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[Home](#) [Contents](#) [News](#) **A&E** [Classifieds](#) [Personi](#)

|  
[Archive](#)  
[From The Pulpit](#)  
[In Short](#)  
[Cover Story](#)  
[24-Seven+1](#)  
[The List](#)  
[Eateries](#)  
[Live This Week](#)  
[Film](#)  
[Astrology](#)  
[About Us](#)  
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[List Your Event](#)  
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**Pulp** > [April 17, 2003](#) > [Arts](#) > Theater Preview

## Bare Bones' Bash at Backward

Squirrel Hill boutique's final days showcase new stage company

### BASH: LATTERDAY PLAYS

By Neil Labute

Directed by Jeff Cordell

April 16-19, 23-26

Backward on Forward, Squirrel Hill

412.421.4117

By Robert Isenberg

Limited amount of money, max amount of impact," says Patrick Jordan, summarizing the credo of his new stage company, Bare Bones Productions, and its first no frills, high-gear show: *Bash*, by acclaimed playwright Neil Labute. Co-founded with actress Beth Hersey and director Jeff Cordell, Bare Bones boasts an impossibly thin budget, a grittily unconventional script and a performance space that makes the traditional black box theater look like Broadway: 25 seats, and discounts for ticketholders who don't mind standing in the back.

On the surface, Bare Bones and its debut are a delightful risk and a quixotic labor of love. The stage uses naturalistic lighting, including a single table lamp, and the set is sparsely decorated with a chair and a small table. The three one-acts are dominated by long, colloquial monologues and limited physical action; no song and dance, no lavishly painted flats. More importantly, though, Bare Bones may benchmark a new era in independent theater.

The idea was born last year when Hersey, then a senior drama student at the University of Pittsburgh, proposed Labute's monologue one-act, *Medea Redux*, as a student workshop under the direction of Cordell, a masters student in the same program. "I fell in love with the piece," Hersey recalls. Cordell shared her enthusiasm, but the play was rejected. "They said it was too dark and too hard for an undergraduate to do," she recounts. The theater department also cited the direction as unchallenging. "They were wondering where the direction was in monologue plays."

The criticisms weren't unfounded: *Medea Redux* features a young woman who confesses a taboo affair with her junior high school English teacher. Her language is clipped and clunky; her attraction to her teacher is innocent and unashamed. "There's nothing feel-good about this play," says Jordan.

One winter night, shortly before Christmas, Jordan and Hersey discussed over coffee the idea of producing the play on their own. Both are in their early 20s, and have recently graduated; both have performed in professional settings, including Dog & Pony Show, the Provoke Theater Project, and Starlight. But to build their own company from scratch was a distant dream. "I've been in that

conversation a million times," Jordan says. "But something about this really took off."

As they walked along the chilly streets of Squirrel Hill, they passed Backward on Forward, a struggling vintage clothing shop that doubles as a gallery and performance space mostly geared toward live music. Within two months, they had made arrangements to perform there. Their scheduling was timely: Despite a sparkling underground reputation, Backward on Forward will close its doors shortly after *Bash* graces its tiny stage. For larger companies, Backward would be a technical nightmare: no suspended lighting, no expansive dressing room and no significant sound system. But for the intrepid founders of Bare Bones, the space is the perfect experiment in intimacy.

"I'd be thrilled with 15 people a night," Jordan says. The budget is so small, he adds, that if half this many people buy tickets, Bare Bones will break even. "What we're after is a small group of people to witness this, because it's so raw, and because it's so intimate." Jordan is fond of the word "raw" when discussing Labute. The monologue he will perform, *Iphigenia in Orem*, runs at approximately 40 minutes and concerns a Mormon businessman's private talk with a prostitute. As Jordan and Hersey memorize page after page of text, they must also write their own press releases, design their own posters, and try to summon an audience through word of mouth.

"What we've found is this shit ain't easy," says Jordan, who juggles rehearsals, advertising and his day job as a server at Bruschetta's in South Side. "It's tough to do [publicity] while we're acting. If we could stop our real lives, things would be easy."

As the performance date approaches, what do they have to say about all these challenges -- the low-tech, the high-stress, the unpredictable audience that could make or break them? With no run crew and funding from their own pockets, what insight do these twentysomethings have to offer?

"Obviously," Hersey says, "we have to make it good."

*Closing night includes a performance by the Mood Swingers, and an exhibition of works by Corey LeChat runs through the performance dates.*

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[Top Of Page](#)



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