The worst time to interview Meredith MacNeill is during a pandemic. She’s too covered up. MacNeill is a performer who does so much with her face, her voice, her body that, even on a regular day—when we couldn’t both die from sharing the same room—the fewer barriers between her and the audience, the better. She has, as her British colleagues kept telling me, “funny bones.”

Maybe that’s why “Send Nudes” is my favourite sketch from her popular CBC comedy, Baroness von Sketch Show (the series she co-executive produced, the one she co-wrote with three other women, and the one that concluded after its fifth and final season, last December). For almost the entire three minutes, MacNeill is in a tiny kitchen, contorting her limbs into various poses and states of undress—including supine and sushi-covered—in response to the text “send nudes.” Her initial reaction is a cascade of emotion wrapped in a feat of physicality: a coy smile reconfigures into a furrowed brow that explodes into bulging eyeballs before she literally ducks, as if the command had been lobbed at her head. “That seems,” she says before scrunching up her nose, “that seems early…” (Slight shrug) “Is that what you do now?” Even the way MacNeill pops out her dialogue—abrupt, emphatic—is enough to explain why Toronto Life named her the show’s “breakout star” and the New York Times designated her the “wild, physical one.”

But, right now, at 5 p.m. on August 17, 2020, she’s wearing a mask. We’re sitting in the spartan surroundings of a production office that feels like a makeshift interrogation room. It has a desk, a kitchenette, and a bathroom—the kind of place that’s probably just on the line of legal for a Toronto bachelor apartment. MacNeill is wearing loose pants in a Japanese print and a bright-yellow T-shirt that confesses, “I wish I could but I really don’t want to.” The mask is that disposable blue kind. And perhaps it’s the way her huge eyes arrest me, but I keep expecting the face covering to jump off her head. Similarly, her clothes don’t quite seem to sit still on her body, which is—You know rock climber Alex Honnold? The one with the stringy limbs and broad fingers, like a tree frog? The guy clearly born to free solo El Capitan? Well, MacNeill was born for physical comedy. There’s something delicately monkey-like about her: the way her legs and arms are kind of bowed, the way her arms never seem to really relax, the way her back is always a little bent. It’s something you can’t always spot in photos; you have to see it in person. Hers is a body made to move.

Which is why it’s weird that, in her follow-up to half a decade of Baroness, in her first co-starring role and her biggest role yet, MacNeill will be playing a cop. I mean, yes, she played one a few times on Baroness, but it was always satirical, always as a punchline. This is different—How does an instinctual performer like her fit into the conventional box of a police procedural? Hers is not a body meant to be strapped into a suit, yet there she is wearing one in Pretty Hard Cases, CBC and NBCUniversal’s new series co-starring Adrienne C. Moore. (Remember Black Cindy from Netflix’s Orange Is the New Black?) Pretty Hard Cases’ name and setup—Moore is the off-the-cuff detective, MacNeill the by-the-book one—suggest a comedy, but the show, which premiered in early February, is being sold as a drama. This identity crisis is perhaps unsurprising for a buddy-cop show that was forced to recalibrate not only around a pandemic but around protests to defund the police. A further indication of the show’s struggle to find the right tone was its abrupt name change, from Lady Dicks, days before the announcement of its premiere date. Pretty Hard Cases’ Instagram page cited concern from gender-rights advocates about the “derogatory use of those two words together.”

But it’s August, several months before all of this will go down, and MacNeill is having her own crisis. She just had her first read-through on Zoom. I ask her how she felt about it. “Terrified. Had diarrhea.” Her prop pistol sits near us, emasculated in a grey plastic bag. (“My East Coast carry-on,” says MacNeill, who was born in Nova Scotia.) She says she was trying really hard and it just wasn’t “happening.” (Pretty Hard Cases showrunners Tassie Cameron and Sherry White will later tell me that it was happening just fine.) I can see messages flooding her phone. Her friends are asking how it went. Cameron and White are texting too. MacNeill says that, if they fired her right now, she wouldn’t blame them.

