

YOUR LETTERS

● I WOULD like, through your letters columns to state the following to the owners and management of Irish Ferries:

1. I have for many years been a faithful customer of your company.

2. I now refuse to support the operations of what are clearly little better than modern day slave ships.

3. I pledge therefore, that if you do not reinstate with proper union rate those of my fellow countrymen and countrywomen whom you have cruelly sacked, I will never use your ships again.

4. I hope that, for the sake of all Irish people, others will initiate their own personal boycott of the company you now so inappropriately call Irish Ferries.

Charles Hayes, East Ferry, Midleton, Co. Cork.

● THE about-turn on airbridges signals the powerlessness of the new Cork Airport Authority. Nothing has changed and Dublin are still in control. The DAA do not want Cork to be successful.

I suggest that the board of Cork Airport follow the example of Eddie Shaw who resigned from the Road Safety Council rather than remain in a position where his influence was zero. In that way they would be performing a service for the Cork area.

Sean McCarthy, Glenbowser View, Midleton, Co. Cork.

● ON November 11th last I was walking home alongside Merchants Quay Shopping Centre. Three boys aged between 14 and 16 ran by me in the opposite direction. As they passed, one of them punched me full force in the face. He hit me so hard that he fell over and hurt his leg, but he and one of the boys quickly ran off. I managed to hang on to the third boy but unfortunately, he got away before the police arrived.

What amazed me most about this incident was not the unprovoked punch in the mouth. It was the fact that it occurred at half five on a Friday afternoon, on a busy city centre street, crowded with people. And although many of these people saw it happen, and many more saw me struggle to hold on to the boy, not one person offered to help or asked if I was all right.

To all those who were on the street at the time, and anyone else reading this, I would ask you — next time you see someone in trouble, don't pretend you haven't noticed and walk away. Find it in yourself to try to help.

Name and address supplied

● WESTLIFE are holding concerts in Millstreet but all designated areas for wheelchairs are booked out. My daughter Miriam is wheelchair-bound but was unable to get a space at any of the concerts. This is because there are people using this area that are not wheelchair bound. I was hoping through your paper to put out an appeal for someone to give their space to the less fortunate.

Name and address supplied.

● If you can help, contact the Evening Echo on 021 4802162.

ROBERT O'SHEA talks to Neil LaBute about his play *Wrecks*

WHEN listing ten reasons why he prefers making plays to making movies in a newspaper article last year, Neil LaBute wrote that he found the theatre the place where he is most often challenged as an audience member.

Those who have seen his new one-man play *Wrecks* at the Everyman will be able to empathise with the sentiment.

LaBute presents the audience with a play that he says is influenced by the Irish storytelling tradition, but a neat swerve near the end of the monologue delivered by Ed Harris has been unsettling Cork audiences for the past week and a half now.

One morning last week, the American playwright, an imposing man in stature, most often photographed wearing untucked lumberjack shirts but on this occasion wearing a sporty Adidas polo neck, sat down with a cup of tea and explained himself:

"This play is a love story. It would be hard to argue that the guy (Harris) is not in love with his wife. Somebody else might say: 'Are you kidding me? He hated that woman.' I'd see that as a dark view because that is not what I put down on paper. People can say it's a dark view of love, but love is a funny thing. You can argue both sides of it and that's the fun part of it for me."

Wrecks takes the form of a eulogy for his wife that the character played by Harris would give if he could. Why he cannot is revealed one hour and ten minutes into a one-hour-and-15-minute play. What seems to be a simple and un sentimental tale of one man's grief is then turned on its head. (For those who won't get to see the play and want to know what the twist is, read a story called Maraschino in LaBute's book of short fiction *Seconds of Pleasure*.)

"It makes good drama to have people do or say unexpected things, things that unnerve you a little," said LaBute. "I'm interested in that as an audience member, so I tend to do that as a writer: I don't ever set out wanting it to end badly. I want it to end truthfully."

"A lot of my stories end in a way that the audience may not want them to end. I think we have been trained to want certain things to happen. Sometimes people want things to be simplified on the stage and to tie the package up and when you leave a big mess in their laps they start thinking: 'Why didn't...?' 'How come...?' That's not my problem. Just because that is the way stories ended when you read them as a kid doesn't mean I have to do it. If you like the other way you can go almost anywhere else to find it. Don't be unhappy when I take you somewhere you hadn't expected."

"The idea that you can show something bad and the end result can be good is hard for some people to accept in drama, and also in life."

The shocking aspects of his work have come at some personal cost in his own life.

LaBute, who is 42, joined the Church of Latter-Day Saints while attending Brigham Young University in Utah. He had a relatively long relationship with the religion but ran into some trouble with a play he wrote called *Bash* five years ago and "butted heads" with the Church on what you can write and still be a Mormon. He was subsequently disfellowshipped and in the last year resigned his membership.

A writer with the capacity to shock



WRECKS WRITER: Neil LaBute

"Though I still have leanings and affections for the church, I'm no longer on the books. I wasn't trying to break the rules with my writing but ultimately they make those decisions and I understood their choice. I felt more strongly about the work than the religion and now I see we're not compatible."

