

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

THIS IS HOW IT GOES

a Play

by Neil LaBute

Premiere on 9 September, 2010

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 6, 7 and 8 September

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours

Matinee Performances at 11.00 Hours on Tuesday and

Fridays beginning 14 September

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **THIS IS HOW IT GOES** by Neil LaBute on 9 September, 2010, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 6, 7 and 8 September. Bookings for this new American play have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be ordered from Faber and Faber Limited, 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AU, England. Their website is www.faber.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Neil LaBute is one of America's most successful new authors, having received acclaim both as a playwright and screenwriter. He has a reputation for exposing what society prefers to suppress and for saying what is usually considered unspeakable. He was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1963. After graduating from the University of Kansas, he studied theatre at New York University and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Perhaps his most famous play to date is **FAT PIG**, which has been produced around the world. Other works for the stage include: **THE SHAPE OF THINGS**, **THE DISTANCE FROM HERE**, **THE MERCY SEAT**, **SOME GIRL(S)**, **AUTOBAHN** and **THIS IS HOW IT GOES**. He made his first major mark in the film world (where he has functioned both as a writer and director) with **IN THE COMPANY OF MEN** in 1997. **YOUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS** followed soon. Other films include: **NURSE BETTY**, **TUMBLE** and **POSSESSION**. He has also brought to the screen an adaptation of his play **THE SHAPE OF THINGS**, starring Paul Rudd and Rachael Weisz. Neil LaBute is the recipient of numerous awards for his plays and films.

ABOUT THE PLAY: Belinda and Cody are a typical young American couple: teenage sweethearts, children, nice home, etc. Typical...except Cody is black and Belinda is white. All appears to be going well until she becomes attracted to a former classmate who is also white. He (identified only as the "Man" in the play) has just returned to the small American town where he grew up. He is looking for a place to live. Belinda and Cody offer him the apartment over their garage. He moves in because he wants to be near Belinda, his secret love in high school. The rest of the play has some unexpected surprises. What starts out as a light-hearted romantic comedy turns into a drama about race, love and truth as the Man and Belinda's African-American husband battle for her affections. The Man is not only a character in the play. He is also the narrator and guide throughout the play's action. It soon becomes clear, however, that the story we are getting from him is not necessarily what really happened. Rather, it is his own very subjective version of the events based on deep-rooted racism and sexual fantasies.

The play opened in 2005, and has since been produced to great acclaim internationally. It is part comedy, part drama, and also a kind of "whodunit" in which the audience has to decide who is telling the truth. The author often shocks by having his characters speak the unspeakable, the politically incorrect. In this case the unspeakable pertains to white attitudes toward African-Americans. He makes it clear, however, that few people, black or white, are entirely good or bad. The real message is that in America today racism is still just below the surface.

"...as suspenseful as a psycho-thriller and as entertaining as a boulevard comedy."
New York Post

Summary of Neil LaBute's

THIS IS HOW IT GOES

Setting: Various locations in a small American town

Time: The present

A MALL

A young man in his late twenties is standing in a mall in front of a department store. (He is referred to only as the "Man" in the play.) He speaks directly to the audience. "Okay," he says. "This is how it goes. I mean went. This is how it all played out." From his opening remarks we understand that he is going to tell us a story and function as our guide through the play. As it turns out, he will also play one of the characters and, at times, comment on the action. The Man admits that he is insecure about how to start the story and keep it going. He could therefore end up being "an unreliable narrator", he says.

He begins his story by having a pretty young woman appear and take a seat on a bench near him. It is Belinda, whom he has not seen or spoken to since their graduation from high school. The Man approaches her and says hello. She hardly remembers him. He points out that they once had a movie date. He makes some jokes to relax her. It works. She remembers that he was something of a comedian in high school.

Belinda leaves to pick up a key she is having made somewhere in the mall. She promises to come back, however, and continue their talk. In her absence, the Man tells us that she was his secret love in high school. He has apparently never stopped thinking about her since then.

Belinda returns with the key. It is for the newly decorated apartment over the garage of her house, she explains. They catch up on the years that have passed since high school. After graduation he left for the big city. She stayed in the small town. Her plans to become a teacher were forgotten after she got married and had two children. The marriage, it appears, is not a happy one. The Man is an ex-lawyer, divorced, and has just returned to the town where he grew up. During their conversation, it becomes clear that the Man would like a closer relationship with Belinda and that she is not entirely against it. When she hears that he is looking for a place to live, she offers him the vacant apartment above her garage. This, of course, suits him perfectly. He is stunned, however, when she tells him that her husband is Cody Phipps, the African-American who was the only black student in their high school. Before parting, they agree to meet at one-third the next day at another mall in town.

