‘Shape of Things’ brings sharp-edged change of pace

By Carl Hoover
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Baylor Theatre’s production of "The Shape of Things" provides a bracing reminder that, thankfully, there’s more to theater than musicals and marshmallows. Sometimes there’s nasty behavior and consequences that can instruct.

From the sexually frank dialogue that opens Neil LaBute’s four-person meditation on art and relationships to the reckless meanness of some characters, "The Shape of Things" goes into territory that’s been off limits in the past for Baylor, and director Stan Denman deserves a handshake for that.

The setup: Student security guard Adam (Jeff Wisnoski) meets graduate art student Evelyn (Cassie Bann-Kelty) as she’s about to deface a nude statue that’s had a fig leaf attached (all imagined, not seen, in the Bay-
lor production). She likes his somewhat soft innocence; he likes her sexual directness and forcefulness.

The relationship that grows from that meeting starts to change Adam. Under her prodding, he loses weight, begins to exercise, dresses more stylishly, switches to contact lenses, even has plastic surgery. Their relationship soon knocks off-kilter another relationship, that of Adam’s self-centered, handsome friend Philip (Jared Eaton) and his pretty fiancée Jenny (Lindsey Christian).

Infidelity follows, as do vicious personal attacks and betrayal before Evelyn’s alarming revelation toward play’s end of what it’s all about.

Denman gets strong performances from his cast, led by Bann-Kelty’s tightly focused, driven Evelyn and the play’s intimate, in-the-round staging in Theater 11. Wisnoski handles his changing role well, even if — a structural defect here — his softer character at the end seems less suited for any confrontation. Eaton’s macho, blustering Philip is a bit one-dimensional, but the role’s written that way.

Christian’s strong twang makes Jenny sound out of place with no other accents heard onstage, although that twang is mocked viciously by Evelyn in a crucial scene that signals to the audience something is very, very wrong. The wounding of Christian’s vulnerable Jenny, in fact, helps provide an emotional beacon for the audience to steer by.

Cautions for the play’s language and content are well deserved: There’s frequent vulgarity and implied sexual behavior, though both are handled judiciously. It’s "The Shape of Things" chewier issues of interpersonal behavior, decency and manipulation that should trigger post-play discussion.

A drama that raises the question of what art is about, "The Shape of Things" demonstrates what provocative art — art for grown-ups — can do.

"The Shape of Things" continues its run with performances at 7:30 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at Theater 11 in Baylor's Hoop-
der-Schaefar Fine Arts Center. Tickets cost $15, $10 for Baylor students, faculty and staff. Call 710-1865 for ticket availability.

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