

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Neil LaBute gives a twist to vampire lore with new SyFy series 'Van Helsing'

By Nathan Weinbender

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 28, 2016, 7 P.M.



Neil LaBute is best known for such blistering, controversial character studies as "In the Company of Men," "The Shape of Things" and "Fat Pig," which turn gender dynamics, sexual warfare and general bad manners into bruising dark comedy.

But the playwright and filmmaker's most recent project is nearly unrecognizable from his typical output – a supernatural action series inspired by the Dracula mythology.

The former Spokane Valley resident is the creator and showrunner of “Van Helsing,” which premiered last week on Syfy. It reimagines literature's most famous vampire hunter as a woman named Vanessa Helsing (Kelly Overton), who goes looking for her missing daughter in a post-apocalyptic world overrun by bloodsucking creatures.

“The key thing for us was to not just go with a lot of the lore that has surrounded vampires and vampire hunters from the past,” LaBute said during a recent phone interview. “We looked at what we already knew, from movies that we'd enjoyed and graphic novels and how they dealt with it, and then tried to turn that on its ear and sidestep it a little bit to make something that was completely its own.”

“Van Helsing” opens in 2019, three years following an event known as the Rising. Vanessa wakes from a coma in a Seattle hospital to discover that most of the country's population have transformed into bloodthirsty monsters known as feeders.

Not only is Vanessa immune to bodily harm – at one point, she takes a knife to the palm and watches as the wound immediately heals itself – but her blood also seems to turn vampires back into breathing, thinking humans. That wrinkle to the Dracula legend is an especially nifty dramatic loophole, LaBute admits.

“Even if they're turned into a vampire, we now have a thread that allows us to say, ‘Yes, but perhaps we can bring them back,’ ” LaBute said. “There is the opportunity to really cycle through a character, allow them to go from being a human to a vampire to back again.”

Van Helsing has been depicted countless times since the days of Bram Stoker, and the character has almost always been portrayed as a man (Laurence Olivier, Peter Cushing, Anthony Hopkins and Hugh Jackman have all taken a crack at the role). LaBute had previously produced a gender-swapped adaptation of Stoker's novel for the stage, which he says gave him an advantage as he was writing for Vanessa.

“When we began to create her, our interest was to certainly have a strong female, one who was definitely human,” LaBute said. “She’s a perfectly emotional creature, but she also has powers that have been awakened through being thrust into this world.”

Like Syfy’s Spokane-shot “Z Nation,” this series owes quite a bit to the success of “The Walking Dead”: Not only do the mobs of vampires in “Van Helsing” closely resemble zombies, but the notion of survivors getting picked off one by one also recalls the popular AMC series.

“You’re really trying to create something that fits within the world of Syfy,” LaBute said. “We wanted to create something that would give (fans) a lot of what they look for when they turn to a show like this, but to make the characters interesting and human enough that you really do care about their survival, not just serve up fodder for the mill by throwing in new characters all the time that you can just wipe out.”

LaBute has previously dabbled in genres outside of acerbic domestic comedies – his directorial credits the suburban thriller “Lakeview Terrace” and the cult horror oddity “The Wicker Man” – but he admits that action filmmaking in a serialized format is a new challenge for him.

“Most of this you learn by doing,” LaBute said. “The first day we were going to shoot vampires, I thought, ‘Oh, God, there are so many ways this could go bad.’ As soon as they start talking, or if one of them actually started driving a car, how am I going to feel about that? I mean, that’s just goofy. They were human at one point and they still maintain some of that, (but) the more they act like us, the less frightening they’ll be. It’s really the unknown we’re frightened of.”

“Sometimes I felt like it was the first day of school. But that’s kind of fun, to actually be in that place, to see if you can do what other people have done successfully.”

LaBute has been involved with the production of “Van Helsing” for the past 10 months – he says he’s still finalizing the editing and special effects for upcoming episodes. But during that time he made a couple of short films and opened a new play in New York, and he’s currently directing another play in Germany.

“I do keep busy, and I think that’s just because I like the idea of being busy,” LaBute said. “But I also work in a couple different mediums, and I always want to get back to theater, and so I force myself to find the time to do it. So I’ve got different things going, but I did invest a great deal of time and thought into making ‘Van Helsing’ something that hopefully people will want to put on their menu of television.”

‘Van Helsing’ airs Fridays at 10 p.m on SyFy.