Alone now, the Man expresses to us his shock over Belinda's marriage to Cody Phipps. He reluctantly admits that Cody was popular, good-looking and a great runner and football player in high school. Instead of continuing to describe Cody, however, the Man wants to show us Cody in action in the next scene.

A RESTAURANT

The Man walks into the restaurant and sits at a table. Cody and Belinda join him. They are meeting to discuss the terms for renting the garage apartment. Cody sees that the Man looks different from when they were in high school. "You're not so fat, right?" Cody says. The Man laughs, agreeing with Cody, but Belinda is embarrassed by her husband's comment. "What's the matter with the truth?", Cody asks her. He boasts that he is not just rich, but "stinking" rich, having inherited his father's successful business. Cody wants to order drinks and gets angry when he cannot get the attention of a waitress. He is certain that she is ignoring him because he is black. When Belinda suggests that the waitress simply did not see him, Cody turns his anger on her. After they all try once more to get the attention of the waitress, the Man goes to fetch the drinks himself.

While waiting for the drinks, the Man asks us if we, too, noticed how "pissed off" Cody was. He recounts how Cody in the past (just like with the waitress a few moments ago) accused others of racism when he did not get what he wanted.

After collecting the drinks, the Man moves back to the table where Cody and Belinda are sitting. Cody asks the Man why he returned to live in his hometown. The Man answers that he missed the place and plans to become a writer. Besides that, he likes returning to his "roots". When he jokingly suggests that Cody should move back to his roots (Africa), Cody is insulted. He is very pleased, however, to hear that the Man still has the baseball card Cody gave him in high school in exchange for a favor. Cody would love to have the card back because it has a picture of Jackie Robinson, the famous black baseball player, on it. The card is now very valuable because most of the originals were destroyed by white people who were prejudiced against the successful black athlete. After agreeing that the Man should have a look at the apartment before moving in, Cody and Belinda leave the restaurant and the Man addresses the audience. He tells us that he will not be in the next scene, but that we should pay close attention because it is very important to the rest of the story. It will show, he says, "how Belinda ends up with the black guy...eye, I mean

'black eye!'" After laughing over what he calls his Freudian slip, the new scene begins.

CODY AND BELINDA'S LIVING ROOM

Belinda enters and sits on the couch. She has a magazine and a diet coke with her. Cody comes in. He is irritated that she is relaxing in the living room. He criticizes her for putting their two-year-old son down for a nap so early in the morning. She believes the boy should be allowed to sleep when he is tired, but Cody claims she is just lazy and wants to do nothing the rest of the day. He insists that parents should decide when their children do things, not vice versa. "And when was the last time you took part in that?", she asks him. "Don't start that crap...I work," he answers. He says he needs a wife who does not sit around all day drinking coke like a sixteen-year-old. She replies that she wishes she were sixteen because that was a year before she met him. Belinda realizes from Cody's reaction that she should not have said that, but she cannot stop. She says that he treats her like hired help and that she cannot endure the tension between them. "...you're so paranoid, so worried about everybody giving you shit, or disrespecting you or I don't know what," she says. She points out that life is not about being black or white, but about being a decent person. He is not that kind of person, she says. Cody tenses up, then advances toward her. "You're getting real cute with your mouth lately," he says. He blames the Man (now living over their garage) for putting such ideas in her head. Cody hits Belinda in the stomach. She falls to the floor. He reaches down and hits her in the face. Then Cody exits.

The Man appears and talks to the audience. He admits that the previous scene, showing how Belinda got the black eye from Cody, "was a bit much". He also admits that it might not have happened exactly that way. "Actually," he says, "I think it's how I want it to be...so I can jump in there, save her or whatever." Therefore, to be fair, he thinks he should show us another version of the scene, the one that Belinda described to him. We now realize that the Man (as he hinted at the beginning of the play) cannot be trusted as a story teller; and that what we are seeing is not necessarily the truth, but the Man's very subjective version of it. He is manipulating the story to make it serve his own emotional needs and prejudices. He leaves it to the audience to decide which version of the scene to believe, the previous one (his) or the next one (Belinda's).

The lights come up again on Cody and Belinda's living room. The scene begins exactly like the previous one: Belinda is sitting on the couch; Cody enters as before. What happens after that,

however, is completely different. This time Cody notices that Belinda has a black eye. She tells him that she banged it on something. He is very sympathetic. He kisses her gently near the eye. True to form, however, Cody expects that people will assume that he, a black man, went crazy and attacked his wife. Everything is harmonious until he announces that he has an appointment at the office at ten o'clock. Belinda is suspicious. He usually does not schedule meetings on a Friday, she tells him. "Yeah, I do," he replies. She insists he does not. This irritates Cody, so she tells him to go. "And tell her 'Hi' for me... whoever she is," Belinda adds. Her suspicion that he is seeing another woman angers Cody. He accuses her of having played around with other guys in high school. He dealt with that, he says, because he could not get past her good looks. Now he regrets having married her. She tells him that she can have his things packed in an hour if he wants to move out. Cody insists that he will not do that, despite the terrible state of their marriage. After he exits, Belinda starts to cry. The lights fade on her and come up on the Man who again addresses the audience.