This cycle of torment is nothing new. MacNeill was shocked when Cameron and White initially approached her to do Pretty Hard Cases. “Are you sure?” she kept asking, even though they tell me she was their “Platonic ideal” for the role of Sam Wazowski. MacNeill knew...
they wanted her to play their uptight A-type lady of the law because of what she could do on *Baroness*, but she wanted to make it clear that she could do that only under very particular circumstances.

As counterintuitive as it sounds, MacNeill can succeed only if she is allowed to fail. For instance, *The Walrus* terrifies her. To her, the magazine implies a level of expectation, and she’s loath to disappoint. “Tell her I’m not a good interview,” she told a publicist to relay back to me. “She probably would like to talk to another baroness.” This is a profile of Meredith MacNeill, so of course I spoke to another baroness (mostly to find out about MacNeill). When she heard that I had indeed talked to someone else, she was relieved. “Oh, that’s good,” she thought. “I don’t have to do it.” Thinking that gave her the freedom not to fall short. And that’s when she feels most comfortable—when there are no demands. Of course, there are always demands: demands on herself to be better, demands of a tradition that is almost entirely male. But MacNeill’s refusal to sit pretty, or still, in an industry that expects female performers to do both (especially if they are over forty) has helped turn her physical comedy into a feminist act.

Turns out, you don’t have to see MacNeill for her comedy to work. It’s also in how she uses her voice, the rhythm of it, the volume. Which means that, even if she’s literally squeezed into a box, she busts through. In the third episode of the final season of *Baroness*, her character is on a camping trip that includes her partner, Gary, and a woman named Jenna. They are filling a “bear box” with anything that might attract wildlife—including MacNeill’s character, who has her period. “Don’t sleep with Jenna when I’m in the box,” she tells Gary. Once the box is secured with her in it, Gary puts his right arm around Jenna as they go off on their hike. Now, all you hear are the waves and, occasionally, MacNeill’s disembodied voice from inside the container. “Gary, I mean it.” Pause. “If you sleep with Jenna, I’ll know.” And then, much lower, basically to herself, “I’ll be able to smell it. I’m like a God. Damn. Bear.”

How does MacNeill take this kind of internal discomfort and externalize it? How does she manifest our collective shudder and diffuse it through laughter? One thing I do know is that this talent could only ever belong to a woman, because only a woman can embody that kind of humiliation. And extinguish it. Men don’t have to.

As a girl, MacNeill’s days were “go out in the morning, come back at dinner-time,” but a lot of kids had that childhood. She tells me she thought she could fly when she was five, made wings out of the Saturday comics, jumped off her veranda, and landed in a bush at a weird angle, hurting her ankle, then thought, “Oh, I can’t fly.” I mean, that’s funny, but once again, it’s something that a lot of kids do. Maybe they don’t all pee their pants in grade three during a Highland Sword Dancing competition and then grind their hips to cover it up, but kids do a lot of weird stuff—it doesn’t turn them all into Lucille Ball. MacNeill wasn’t a particularly strong dancer and she wasn’t a particularly strong athlete. Things were also harder for her because she couldn’t quite communicate the way she wanted to. She doesn’t know if it was some kind of debilitating shyness, but something would happen on the way from her thoughts to her lips, and it never seemed to work out right. “I just felt like I was smarter than what was coming out of my mouth,” she says.

Dyslexia may also have had something to do with it. In grade two, MacNeill
worst, but like she wasn’t being judged of it. When her teacher took a while to get to her, going over the assignment in class, MacNeill thought she was saving her for last because her poem was so good. When it was finally her turn, the teacher asked if she had anything to add. “No,” MacNeill said, barely containing her excitement. She remembers the teacher then handing her back the poem, in which basically every word had been misspelled, and saying flatly, “I guess you’re just stupid then.”

