

ATREFORUM-THEATREFORUM REFORUM-THEATREFORUM-T

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL

THE COMPLETE SCRIPTS OF

HONOR MOLLOY'S

MADAME KILLER

LYDIA R. DIAMOND'S

VOYEURS DE VENUS

PLUS ARTICLES ON
OUT OF HAND THEATER
RUDE MECHANICALS
BIG DANCE THEATER
CIRCUS CONTRAPTION
SITI AND CHARLES MEE

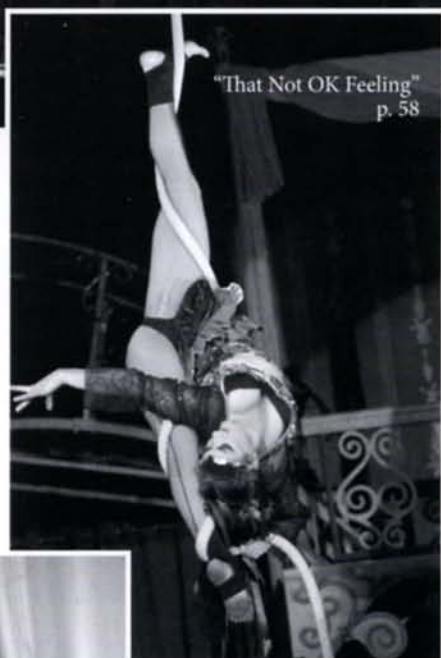
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Front Cover Photo: A nightmarish striptease in Lydia R. Diamond's *Voyeurs de Venus*.
Photo: Jeff Pines

Back Cover Photo: The aptly named Out of Hand Theater turns a schoolgirl crush into cartoonish violence.
Photo: Neil Anderson

January 30, 2005



RUDE MECHANICALS AND *GET YOUR WAR ON*

by Nicole Estvanik

It shouldn't surprise the rest of the United States that Austin, Texas, would produce a theatre company with the energy, spontaneity and intellectual curiosity of Rude Mechanicals.

For starters, Austin is a young and brainy city, with tens of thousands of inhabitants doing their studies at the University of Texas's largest campus. Politically, the city leans far left, in stark contrast with the rest of the state, and it's buzzing with art and performance, including a noted live music scene. But when Rude Mechs, as the 12-year-old collective is known, went on national tour for the first time with its 1999 adaptation of the Greil Marcus book *Lipstick Traces*—a free-wheeling, cerebral-yet-visceral take on punk culture through the centuries—its members were dismayed to hear the same refrain from coast to coast: Wow, there's theatre in Texas?

"It made us come home and go, damn! I know I make art, and I know other incredible artists here, but nobody else in the entire country does—we're totally isolated," remembers Lana Lesley, one of the group's five "copads," or coproducing artistic directors. That's a strange sensation for a group that uses its performance space as a hub for outreach and exchange, and that relies on no-boundaries collaboration among its growing community of artists to create unconventional plays that on some level are usually about building community.

So how did they respond? They visited the sculptor Donald Judd's museum in Marfa, Texas, bonded with some rodeo cowboys who happened to be in town, and from that trip created *El Paraiso* (2002), a play about what it means to be an artist in the Lone Star State. For the record, here's a few of the things it means to them: a stage covered in sand, a philosophical debate between James Dean and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and lots and lots of tequila.

With a budget that has just recently risen above \$200,000, Rude Mechs is not a rich company, but no longer is it one of the scrappy upstarts on the scene. Certainly, it has achieved a quality of life in Austin that it probably couldn't manage in a city such as New York. Since 1999 the group has managed its converted warehouse home, the Off Center, which contains a 100 seat theatre with a large playing area. It coproduces other artists' work, hosts festivals focusing on African American and female artists, and for eight years has run a summer camp in writing and performance for teenage girls. To fuel its own play development, Rude Mechs has been successful in scoring grants—most recently from the Creative Capital Foundation for its latest work-in-progress, *The Method Gun*, which will explore various acting

Photo 1: *Get Your War On* (2007). From left, Kirk Lynn, Jason Liebrecht (at projector), Sarah Richardson and Ron Berry.
Photo: Geri Hernandez

techniques (including differences between film and stage performance, a particular Rude Mechs preoccupation) through the life of a fictional acting guru.

