“Though set in the cold, gray light of morning in a downtown loft with inescapable views of the vacuum left by the twin towers, *The Mercy Seat* really occurs in one of those feverish nights of the soul in which men and women lock in vicious sexual combat, as in Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” ?Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

“[A] powerful drama . . . LaBute shows a true master's hand in gliding us amid the shoals and reefs of a mined relationship.” ?Donald Lyons, *New York Post*

“Uncomfortable yet fascinating . . . *The Mercy Seat* makes for provocative theater” ?sharp, compelling and more than a little chilling.”

“LaBute's intriguing . . . new play . . . is most compelling when it is daring to look into [a] character's heart to explore the way self-interest, given the opportunity, can swamp all our nobler instincts.” ?Charles Isherwood, *Variety*

“In *The Mercy Seat* . . . LaBute has given us his most compelling portrait of male inner turmoil.” ?Brendan Lemon, *Financial Times*

“LaBute [is] the dark shining star of stage and film morality.” ?Linda Winer, *Newsday*

“Sharply funny and incisive *Seat* is not a response to September 11, but a response to the response to September 11--an emotionally jarring consideration of the self-serving exploitation of tragedy for personal gain . . . Perhaps it's time we stop thinking of LaBute as a mere provocateur, a label that condescends to an artist of grand ambition and a nimble facility with language. With this gripping . . . new drama, he probes deeper than he ever has before.” ?Jason Zinoman, *TimeOut New York*

“A nihilistic yet brutally honest work . . . As complex and unfathomable as human motivations . . . *The Mercy Seat* is haunting.” ?David A. Rosenberg, *Backstage*

“LaBute risks offending contemporary sensibilities by using a historic tragedy as his turning point for a drama regarding a morally empty American . . . [*The Mercy Seat* is] controversial and compelling.” ?Michael Sommers, *The Star-Ledger*

“LaBute . . . is holding up a pitiless mirror to ourselves. We may not like what we see, but we can't deny that--if only in some dark corner of our soul--it is there.” ?Jacques le Sourd, *The Journal News*

About the Author

**Neil LaBute** is currently at work on the film adaptation of his play *The Shape of Things*.

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### **Characters**

**BEN HARCOURT** male, thirties

**ABBY PRESCOTT** female, forties

### **Setting**

New York City, not long ago

**NOTE:** A / denotes a suggested point of overlap between that line and the next actor's line.

Silence. Darkness.

A spacious loft apartment, well appointed. Doors leading off in several directions, suggesting a hallway to bedrooms and a bathroom or two. A stainless-steel kitchen, visible. Three large arched windows display a view of other buildings across the street. A kind of amber haze in the air.

This is a large sitting room with lovely couches and chairs. Bookshelves heaped high. Framed pictures. A television plays quietly in one corner. A layer of white dust on everything. Absolutely everything.

**BEN**, maybe thirty-three, sits pressed into the corner of one loveseat, staring straight ahead. A cell phone rests in one hand. It rings and rings.

After a long moment, the front door opens and a woman of about forty-five enters, also covered in dust and carrying several plastic bags. This is **ABBY**. She sees **BEN** as she removes an Hermès scarf from around her mouth, but she says nothing, continuing on to the kitchen. She takes off her coat and hat, then begins putting groceries away. When she can't stand it any longer, she walks over and takes the phone out of his hand and pushes a button. The ringing stops and she returns the phone to **BEN**. White clouds of dust follow her every move.

**ABBY** Save it.

**BEN** Hmm?

**ABBY** The phone. I turned it off to save it.

**BEN** That's okay.

**ABBY** I know it's okay, I know that. That's why I did it, because it's okay.

**BEN** Right. / Sure.

**ABBY** If you're not going to use it, then you should keep it off. / Save the battery.

**BEN** Uh-huh.

**ABBY** Plus the sound . . . drives me crazy. You know?

**BEN** Sorry . . . I didn't hear it.

**ABBY** Oh. *(She laughs.)* Okay . . . *(She stands over BEN until he finally looks up. Doesn't say anything else. She shakes her head and moves back to the kitchen.)* So . . . did you call?

**BEN** Huh?

**ABBY** "Call." I asked if you called.

**BEN** Ummm . . .

**ABBY** Of course you didn't. I know you didn't. **BEN** No, I didn't.

**ABBY** I knew it.

**BEN** Didn't answer it, either . . .

**ABBY** And are you planning to?

**BEN** I'm . . . I was, ahh . . . I was going to, maybe . . .

**ABBY** Yeah, that's pretty much where I left you. At the "babbling- to-myself" stage.

**BEN** I keep trying to.

**ABBY** Really?

**BEN** Yeah, but . . . but I'm . . .

**ABBY** Huh. *(She walks over again, billowing little clouds of white behind her. She takes back the phone for a moment, turns it on. Waits. Checks something as it begins ringing almost immediately.)* The last number you called was the Chinese place. Yesterday morning, for your shirts. I called, actually . . . remember?

**BEN** Yes. / I do.

**ABBY** Good. / Just so we're on the same page here . . . *(Looking at the display.)* It's for you. *(She sighs and turns the phone off in mid-ring. Hands it back.)*

**BEN** What I meant was . . . in my head, I was trying to . . . Several times. But I . . .

**ABBY** You couldn't. Right? / Just couldn't do it . . .

**BEN** No. I guess not. / No.

**ABBY** So, you want to, then? You haven't, but you want to . . .

**BEN** I dunno. I guess so . . . shouldn't I?

**ABBY** Oh, I can't help you with this one. Uh-uh . . . *This* one's all up to you.

**BEN** I know, I know . . . I just . . .

**ABBY** You should, of course. Call.

**BEN** Yes.

**ABBY** I mean, it's the decent thing to do.

**BEN** That's true . . .

**ABBY** It's the only thing to do, really . . .

**BEN** Uh-huh.

**ABBY** You know that, right?

**BEN** Yeah. (*Beat.*) Yeah, I do . . . Yes.

**ABBY** Yeah. (*Beat.*) Funny thing is, you were going to, anyway. I mean, for a *different* reason, obviously, but that's what you said.

**BEN** I did. / I did say that . . .

**ABBY** That's what you told me. / You said, I'm going to call her. I am. Right now." You were sitting on that couch, the same spot, really, and I was kneeling between your legs when you told me that. Five minutes before it happened. Like, a minute before all this . . . happened. (*Beat.*) Of course, we've heard about that one a few times now, haven't we? The BIG CALL.

**BEN** Yes.

**ABBY** Yeah, just a couple. / "I'm going to do it, I promise. This time I mean it." (*Beat.*) I even threw in a little incentive, didn't I? / Down there on my hands and knees . . .

**BEN** I'm aware of that. / Yes. / I did say it, I know . . . and I should. Call.

**ABBY** But that doesn't really mean shit. Does it?

**BEN** I guess not.

**ABBY** That's what I like about you, Ben. Your absolutely rigid commitment to being a flake.

**BEN** Thanks.

**ABBY** You're welcome.

**BEN** A lot.

**ABBY** You're welcome a lot. (*Beat.*) You want a snack? It's cheese.

**BEN** No thanks, but . . . no.

**ABBY** I'm gonna have some. I'm going to have some cheese. **BEN** That's all right.

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### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Nicole Oneal:**

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#### **Edna Pilon:**

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#### **Teressa Fernandez:**

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#### **Charles Shin:**

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