MacNeill didn’t do community theatre because it made her feel smart—she did it because it didn’t make her feel stupid. “My love of it and wanting to pursue it wasn’t because I was, like, super talented,” she says. “I think, for so many different reasons, it made me feel good. It made me feel safe.” Bette Douglas and Beverly True, who both taught MacNeill drama in Nova Scotia, made her feel like that. Not like she was the best, or the

For women, writes Hennefeld, physical comedy is about “destroying a world that gives you a subservient place.”

wrote a poem as a class assignment. It was about leaves. She was proud as hell of it. When her teacher took a while to get to her, going over the assignment in class, MacNeill thought she was saving her for last because her poem was so good. When it was finally her turn, the teacher asked if she had anything to add. “No,” MacNeill said, barely containing her excitement. She remembers the teacher then handing her back the poem, in which basically every word had been misspelled, and saying flatly, “I guess you’re just stupid then.”

Douglas repeats this story a few times in the course of our conversation. It says everything you need to know that she defines her “most outstanding student” in a half-century of community theatre by the way she failed. Failure isn’t failure to Douglas; it’s determination.

But even Douglas and True couldn’t cure MacNeill of that stupid feeling. Instead, MacNeill found that, the less she had to say, the more comfortable she could be. She remembers a class at Dalhousie University, where she studied theatre, in which everyone was instructed to remain completely silent. “That hour and a half was complete and utter peace for me,” she says. Expressing herself corporeally felt secure, instinctive. There was no laborious translation involved, no words to write or to say—there was just being.

Maybe that’s why, as a kid, she was obsessed with slapstick comedian Carol Burnett. Maybe that’s why, of all the Muppets, blue tapir-nosed stunt-nut Gonzo was her guy. Maybe that’s why physical comedy didn’t seem outside her purview even though it was mostly performed by men. “Women have always had a marginal position in physical comedy because audiences often feel uncomfortable laughing at comical images of violence against female characters,” writes film scholar Maggie Hennefeld. Even if audiences don’t, Hollywood does. Men can be uncomfortable with women being loud, being ugly, being punchy, all of which subvert their notion of femininity as a form of contained domesticity. It’s worth noting that MacNeill’s recent work—This Hour Has 22 Minutes, Baroness, Pretty Hard Cases—has been largely chaperoned by on her way home. “I know I could’ve done the lead,” she told him. She was eight. Douglas repeats this story a few times in the course of our conversation. It says everything you need to know that she defines her “most outstanding student” in a half-century of community theatre by the way she failed. Failure isn’t failure to Douglas; it’s determination.

But even Douglas and True couldn’t cure MacNeill of that stupid feeling. Instead, MacNeill found that, the less she had to say, the more comfortable she could be. She remembers a class at Dalhousie University, where she studied theatre, in which everyone was instructed to remain completely silent. “That hour and a half was complete and utter peace for me,” she says. Expressing herself corporeally felt secure, instinctive. There was no laborious translation involved, no words to write or to say—there was just being.

Maybe that’s why, as a kid, she was obsessed with slapstick comedian Carol Burnett. Maybe that’s why, of all the Muppets, blue tapir-nosed stunt-nut Gonzo was her guy. Maybe that’s why physical comedy didn’t seem outside her purview even though it was mostly performed by men. “Women have always had a marginal position in physical comedy because audiences often feel uncomfortable laughing at comical images of violence against female characters,” writes film scholar Maggie Hennefeld. Even if audiences don’t, Hollywood does. Men can be uncomfortable with women being loud, being ugly, being punchy, all of which subvert their notion of femininity as a form of contained domesticity. It’s worth noting that MacNeill’s recent work—This Hour Has 22 Minutes, Baroness, Pretty Hard Cases—has been largely chaperoned by
women. According to Hennefeld, for women, physical comedy, especially slapstick, is about “destroying a world that gives you a subservient place.”