"See what I mean?", the Man says. He is referring to the fact that the two versions of the scene are so different. He admits that he does not know the whole story, but he does know that there is some sort of trouble going on between Cody and Belinda. He is sure of this because he can hear them quarrelling. "I mean, it's a detached garage and all, but hey...voices carry," he says. The Man is eager to show us another scene now. The lights rise on a backyard set up for a picnic.

CODY AND BELINDA'S BACKYARD

Cody is at the grill and Belinda is setting the table. The Man enters. Cody notices that the Man and Belinda hug while greeting each other. He also notices that the Man has not brought along his collection of baseball cards as he promised to do. The Man apologizes for that. Cody goes into the house to get some vegetables for the picnic and to check on the two-year-old who is sleeping. During his absence, Belinda talks about why she married Cody. She says she wanted him from the first time she saw him. The Man asks her if it is true love. She answers that perhaps she just likes a nice, thick black penis. She looks away, embarrassed by what she has said. The Man stops for a moment, as if stunned by her words. He moves away from Belinda and addresses the audience.

The Man tells us that Belinda did not really say that, would never say such a thing. It is what he is thinking, he confesses, what he has had in his

head since the first time he heard about her and Cody, or anytime he sees a white girl with a black man. It is the old cliché kept alive in jokes, etc, concerning the greater size and potency of the black man's genitals. Feeling uncomfortable talking about the subject, the Man returns to Belinda at the picnic table.

She stands and goes to check the grill. As she turns the pieces of meat, she says she married Cody because she wanted to be noticed. And being married to a black man in a small town made her stand out. She also liked the fact that Cody was rich and a star athlete. But she was in love with him too, at the time. She thinks the main reason she married Cody was that she liked being different. She still does, she says. The Man assures Belinda that, for him, she always stood out. She is touched by his compliment.

When Cody returns, he wants to know why the Man stopped being a lawyer. The Man is reluctant to go into that. Cody presses him. When Belinda defends the Man's right to remain silent on the subject, Cody snaps at her aggressively. To relieve the tension, the Man decides to answer Cody's question. He reveals that he was fired from his position in the law firm for causing a nasty racial scene on an airplane. As a black woman was going to her seat in the back of the plane, she overheard him say, "Well, at least they still sit in the back of the bus." He insists that the comment was meant as a joke, but the woman was furious. He grabbed and shook her, telling her to stop acting like a chimpanzee. The woman became hysterical. He made the mistake of refusing to apologize. Three days later he was fired. A few weeks after that his wife left him. After hearing the Man's story, Cody orders him to move out of the apartment by the end of the month. Cody then exits. Belinda touches the Man's hand. She wants to know if he really meant what he said to the woman. "No... not now, not when I'm thinking about it. No," he answers.

As Belinda cleans up the picnic stuff and exits, the Man addresses the audience. He tells us that he and Belinda kissed recently. It happened one day while he was raking the lawn in the backyard. The Man picks up a rake in preparation for showing us how the kiss happened. He begins raking the lawn. Belinda appears with a glass of ice water. She smiles at him and gives him the glass. He drinks. They kiss passionately. When they stop, she exits. He watches her go. The Man now wants to show us a scene in which something happened that changed the whole situation

A NATURE RESERVE

Cody is doing some stretching exercises, trying to cool down after his run. The Man runs in out of breath. They are meeting to finalize a deal that they have apparently been talking about for some time. Cody has been seeing another woman on the side, and the Man and Belinda have been meeting to have sex. Both men are aware of each other's activity. They have agreed, therefore, that the Man will take over Belinda permanently in exchange for some cash from Cody. As part of the deal the Man has also agreed to give Cody the valuable baseball card with Jackie Robinson's picture on it. Before handing over the cash and card to each other, they argue about whose idea the trade-off was in the first place. Cody gives the Man an envelope full of cash. Judging from the amount, the Man thinks that Cody must really hate his wife, which Cody admits is indeed the case. When the Man recalls that Cody's mother humiliated his dad by leaving and returning to him repeatedly, Cody becomes violent, grabbing the Man by the collar. He demands that the man give him the baseball card and exits, concluding their deal.

