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## Arts & Entertainment

### Stage Review: Barebones gets to the meat of LaBute

Friday, April 18, 2003

By Christopher Rawson, Post-Gazette Drama Critic

It used to be said that when you heard thunder, it meant the gods were angry; though I recall some saying it meant the gods were bowling.

In this case, there's no question the thunder coming from up above is bowling, though it isn't the gods, just the humans at the Forward Lanes. But the gods must be angry, too.

How else could immortals react to the guilty goings-on so craftily revealed in the three hair-raising short plays that make up Neil LaBute's "bash: latterday plays"? Don't let that lower-case modesty fool you -- LaBute is after big game. Even as he gently unveils the bloody acts that can arise from mundane human passions, acts even motivated by deference to God, he also wonders whether there can possibly be a God to allow such behavior.

If you know LaBute, it is most likely for the movies he directed, such as "The Company of Men," "Possession" or "Nurse Betty" (he also wrote the first two). As that suggests, he has a striking voice. I've seen only two of his plays before, both out of town -- "bash" and his more subtly creepy comedy, "The Shape of Things." As far as I can recall, this is his Pittsburgh debut.

It is also the debut of Barebones Productions, a new theater group whose members have been active in college and semi-pro theater here for several years. The conditions for this dual debut are modest, just 50 chairs in a Squirrel Hill storeback (the geographic opposite of a storefront). But LaBute is fortunate in his first Pittsburgh interpreters:

#### 'Bash: Latterday Plays'

**WHERE:** Barebones Productions at Backward on Forward, 5840 Forward Ave., Squirrel Hill.

**WHEN:** Through April 26, Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m.

**TICKETS:** \$7-\$10; 412-915-2162.

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The quality of the plays comes through, and the four actors involved could hardly find better showcase roles.

God is very much an issue. In two of the three plays, members of the Church of Latter Day Saints -- Mormons -- specifically frame their behavior in relation to God. But it is the moral atmosphere that is pervasive: Although contemporary, the characters in these playlets live in a stern world reminiscent of both the vengeful Old Testament and the bloody tales spun by the ancient Greek playwrights.

The Greek parallels are primary, insisted on with a self-conscious intellect that is the least likable quality of "bash." The opening play is called "Iphigenia in Orem" and the third is "Medea Redux," making clear their mythic parallels. In between comes "A Gaggle of Saints," the account by a young Mormon couple of a Manhattan spree.

All three plays are monologues, two of them solo, the middle play a pair of simultaneous, overlapping monologues that remain oddly distinct.

"Iphigenia" has the most awkward set-up, in which a businessman from Orem, Utah, chooses a stranger in a Las Vegas hotel bar to hear his confession of guilt. Like Agamemnon in the Greek myth, he has made a conscious sacrifice to change his luck -- not to move an army against Troy, but to keep his job, in the process revenging himself on the uppity women invading the male bastion of business. He doesn't specifically invoke God, but it's clear he has a sense of his own special election. Of those God favors, much is expected.

The story is compelling, but the continual reference to the auditor, unseen off to one side, feels arbitrary. Patrick Jordan gives the man a smug mixture of vanity and insecurity, but he can't make us believe in that unseen presence. Surely it would be better if he looked directly at us, the audience, turning us into the accidental listener and directly entangling us in the moral quagmire of his confession.

"A Gaggle of Saints" presents two young adults describing a wonderful weekend trip to Manhattan with friends to attend a ball at the Plaza Hotel. They sit beside each other, each speaking to just half the audience -- another awkward production choice. But their stories are mesmerizing, the way they intertwine and make reference to each other without acknowledging each other's presence, dramatizing their self-centered obliviousness and moral vanity. Both have a maddening way of insisting on precise details without any sense of larger issues. Their stories diverge in one important respect. As Sue and the other girls took a late-night nap, John and two friends had a horrible adventure -- described by him with a bright, cheery frankness that's blood-chilling.

Jason Planitzer and Autumn Ayers are near-perfect in their evil innocence. John and Sue really do think their moral limitations and ignorance are strengths and that the universe has been arranged just for

the comfort of their kind. Both faces shine with a conviction of having been specially chosen. They are cute in a creepy, repellent way that is funny and terrifying at the same time.

In "Medea Redux," there's no uncertainty over who's talking to whom: A woman is making a statement to an unseen interrogator (located somewhere behind us), with a tape recorder in full view. Now 28, she describes an affair she had 15 years before with the junior high teacher who had taught her about the Greek myths. There was a child. Her mix of remembered innocence and matter-of-fact toughness is appealing -- we never doubt the accuracy of her story -- so its conclusion is shocking, though the title has warned us what's coming.

Beth Hersey is completely at home in her role -- tough, wistful, brusque and generally speaking in scale. At the end, Hersey seems to go over the top, but only, I think, because her character has developed a monomaniacal glint.

Finally, this angry woman imagines the victim of her revenge, tears streaming down, appealing to the silent heavens for some explanation, "Why me?" "There's never an answer," she says with grim satisfaction.

She is apparently the only one of these testifiers who is not Mormon. The others, of course, think they do know the answers, but you can see the spiritual expense their assurance has cost.

There's a lot of angst and anger packed into this 1 1/2 hours, but LaBute provides a sheen that gives a surreal tint to the dark humor. If there are any gods in LaBute's universe, they may not be angry after all -- sardonic laughter would be more appropriate.

Under Jeffrey Cordell's direction, the three plays follow each other with barely a pause. This is an assured production, notwithstanding its simplicity of presentation and that awkwardness in aiming the monologues in the first two plays. Barebones Productions is led by Hersey and Jordan; they've made a capable start.

■ ■ ■

This debut for Barebones is also a finale for Backward on Forward, a boutique dealing in arts, crafts and goods of recent vintage (1950s-70s). Its storeback performance space has been used primarily for music and film; this is its first play but also, unfortunately, its last, since the owner, Sarah Swan, is moving to the South Side, where she won't have room for performances.

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