But, as silenced as MacNeill often felt, the plays she performed spoke for her. Particularly Shakespeare, chiefly his heroines. “These women had these voices,” she says. “And I might not have understood all the words, but I understood that they had a platform and they were angry or they were hurt or they were hilarious.” It was a Greek heroine who gave MacNeill back her voice, or at least the beginnings of it. At Dalhousie, she appeared in The Love of the Nightingale, a feminist adaptation of the ancient Greek story about the rape of Philomele. In the play, Philomele—as the corresponding character is named—has been assaulted by her brother in law, Tereus, and threatens to tell his wife. But, before Tereus can cut out her tongue to keep her quiet, Philomele gives a speech, and it was here that MacNeill decided to add something, a primal kind of retching howl she describes as “almost other.” It speaks to the moral complexity of theatre that an actor can be empowered by the disempowerment of their character. But, in a way, MacNeill was using the role of Philomele to do the same thing for herself: claiming power where she felt, for so long, that she had none.

Imagine a wild-eyed MacNeill, about twenty years younger than she is now, tearing across a stage in a dishevelled white bridal gown, a veil trailing behind her. Imagine her dizzyly vacillating between jugular-popping absurdity and a more subdued, vibrating surdity. Imagine her then puking and passing out. This approximates MacNeill’s graduate performance at London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). It was her version of Cindy Lou Tereus can cut out her tongue to keep her, according to the Chronicle Herald, no other Atlantic woman had been let into this British institution before her. RADA is the type of school that is populated by the kids of acting dynasties (the son of Sexy Beast actor James Fox was in MacNeill’s class) and turns out the likes of Anthony Hopkins. The three-year program cost $39,000 for the first year alone. To help cover the fee, friends and family set up a crowdfunding account at a local bank, something MacNeill struggled with for years. It wasn’t shame, exactly, but the overwhelming responsibility she felt to earn it. “Receiving that kind of love is really hard,” she tells me. “I had to make it worth their while.”

MacNeill’s tactic for succeeding was by trying not to. This was her thought process: “I’m going to fail every day. I’m going to push it to the point where people won’t be my friends. It will be so embarrassing, what I’m about to do.” Think of a runner testing out a bunch of different speeds, most of which will defeat them, in order to find the most extreme one that won’t. It’s a way of establishing your limit, or what MacNeill calls the line. “I needed to know the line. Because what I discovered is it’s that line...that’s interesting. When you’re right on it, that’s what’s captivating. For me, I couldn’t know what that line was until I got there, and I’d go past it.”

But what does that look like in practice? At RADA, it looked like MacNeill pushing her characters to such emotional extremes that her peers became uncomfortable. In other words, their discomfort would signal when she had gone too far. She uses an example from when she was in elementary school performing improv. She remembers everyone laughing at what she was doing. Then she picked her nose and the laughter stopped. She recalls thinking, “Went too far. Went too far.” She was only a kid, but the line was clear. At RADA, failure was more extravagant. MacNeill decided, for instance, to play Hamlet as a Southern man. She thought, Wouldn’t it be interesting if he was a cowboy? It wasn’t. Then she took Black Narcissus, the 1947 Powell and Pressburger film about a bunch of sexually frustrated nuns, and imagined it for a combat-training class. In the middle of the fight sequence, having retrofitted their costumes with Velcro, she and her foe tore off their habits and sparred in their briefs. “So that one didn’t work.”

In the final year at RADA, the school invites talent agents to watch the graduating class. MacNeill didn’t think anyone would be looking at her, so she did what she wanted. That’s how she landed on the idea of reimagining Brilliant Traces. In a sense, she was acting on instinct. That one worked. Or, at least, it made Rachel Freck, an agent and casting director, laugh. According to MacNeill, Freck then convinced the producer of a new sketch series to audition her. Somehow, MacNeill got the role. The show, Man Stroke Woman, aired in the UK from 2005 to 2007 and starred six comedians—three men, three women—who played recurring characters in vignettes that dissected the absurdity of life, relationships, and gender. One sketch—two wives sitting outside a fitting room, appraising their husbands as the men model Halloween costumes—was the kind of feminist flip that would later characterize Baroness.