The Man apologizes to the audience for letting things get out of hand in the previous scene. With a smile he again calls into question what he has just shown us. He assures us, however, that he and Cody did meet and that Cody gave him some cash. But the cash, he admits, might have been the deposit he gave Cody before moving into the apartment. He says we have to decide such things for ourselves because that makes it more fun. He is sure, however, that he moved out of the apartment and that Belinda is now living with him at his new place in town. Cody, as he expected, is telling everyone that Belinda left him because he is black. The Man thinks that he himself was not very sympathetic in the previous scene. So in the coming scene, the final one, he intends to be more sensitive. He will be in the scene, he says, to support Belinda.

A LAWYER'S OFFICE

Cody and Belinda are waiting for the lawyer to appear so they can settle their divorce. The Man enters and sits near Belinda. Cody checks his watch. He is impatient to finish their business and irritated that the lawyer is late for their appointment. They are in agreement that Belinda will receive a single payment from Cody and share custody of the children. He will keep the house and all of his business properties. The Man is confident that he and Belinda will manage by themselves. Cody doubts this. The important thing for Belinda is that she and the Man are going to be happy, something she and Cody never managed, she says. "That's bullshit, but

think what you want,” Cody replies. That is exactly what she intends to do, she tells him: think, feel and do whatever she wants without being afraid of his reaction. “Shut the hell up,” Cody says. When the Man comes to Belinda’s defense, Cody explodes in anger. After calming down, he says he is going to check on the lawyer. Before leaving the room, however, he smiles and asks the Man, “But if I ever wanna trade back, you’ll let me, right? Hmm?” The Man, unable to believe that Cody has asked him this question in front of Belinda, slowly nods. Cody smiles again and exits. Belinda looks at the Man and wants to know what Cody meant by that question. The Man panics, afraid to reveal to Belinda that Cody was referring to her and the cash the Man received to take her off Cody’s hands. Unable to answer Belinda’s question, he moves away from her and asks the audience to give him some help.

The Man wonders if he should tell Belinda the truth about the deal he and Cody made regarding her. “But the thing of it is,” he says, “the truth is just so damn...elusive, isn’t it? The second you start telling somebody what the truth is—how it goes—it all starts to slip away.” Besides that, he does not want to spoil the happiness he has found with Belinda. He also thinks he is justified in keeping the truth from her because of the kind of

person Cody is. “See,” he says, “Cody Phipps is a born nigger. Still is, to this day.” In addition to “nigger” the Man uses other words to describe Cody which are considered politically incorrect today. He goes so far as to suggest that it was a mistake bringing the blacks to America. The Man points out that he does not often talk this way because the good side of him, the “educated” side, knows that he should not. But because of his background these thoughts are always “near the surface, ready to bubble over”, he says.

The Man returns to his seat next to Belinda. She still wants to know what Cody meant by possibly trading something back. The Man is alarmed for a moment when she seems to know that Cody was referring to her. If she does know, it does not seem to matter. She accepts the Man’s explanation—that Cody was referring only to the Jackie Robinson card the Man gave him. She wants to know what Cody is giving the Man in exchange for the card. He tells her he is getting one of Cody’s baseball cards. Her only worry is that Cody could be forcing the Man to do something against his will. He assures her that everything is fine. She smiles at him. He reaches over and kisses her on the cheek. They look out at the audience, lost in their own thoughts.

Multiple Choice Exercise

1. The play takes place in (a. a small American town, b. a big city, c. a village in England).
2. The story of the play is told by a (a. young black man, b. young white man, c. woman in her 50s).
3. In high school Belinda was the Man’s (a. teacher, b. coach, c. secret love).
4. Cody is (a. Chinese, b. African-American, c. Turkish).
5. Cody believes the waitress does not serve him because (a. she is too busy, b. she does not see him, c. he is black).
6. The Man moves into Cody and Belinda’s (a. house, b. garage apartment, c. trailer).
7. Jackie Robinson was a famous black (a. football player, b. baseball player, c. basketball player).
8. The Man is no longer a lawyer because he (a. was fired, b. decided to become a doctor, c. disliked his profession).
9. The Man insulted (a. a pilot, b. a flight attendant, c. a black woman) on the airplane.
10. The Man and Cody make a deal whereby Belinda (a. stays with Cody, b. moves in with the Man, c. lives alone).

Answer Key:

1. a, 2. b, 3. c, 4. b, 5. c, 6. b, 7. b, 8. a, 9. c, 10. b

Interpretative Exercise

1. List some things that the Man says which are usually considered politically incorrect or racist today.
2. Do you think race is the problem in Cody and Belinda’s marriage or does the problem lie more in their character? Is it a combination of both?
3. The author points out the difficulty in knowing what the truth is, especially when love, sex and race are involved. Comment.
4. Give some examples of Cody’s discontent and anger in the play. Do you think it is justified or would you say it is just his racial paranoia?
5. Discuss how racism is revealed through jokes about black people and other ethnic groups.