Few of LaBute's scripts withhold the capacity to shock. Does he look for a gasp when he sits down to write?

"If I was looking for a gasp then that would be something I'd need look into, it might be a psychological defect, that I require people to react that way. I try to take people to some new place: to tell a story as old as this (*Wrecks* has a debt to Greek drama) and think: 'How can I bring a fresh spin to it?' There's a tricky quality to this; can I do that — bring them on a journey that takes them one way and then directs them to another side of it? That's fun to do. But if you went back next week I'd want the experience to still be rich and not: 'Now that I know, there's not much too it'. That would be a bit of a parlour game rather than a piece of theatre."

"Though this is not to deny that a gasp or two in the right place is not nice; it's always good, on stage and oof. But I don't want that to be something I'm remembered for; I don't want it chiselled on to the granite: 'He made me gasp.'"

A number of critics have suggested that the play's axis is a crude and empty revelation, no more than a gimmick to shock the audience.

"The play is a kind of confession that Ed's character wishes somebody could understand. I believe he believes what he did was OK and for me he makes a fairly compelling case. You can remove one page of that story and change the whole play and everything goes back to normal. Why does everything change when we switch the degree of something?"

"What's interesting to me is how little we know each other and when we do get a new piece of information does it change things and should it change things? Should it matter? I

the added concern about if it is going to make any money."

Yet it was on the screen where LaBute was first acclaimed as a writer of modern parables.

LaBute the director, who studied drama at the Royal Court Theatre in London (famed for its association with "angry young men" like John Osborne, David Hare and Edward Bond), carved out his reputation as an edgy filmmaker with a discomforting voice in his first two movies, *In The Company Of Men* and *Our Friends And Neighbours*. Both are indictments on relationships and intimacy and ooze resentment, revenge and self-hatred; it's a case of 'feel the pain'. *In The Company Of Men* ignited enough controversy to be variously labelled "misogynistic" and "profoundly feminist in its outlook".

Nurse Betty, *Possession* and *The Shape Of Things* (which has possibly the cruelest twist in a movie this side of the millennium) followed, and although none was a spectacular commercial success, they all found their audience.

LaBute is currently editing a remake of the cult British horror film *The Wicker Man*, starring Nicolas Cage, which was shot during the summer.

On stage, there are plans to bring his successful Broadway play from last year *Fat Pig* to the West End and next up in New York is a play with the intriguing title *Swallowing Bicycles*.

But he hopes that *Wrecks* will see life after the Everyman.

"Ed has done a great job with what I've seen so far. He's a compelling person to watch. The one-man show is more of a contact show and the actor has to use the audience much more and make that connection with them. We were worried about that with the Everyman because of the size of the place: I prefer places where you are right up against the audience and can look them in the faces. It is really hard to make that eye-contact with the audience but watching Ed up there it sure feels like he is making it."

"What is satisfying for me is to stand behind that audience, in the back there (the author skulked behind the audience on the night of the preview) and watch their reaction. Most people won't come up to you afterwards and say: 'I really didn't like it and I wanted you to know that.' They'll say it to their friends maybe..."

"The ones who do come up will say: 'Thanks. I liked it,' whatever, but in the moment when they're watching, if they're watching, and following the story, you can see in that moment that the audience was with him, and that's the trick, the pot of gold."

"You go on a journey with this narrator, and this actor, who you may know from Hollywood, has been telling this story and made you smile — that's a charming thing — but by the end your view of him has changed."

"Can you go on that journey and still be open to the notion: 'Well, how do I feel about that?' 'If this had been someone I had known and spent Christmases with but I found out this secret, should it change everything?' Ultimately, I think it's about the lie itself — that they've been deceived."

Whether they feel deceived or aggrieved by where he has brought them, Cork audiences have certainly been talking about this play.

With Neil LaBute, you wouldn't expect it to be any other way.

● *Wrecks* ends its run at the Everyman tomorrow. Call (021) 4501673.

don't know. I'm not saying I know the answer. It's about those questions, not: 'I have an answer and I'm going to show you.' That's preaching. It's: 'Here's an interesting thought and I'll leave it in your lap.'"

How does he think he would react himself?

The tea is stirred.

"I don't know. It challenges a lot of your beliefs. I'd like to think of it as a good or bad thing rather than judging them as a good or bad person because a lot of things go into making up what we are and we're not just good or bad."

"Even with extremes. Stalin: he had a lot of bad days; he came dangerously close to being a bad guy probably, but were there good days, were there days when he made somebody truly happy? Probably. Maybe not Stalin..."

He pauses to perhaps consider if he's digging a hole for himself, but then plunges in regardless.

"Hitler was a little cranky, but he probably had a few good laughs with people along the way. But it is easier to assign them as bad people. It's easier, but I'm not sure if it's completely true."

"That's the beauty of the theatre: you get to examine that stuff. You go in, you put away your own life and look at this guy's story — and we see where we are in relation to him. It's a great place to talk about ideas, unlike the box office, where you still have to connect with an audience but have