



# Writer Neil LaBute explores all kinds of monsters with Syfy's *Van Helsing*

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If you're familiar with writer/playwright Neil LaBute's work, then you're aware that he's scarily acute in penning devastating stories about the pain humans tend to inflict on one another. From the withering *In the Company of Men* to *The Shape of Things* and many more, there's a reason he's been labeled as a misanthrope because of his precision in capturing it so brutally. Which begs the question, how is it that LaBute is writing and executive-producing a series about vampires?

Perhaps it's because monsters in any form are fascinating to the writer, and Syfy's *Van Helsing* provides a narrative playground to explore what happens when bloodsuckers aren't the scariest things roaming the world.

In an exclusive interview, LaBute talks to Blastr about his choice to transition to the small screen, how he's crafted his own unique vampire mythology and what's going to keep Vanessa Van Helsing (Kelly Overton) motivated in this world.

**With a successful career writing for theater and film, as well as directing, what made you think TV showrunning might be an interesting path to follow?**

**Neil LaBute:** A lot what happens is opportunity, and sometimes you make that yourself, and other times it comes your way. This was certainly one of those that came my way. I was in the middle of directing an episode of *Hell on Wheels* when [executive producers] Mike [Frisley] and Chad [Oakes] first mentioned [*Van Helsing*]. I had directed a series, *Billy and Billie*, but that was like doing a film because I wrote and directed them myself. So I never had a sense of being a showrunner, in the traditional sense of having a writers' room, working with other people and overseeing something you weren't going to direct. And actually, I had adapted *Dracula* [for the stage] from Bram Stoker's novel years ago. I even had a female Van Helsing, albeit an older female in the part. When they told me what they were interested in doing with this, it sounded like something that would be a challenge and I had interest in. But in a greater sense, it would allow me to learn the [showrunning] job. There were a lot of plusses that said, "Why don't you give this a try?"

**Executive producing a series is a very different world, with writing done in a room with other writers and getting network notes that impact your vision. Has it been a difficult**

## **exercise adjusting?**

I'm pretty adaptable myself. I've gone back and forth as a writer in the theater having people direct my stuff, or I direct, so I'm used to the give and take. In this case, there is a lot of stepping forward and having a lot of trust in people you don't know. There are directors you don't necessarily know, and writers you are just meeting and asking to create together in a singular voice. It worried me, quite honestly, at first. It was too many variables I can't control, but then I started thinking as many times as I've done this, how many groups of people did I not actually know? You hire a DP, or producers come to you [with someone], or there's an editor you've never met before. So in the end, this wasn't that dissimilar to that. Like always, just hire well and you'll be in a great place.

**While vampires might seem like a stretch for you, *Van Helsing* also has plenty of post-apocalyptic human survivors that fit your dysfunctional wheelhouse. That's obviously by design?**

Absolutely. It was pretty important to us that vampires are only part of the problem. They're something else that can mess up your day, but humans are very capable of doing it themselves. (Laughs)

**Audiences are getting to watch a lot of those problems manifesting already amongst the human factions.**

Yes. We wanted a good social structure that could create its own drama for a lot of reasons. Economics means you don't have the money to keep throwing pyrotechnics and vampires at the screen so you have to have interpersonal problems between everybody. We found this [hospital] set that was very enclosed and forced these people to live together. We stumbled onto the

idea of perhaps having a serial killer in their midst. You keep the doors locked so that nobody can get inside, but suddenly you are locked inside with a killer who is thriving in this atmosphere. It's a hunting ground for a person like that.

But we also had to get ourselves out of that, and find stories that would logically take them away from the hospital for awhile. About halfway in the season, that hospital will no longer be a safe place of refuge so [the series] will become more of a road show.

***Van Helsing* has some different riffs on typical vampire mythology. What's been fun for you to run with?**

I was very fascinated by the hook that this woman (Vanessa) can turn vampires back to human. I thought it was a great revolving door for characters you think might end up being deceased when bitten, but it's not the end of the world for them. They may come back, so it left a lot of paths open to us. The euphoria of [vampires] turning human again is interesting. Also, it's the way we've kept looking at the world at large and what it's like for them to be vampires. We've taken away some of the classic things that have hung over that genre. Like the idea that vampires can live forever, we said it doesn't work for us. They can live for a long time but they should die as well so [Vanessa] becomes hugely valuable to everyone - both vampire and human. It's equal parts frightening and hopeful in that you don't know what she might be able to do in the end. We also treat the vampires like junkies. When they become vampires, they are so overcome by hunger that rational thought gets put aside. It was a more interesting thing than just making them monsters.

**Have you had to pull back on too many impulses to make major vampire changes?**

Along the way you feel a very strong pull to tick off some boxes from the genre so that people go, "It's a vampire show, so I'd like to see some blood spilled." You can't just say I'm doing a whole new thing and hope that everyone is going to get on board because a lot of people won't. They like their old-fashioned vampire shows. We're trying to deftly juggle the balls in a way that makes the old and the new comfortable next to each other.

**Has it been difficult to find the right balance of human monsters versus vampire monsters?**

You look at everything you've got and put it on the table. It's about making all the economic choices look like artistic choices, which is really the game. We've got a good cast and people who love the genre so they keep throwing blood at the scenes, and I'll keep the men and women fighting with each other, and hopefully somewhere in there, you'll create a show that make sense to a wide swath of watchers.

**We know Vanessa has a missing daughter, which is a very compelling motivation for her in this bleak world. Does that dominate the rest of the season?**

It certainly drives her throughout Season 1. There's no way around it. When she wakes up, it's the first thing she asks, and really all that she's interested in. When she landed in this hospital, she was by all accounts dead. She wasn't there to save anyone, and didn't realize she had these abilities, nor did she really want them with the expectations placed on her. All she wants to do is find her kid and it does drive her in various ways throughout the season. It also won't take long for people to think if mother has these abilities, the daughter must have some

variation of them as well. It becomes important to people farther down the line. I think as long as she has a daughter, and that she believes even to be alive - whether she knows it or not for sure - any good parent would drive to know the truth. Sometimes the truth, as bad as it can be, is better than the unknown. She will push until she has some answers.

Van Helsing airs Friday nights at 10p EST on Syfy and has been renewed for a second season.