“I’m shit in it,” MacNeill says. She’s not. Co-star Nicholas Burns recalls MacNeill often being cast as “the slightly outsider-type characters”—a clinging one-night stand, a painfully unfunny dinner date, a wedding guest in full bridal regalia. “She will go to places where you didn’t know there were places,” he tells me. “She’s completely unafraid.” In fact, she was afraid. She wasn’t a comedian. That wasn’t her training. When the series was picked up for season two, she tried to back out of some of the sketches. If nothing else, she knew how to cede space.

“I’m a big believer in collaborative work,” says MacNeill. “What’s electric about storytelling isn’t so much what’s happening to you, it’s what’s happening between the two people—the story that you’re creating together.” Her physical comedy—the way she is prone to making exaggerated expressions, speaking in hyperbole, invading various spaces—is steeped in this philosophy. It is, according to Simon McBurney, “part of her beauty.” McBurney is the co-founder of Complicite, a touring theatre company based
in the UK, where he directed MacNeill in 2004 and 2005. To him, her physicality implies “enormous generosity because she doesn’t self-censor.”

It also implies hospitality because MacNeill creates room for others, not just herself. “As well as giving out,” McBurney says, “there’s an invitation to come in.” Which is why she fit so seamlessly into Complicite, a company that recalled the community theatre she grew up in, where there was no judgment, failure was part of the process, and no one was exceptional—everyone mattered. It’s a way of working that is paradoxical to a star-centric industry like Hollywood: in a system made up of heroes, the entire production revolves around the individual. Complicite helped show MacNeill that physical comedy could not only be a salve for low self-esteem (it’s not about the self) but could also remove the burden from one person. It resists both individualism and the idea that any individual can be worthless. It confirms that everyone has their place.

The reason MacNeill is sitting opposite me in this production office right now is that she has a daughter. That’s what brought her back to Canada. MacNeill had a baby in 2010. A single mom in her mid-thirties, she had to leave England in the middle of her career only to start all over again, back home with her parents in Nova Scotia. I can’t imagine not feeling resentful of this—of the life I had worked so hard for suddenly being derailed. But the word MacNeill uses is “lucky.” She says she is lucky she had her daughter because it became clear what was important, lucky because it provided relief from herself, lucky because it was the reason she made the choices she made and is where she is now. MacNeill compares it to being a kid and climbing a tree, putting your foot down and instinctively knowing a branch will support you. “Having to get to the top of that tree was just like, I was just going to do it,” she says.

It helped that she had already appeared in an episode of the British sitcom Peep Show in 2005. She played Canadian Merry, an unstable, hyper, sparkly, energetic entrepreneur who impulsively gives away her pub to the show’s main characters and is reduced to a monotonous bed-rocking inpatient by the episode’s end. Before Baroness, this was one of the main roles MacNeill was known for. (A cult favourite, Peep Show ran for nine seasons.) Creators Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong actually wrote the part with her in mind. “I think we just felt, as you probably understand, she’s a one-off,” Bain tells me. “There’s no one really quite like her.” Peep Show is what the CBC associated her with when they approached her to write for This Hour Has 22 Minutes, in 2011. Creator Mary Walsh recognized MacNeill’s sense of humour, a feral power she associates with the “darker and wilder” energy of East Coast comedy. Of course, MacNeill being MacNeill, she felt entirely unqualified. But she was broke.

It was somewhere around this time that MacNeill had an epiphany. It was pretty simple, actually: all she had to do was treat comedy the way she had theatre—which is to say, as a space in which she could be uninhibited. She recalled the feminist play that had prompted her to make that guttural sound, the monologue she had reworked for graduation, her stage work at Complicite, where she had experimented freely. The genres aren’t so different in the end, if you think about it. Like tragedy, comedy can also be used to expose the truth. But that’s not how MacNeill had been approaching it. On Man Stroke Woman, in Peep Show, even on 22 Minutes, she had been working within the confines of other people’s stories, where there was no room for her to be honest—to explore, to fail, to be unjudged. The only way to do that was for the story to be hers.