It's true that when members of the Rude Mechs name their theatrical influences (or, as Lesley puts it, "crushes"), apart from some kindred Austin collectives such as Physical Plant Theatre and Rubber Repertory Company, the list is made up mostly of New York City companies: the Wooster Group, SITI Company, Elevator Repair Service, Big Art Group, the Foundry Theatre, Radiohole. But don't think for a minute that they're exiled New Yorker wannabes. The company is proudly Texan, embodying some of the state's most flattering stereotypes: confidence, sass, and all the laid-back warmth that can be crammed into the word "y'all." When Rude Mechs exports a provocative show like *Lipstick Traces*, or its latest touring success, a scathing critique of George W. Bush's administration called *Get Your War On* [Photo 1], it's a chance to be ambassadors of a lesser known side of its state.

Get Your War On is in many ways an atypical Rude Mechanicals project, but it does follow the group's tradition of bringing out the theatrical potential of rich but unlikely source material—in this case, a comic strip. In addition to *Lipstick Traces*, Rude Mechs has staged James Kelman's

novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (2003) and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1999) as well as Percy Shelley's poem *Prometheus Unbound* (1998). Even its non-adaptations are essentially collages of texts—some new, some borrowed. There were excerpts of Wittgenstein in *El Paraiso*, of Frankenstein in *Requiem for Tesla* (2001), and of a Bessie Award-winning dance by Deborah Hay in *Match-Play* (2005). The wildly original *Decameron Day 7: Revenge* (2005) was meant to be an adaptation of Boccaccio, but thanks to its creators' shifting attention span ended up being a study of soap operas and personal vengeance, complete with a ghost story, sultry tango performances, and nods to such movies as *Blade Runner* and *Star Wars*. Fellow Austin theatre artist Steve Moore wrote about *Decameron* in the *Austin Chronicle*, "The collection of elements is so motley that it can seem willfully random. It isn't. What's astonishing...is how well the Rudes combine and marry those elements into something so tight and whole."

In the case of *Get Your War On*, the source is a rabidly anti-Bush comic strip that New York-based writer David Rees began publishing on the Internet after the September 11 attacks (it's currently available on Rees's website, www.mnftiu.cc, as well as in *Rolling Stone* magazine and bookstores). The value of the strip is not in Rees's graphics,

generic clip art of office drones, but in the startling commentary inserted into these figures' mouths. Sometimes their remarks mock the American public, pushing ignorant, hawkish sentiments into a disturbing realm: "Can't we just build a fucking bomb the size of the earth and cut a hole out of the middle in the shape of the United States?" one of Rees's figures questions in a strip published in late 2001, after two months of air strikes in Afghanistan. And sometimes they voice outrage at the absurdity of government ("Freedom fries??? OK, I have a question—is the War on Terrorism over? Because I sure as hell want to know that ALL THE TERRORISTS IN THE WORLD HAVE BEEN CAPTURED before legislators actually take the time to rename their GODDAMN CAFETERIA FOOD!")

