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Play is reminder that real beauty is found on the inside not the outside

*By Diether Haenicke
July 22, 2009*

The other day I came home late and found my wife viewing the Miss USA contest on television.

I just happened to enter the room during the swimsuit part of the proceedings and lingered to watch for a few minutes. As the semi-anorexic women crossed the stage, twisting and turning their bodies for the best visual angles, it occurred to me that they were almost indistinguishable. They were all tall, all bore the same artificial, rehearsed camera smile and their body weight also seemed to follow a strict, prescribed norm. I could keep them apart only by hair color and the color of their swimsuits. When I learned the next morning that Miss Tennessee had won the Miss USA crown, I could not remember what she looked like.

Beauty contests have never interested me. In my younger years at Ohio State University, the chairman of the French department threw a famous party each year when the Miss America contest was on TV. I never attended.

Although all my adult life I have had a keen interest in women, my interest was always kindled after they opened their mouths. I find those most exciting who are bright, nice, interested, and have a sense of humor, and if they are easy on the eye -- I'll admit it -- so much the better.

But the shallowness that sometimes goes with just splendid looks and proper bust and hip measurements never does anything for me. Question my manhood, but that's how it works for me.

One need only stroll through a major art museum to realize that the ideal of female beauty vacillated enormously over the ages. Baroque painters, especially, depicted "plus-sized" women, and a good Rubens model shows love handles all over the place. But even Michelangelo's

sculptures are full-figured men and women, and the dance hall girls of Toulouse-Lautrec look zaftig and upholstered and do not seem to worry one bit about cellulite.

The writer Alexander McCall Smith has created an African heroine in his "No. 1 Detective Agency" series. Mma Ramotswe lives in Botswana and refers with pride to her rather overweight figure as "traditionally built" in the best African sense. And sure enough, she finds love and happiness with a Botswanan mechanic who knows how to cherish her build as much as her many other wonderful qualities.

But our age and culture are obsessed with thinness, and our choices are influenced by how things appear on the surface. Models for all kinds of apparel must be thin; running for public office means going on a diet; TV personalities and commentators are rated by their physical appearance; and office managers want thin and good-looking people at their reception desks to reflect the proper corporate image.

Now Neil LaBute has written a play about just this issue, called "The Fat Pig." I saw it with Joe Miller, a highly talented Western theater graduate, in the lead male role and Michelle Urbane as the fat woman.

The play is about the love story between an up-and-coming yuppie falling in love with an overweight librarian who defies the conventional norms of female beauty as touted by advertisements, TV and beauty contests. A witty, charming, and warm-hearted female casts a spell over an attractive young man who, the more he talks with her, begins to see beyond the cultural norms of beauty and instead develops a deeper appreciation for character, feeling, loyalty and spirit in his partner. While the personal relationship comes to full bloom in the couple's private lives, it is stressed the moment it meets the judgment of outsiders, professional peers, friends and office mates. The play shows how powerful any conventional norms are; how snide remarks, ridicule, and gossip can destroy a relationship that is tender, loving, witty, fulfilling and precious for both.

It is a moving play that provokes thought, discussion and reconsideration of one's own values. It is an eye-opener for most of us and a must-see for all.

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