Baroness was the product of that epiphany. MacNeill chose sketch because she knew the model from Man Stroke Woman. She knew she could be funny in stops and starts, she knew an all-female sketch show could be a novelty (England had a lot of them, Canada had none), and she knew that, by working with other female comedians, not only would she improve but the responsibility would be diffuse. She took the idea to Carolyn Taylor, with whom she had worked on 22 Minutes and who had all the connections MacNeill didn’t. Taylor brought on two fellow Second City alums: Jennifer Whalen and Aurora Browne. That meant all the baronesses were trained in comedy except MacNeill. Again, she was the oddity. “The only reason they probably had me around was I had the idea,” she says. “It wasn’t even that original.”

But it kind of was. It’s not that women hadn’t led sketch shows in Canada before, but an all-female comedy troupe had never been allowed to make something like Kids in the Hall. Not to mention that, in 2013, sketch comedy wasn’t particularly in vogue here, even if Amy Schumer seemed to be doing just fine in the US.

“There was this notion that you shouldn’t pitch sketch to the networks because they weren’t interested,” explains Whalen. But the timing seemed right. When Baroness premiered, in June 2016, #MeToo was proliferating both online and off. Even famous women were speaking out on social media. It was this changing climate that sold the show, which CBC shrewdly advertised online by releasing, piecemeal, zeitgeist-friendly sketches on sexism, ageism, and every other -ism. Baroness was a feminist protest comedy for a culture awash in feminist protest.

The first sketch to go viral, season one’s “Locker Room,” also happened to star MacNeill. In it, she plays a gym member who has just turned forty only to realize she suddenly feels comfortable strolling around naked. “Welcome to not giving a shit at the gym,” she is told. The three other baronesses—also nude—slow clap as MacNeill cracks her neck and bends over. Whalen remembers driving to her brother’s cottage while her husband updated her on the sketch’s mounting page views: 20,000—turn off, get coffee—50,000, then 60,000. And it didn’t stop upon their arrival. “People would be going for a swim, and they’d come back and they’d be like, ‘Oh my God, it’s 600,000,’” Whalen says. By the end of the weekend, it was nearing a million.

Baroness’s success is particularly notable when you consider that MacNeill had just learned how to write a sketch. While
the show would go on to have up to ten writers, it was just the four women at first. And, when MacNeill sat down to write at the same table as everyone else, she felt like she was back in that class with the leaf poem again. “That old feeling of—ughhh—that block,” she says. So she went off by herself. For each sketch, she would stand up and act out the character first—finding the walk, then the look, then the dialogue. By the time she got it all down, she was already more than halfway there. “The way I approached comedy was always the truth,” she says. “It was never about trying to be funny. It was, like, build a situation that you can’t get out of, it’s just so uncomfortable.”

That philosophy was there from the jump. When the Baroness team initially had to run through a preview of their material for CBC’s producers, MacNeill was left shadow-performing one of her sketches—a toned down, sped up, mimed version of what would air—so they would not be reading mere stage directions. What she pantomimed for execs was “Clean Pole,” the one where MacNeill plays a hygiene-obsessed bride at a pole dancing bachelorette. As the rap pumps in, she slides toward the pole on two wet wipes, pulls Purell out of her pants, pours it all over herself…you get the drift.

