



The Decisive Moment: The Making of “The Money Shot”

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by Pat Rogers

“The Money Shot” by Neil LaBute is not an undertaking for the timid. The satirical play pokes fun at Hollywood and its stars by skewering those who want its stardom most. The creative challenge stems from LaBute’s offbeat take on this desire when it turns desperate.

Notorious for creating unlikable characters and then setting them on stage amid cutting humor, LaBute’s “The Money Shot” tangles the question: “How far would you go to keep fame’s attention?” with another one: “Would you sexually betray your partner on film to get it?”

Raising the stakes further for Southampton Cultural Center guest director Joan M. Lyons was the fact the critics didn’t unanimously embrace the 2014 New York City debut of “The Money Shot.” In addition, as written by the playwright, the characters’ dramatic conflicts can come across to audiences as superficial situational laughs with little emotional resonance.

Joan M. Lyons decided to change all that.

For starters, she launched a campaign with her actors to delve deep into nuances of their characters to pull out something real. Rehearsals started weeks earlier than is typical for an East End play production and extra hours were spent peeling back the layers of character motivation, said Lyons in an interview. The search? Discover reactions that reveal the people behind the caustic humor and exchanges that were perhaps brushed over in the earlier production. Then, delve into the ways these conversations between characters can expose tender emotions along the way to an inevitable dramatic conclusion.

According to Lyons, the cast found what they were looking for. The result is a production that pairs LaBute’s acid-tongued characters careening from the glamorous to the decidedly raw with moments of poignancy that exposes each self-interested character as a vulnerable human being in the brief glimpses allowed by LaBute.

“It’s a challenge to do the script the justice it deserves,” said Lyons. “LaBute is generally unsympathetic to all his characters, that’s his style ... I wanted to direct the actors to show some of the more human, stripped down characteristics of their characters instead of pushing only the comedy, which can be relentless. I think we’ve definitely achieved that and rounded out the human side. It makes it more interesting and multi-dimensional.”



Joseph Marshall (as Steve) and Tamara Salkin (as Missy) in a scene from “The Money Shot” at The Southampton Cultural Center. Courtesy of Southampton Cultural Center.

For audiences, she said, the difference is especially noticeable in scenes where the actors draw on their work with the director to tone down the bragging, bravado and self-grandiosity to make it clear what’s really at stake: each of their romantic relationships and an ease to the desperation all four characters feel.

“I wanted to push,” said Lyons, “so during the course of the two-hour production the audience would not only see the absurd moments but would get a glimpse into how fragile these people are and what they’re really like behind their fears.”

To create nuances and transform the script to come closer to realism, Lyons encouraged the actors to do emotional homework so they could sink into the possibilities within the absurd and caustic moments of intensity. In one scene Steve (played by Joseph Marshall) stands above his wife Missy (played by Tamara Salkin) and body-shames her for eating a shrimp hors d’oeuvre, telling her that she is well on her way to a fat ass.

In the past, the scene has been played for laughs as Missy is young and pencil thin. In Lyons’s production, Steve’s barbs hang in the air with Missy clearly feeling his displeasure and control. In the scene, Steve stands over Missy while she’s seated on the floor near the food, creating a visual dynamic of domination-submission to match the verbal one unfolding.

“This is not fun,” said Lyons. “It’s chilling. I’m pushing this ominous quality and not playing it for laughs.”

In another scene, Karen (played by Bonnie Grice) confesses she’s afraid that she’s a fraud and is only playing a part in her own life. The scene is an intense one, said Lyons. In the past production, the scene and reactions were designed for humor and Karen’s comments portrayed as part of an actor’s penchant for a grab at the dramatic limelight in any situation. At the Southampton Cultural Center, Lyons takes the scene as an opportunity to reveal the vulnerability and fears that anyone might have that their life choices are disingenuous, as well as Karen’s true insecurity about her abilities, choices and worth as a human being.

To infuse the intensity Lyons believes the scene deserves, Karen stands apart from the others during her reveal. The lighting is designed to emphasize the intimacy of the intensely personal moment. The other characters’ reaction to her confession makes it clear that Karen’s words have landed, creating an emotional impact that reverberates throughout the room, said Lyons.

“I stopped all the action and allowed the moment to focus on her and how she really feels about her life,” said Lyons. “It lands with all the characters; especially with Steve. He feels it too. He [the character] is an actor and can really relate.”



Bonnie Grice, center, as Karen in one of the pivotal moments of “The Money Shot” at Southampton Cultural Center. Courtesy of Joan Lyons.

For Lyons, coaxing “The Money Shot” to roam into unexpected territory—stripping away some of the absurdity for a more minimal production—allowed the play to connect with personal challenges faced by all moving beyond Hollywood film stars clutching at fame and contemplating real sex on film to maintain it. It was this approach, she said, that makes the production stand apart from its New York City debut as presented by a team of Hamptons and Long Island creatives.

“The Money Shot” is Joan M. Lyons’s solo directorial debut. Lyons has a long history in performance and dance on the East End. She has directed previously in partnership with Michael Disher for Center Stage productions at Southampton Cultural Center.

“The Money Shot” stars Bonnie Grice, Joseph Marshall, Tamara Salkin and Kristin Whiting in the play’s Long Island premiere. Neil LaBute’s satirical play premiered at the MCC Theater at the Lucille Lortel Theater in New York in 2014.

BASIC FACTS: “The Money Shot” is performed January 19 to February 5, 2017 on Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. The show is not recommended for those under 17 due to mature subject matter and language. [Tickets](#) are \$22 for general admission and students under 21 with ID are \$12. The Southampton Cultural Center’s Levitas Center for the Arts is located at 25 Pond Ln, Southampton, NY 11968. www.scc-arts.org. Click [here](#) for event details.

The Decisive Moment is a new series that examines the creative process and the pinnacle moments that send creative projects, performance and art in a new direction.

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