

The Shape of Things

Neil LaBute first made a name for himself as a caustic commentator on male-female relationships in films like *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, unsettling little dramas that depicted the little cruelties people visit on each other in living their lives, but dramas, too, that made you think about your actions. After taking a breather with productions like the antic *Nurse Betty* and the intelligent romance *Possession*, the director seems to have come back home to his native ground in his new film *The Shape of Things* (based on his own play).

Here again the scale is small and the action limited: two college couples attracting and repelling, fencing and trying to find their way. On a California campus, budding artist Evelyn (Rachel Weisz) takes an interest in nerdy but nice Adam (Paul Rudd) when they meet cute in the local museum, where she is thinking of defacing a statue and he is supposedly guarding same. He is smitten with her, and she reciprocates, taking a special interest in making him over into a more stylish guy, urging him to lose weight and dress more modishly. Her hold on Adam discomfits his friends, fiances Jenny (Gretchen Mol) and Philip (Frederick Weller), whose own relationship hits a rough patch as they become more involved with the "new" Adam and his outspoken girl. Ultimately, Adam realizes that his make over is a sham and that succumbing to the mere "shape of things"--even if it brings him newfound confidence and vigor--can most cruelly disappoint.

The movie is set in an anodyne university atmosphere that could be anywhere; the actors have to carry this shell game off by themselves, and they basically do. I doubted immediately that Philip--the very snide Weller--would have Adam as a friend, much less Jenny as a steady, but I didn't doubt Mol's prim but sweet Jenny, who sees Adam changing and is drawn to him. Rachel Weisz, though British, pulls off an American midtone accent perfectly and embodies the edgy but attractive artistic type who can turn on a dime. Best of all is Paul Rudd as Adam, a completely believable schlub and overall decent guy who can't believe his good luck when Evelyn takes an interest in him. His ever-present innocence makes his fate the more crushing.

The Shape of Things might be called a thesis movie: the filmmaker presents a discreet number of personages representing several contending viewpoints, bounces them off one another, then asks the audience to reflect on the validity of those viewpoints. The thesis work raises questions through its characters--questions like "Does morality have a place in art?" or "How honest can you really be with a friend?" or "Can improvements on the surface of life mirror genuine inner changes?"--but doesn't answer them. LaBute poses these kinds of questions to us and does not answer them; he leaves them for us to argue about. That's what this movie is best for: to see with close friends, then repair to a coffee bar to argue about what it all means...

(*The film is rated "R" for language and sexuality.*)

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