Mortification is the essence of MacNeill, which is why Baroness shows her at her most self-actualized. It is her insecurity made physical, her honesty worn on her body. It also helped that the people she was working with were older women who, says Whalen, had the freedom to “give no fucks.” Their only real concern was to punch up, to mock those with more power. (One sketch has a group of women engaging in performative social justice while ignoring a man in a wheelchair.) With them alone in charge, the lines were theirs to draw. “I kept waiting for the network or somebody to say, ‘Nope. Nope. Too far,’” says Whalen, showrunner on the last two seasons and a writer on Pretty Hard Cases, “but nobody did.” “Unfounded” was right on the line. That’s the rape-kit sketch, which MacNeill co-wrote, from season three. In it, she plays a cop who gets a daily follow-up call from a sexual-assault victim checking to see if her rape kit has been processed. The title comes from MacNeill’s cop throwing a dart at a board with a whole bunch of arbitrary answers on it—the joke being how infamously ineffectual the police are at processing assault claims. MacNeill got the idea from a Globe and Mail investigation (also titled “Unfounded”), which reported that one in five sexual assault cases are claimed by police to be baseless. She really pushed to have that sketch in. But, at some point after it was shot, she had a moment of uncertainty. MacNeill says she called one of the CBC producers and they had to talk her down.

While Baroness leaned hard on misogyny, MacNeill was particularly concerned about the sexual objectification of women. “Clean Pole” and “Send Nudes” were a couple of the many ways she tried to recalibrate how women’s bodies are seen. MacNeill was desperate to use her comedy to draw in the kind of guys she grew up with, to show them what it’s like to be a woman in their world, and to force them to watch that world get destroyed.

Join us at the tenth annual YWHISPER Gala as four speakers discuss the she-cession, how elevating women benefits society, and what needs to be done for a more equitable future.
Does Pretty Hard Cases cross the line? It’s a buddy-cop show in which MacNeill plays an edgy detective specializing in gangs and Adrienne C. Moore plays her more relaxed drugsquad colleague. They are both mid-career, apparently the best at what they do, but with opposing approaches. The show follows their relationship and how they navigate this new world in which cops are more widely loathed than lionized.

I’ll stop right here. My initial impulse, before seeing it, was to make clear how easy it would be for Pretty Hard Cases to get it wrong. The show could prove too glib, too politically correct, too any number of things that don’t capture the current realities of policing that are too front-of-mind for the audience to overlook. MacNeill is painfully aware of the stakes. When I texted to ask her how she felt about being in a cop show in the wake of Black Lives Matter and defund the police protests, she took the night to respond. “I feel like you imagine I would,” she wrote. MacNeill faces a very real, very consequential line. If she fails, it’s the kind where she may be slightly off the mark. It’s the kind where she may be on the wrong side of history.

The producers could have decided to pull the show. Pretty Hard Cases was announced last February, the latest wave of protests against police brutality began last May, and filming didn’t start until last September. Instead, they used the time to try to figure things out. In a passionate email to the cast after the protests kicked off, showrunners Tassie Cameron and Sherry White explained that they wanted to, in Moore’s words, “make the show that is reflective of what’s going on in this world, but more importantly, what we hope we’re going to get to, you know, in the future.” Within weeks of the demonstrations, they found that much of their script had become dated. They had to rethink the action sequences and what it now means to be a “badass.” They had to address that one of their leads is Black, one white. Racial tension became part of the dialogue, police brutality part of the storyline. “We believe it’s made the show deeper and more relevant,” Cameron says.

Part of why Cameron and White kept going with Pretty Hard Cases, they told me, is because of how much trust they have in MacNeill. If the first episode is any indication, that trust is well placed. Underneath the suit, MacNeill wears her generosity, her self-effacement, her discomfort in every scene. She is aware of the nuances of who she is and whom she is playing. As “Unfounded” demonstrated, MacNeill understands what is wrong with the police, just as she has shown, in viral moment after viral moment, that she knows what it means to be a white woman in our society. It reminds me of the Baroness sketch in which she plays a provocatively dressed cop who is allowed to get away with anything and ends up shooting her colleague in the arm, physicalizing the self-destruction of myopic authority. Whether Pretty Hard Cases knows how to find that line is almost beside the point. MacNeill does. As Moore, who holds the show together with her, explained it to me, “I can fall back and know that she’s going to catch me.”

SORAYA ROBERTS is a freelance writer and the culture editor of Pipe Wrench, a new bimonthly online magazine.