Like so many of the group's projects, the seed of GYWO was a common obsession among the five Rude Mechs

Photo 2: *Cherrywood [the modern comparable]* (2004). Aron Taylor and Heather Hanna are trapped at a very strange party. Photo: Bret Brookshire



Photo 3: *Lipstick Traces* (2001). Dr. Narrator (Lana Lesley) and Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren (David Greenspan) present a speedy version of 20th-century history. Photo: Joan Marcus



copads, most of whom met through the University of Texas Shakespeare at Winedale program. Lana Lesley is joined in this founding quintet by Madge Darlington, Kirk Lynn, Shawn Sides, and Sarah Richardson (who recently moved to New York City but continues to take an active role). They're a literate bunch with a zeal that doesn't trouble to distinguish between pop culture and academia, and they take a few days each year to skip town together and reconnect. Cultural enthusiasms and nagging existential questions, shared over beers and barbecue, become zygotes of future Rude Mechs shows. Rees's strip was passed around at one such retreat. For Lynn, lead adaptor of the stage version and the group's most prolific playwright, the attraction was in Rees's willingness to put out there what others were afraid to voice, and to do so in the contemporary idiom: heavy sarcasm and even heavier profanity. "We feel like Bush-bashing has been going on for a long time, but there was a time when—at least in Texas—there was no critical media. In terms of pop-culture reaction, David Rees was one of the first and only," Lynn says, comparing the strip's verging-on-gruesome satire to the writing of Jonathan Swift.

But a theatrical version of *GYWO* may never have happened if the copads didn't welcome input from all sources—even audience members. The strip had another fan in Rude Mechs patron Robert Arjet, who convinced Rees these were the folks to dramatize his comic rants. It was the first overture Rees received that didn't send up a red flag. Most parties interested in the project seemed to fixate on "how quote-unquote edgy it was," says the artist. Offending delicate sensi-

bilities is not his point: "The ridiculous amount of profanity is supposed to suggest a level of anxiety and vulnerability." The Rude Mechs grasped that emotional underpinning and had already proved they could adapt the seemingly unstageable. So, just as *Lipstick* author Marcus had done, Rees gave his blessing, free from artistic stipulations.

Usually Rude Mechs creations are developed through free-form experimentation, brainstorming with an ensemble both at the table and, as quickly as possible, on their feet. Though not entrenched in one school of acting, Rude Mechs finds Viewpoints useful as a tool in creating organic moments of physical expression to tie together rich linguistic passages. Lynn's associates say his scripts in particular allow plenty of space for such invention. In *Cherrywood* [*the modern comparable*] (2004) [Photo 2], his stage directions were in suggestive verse: "We were relaxing into our captivity / like opening a great, big, white book / and realizing it wasn't for reading / it was for writing."

Cherrywood was also unusual in that Lynn wrote the entire script without assigning characters to the lines—he allowed the actors to choose what they wanted to say. The growth of Rude Mechs shows often hinges on such challenges, which have been devised by the participants to stretch themselves. But although early *GYWO* rehearsals were a chance to play around with everything from Barbie dolls to an "Internet DJ," director Sides concluded this show

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Photo 4: *Get Your War On* (2007). Kirk Lynn, Sarah Richardson and Lana Lesley discuss suicide bombing over coffee and doughnuts.

Photo: Geri Hernandez

was different. The best thing was “to stand there and say the line and get out of the way of the text,” the *raison d'être* of the production. Instead of the group’s habitual deconstructive approach, this process would be about construction, taking care to keep the building blocks intact. Everyone involved in the project photocopied their favorite *GYWO* episodes and lobbied for their inclusion. Lynn’s primary task as adaptor was to break up the setup-setup-laugh rhythm inherent in a three-panel comic. Says Sides, “There was so little for us to monkey with, and we had to make it a challenge for ourselves, so we limited the rehearsal process to 10 days.” The lessons from those initial sessions—put new material on its feet quickly, don’t over think things, let the words do the work—has kept the show fresh during its touring life, which since 2005 has included stops throughout Texas and in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York.

Almost all the language in Rude Mechs’s *GYWO* is verbatim from its source. Its recent incarnation in January 2007 at New York City’s Under the Radar Festival included references to Saddam Hussein’s execution, which had occurred the previous week; even that text was taken directly from new comics Rees had just posted online, and was used to replace bits the performers felt had gotten stale.

“All the shows we’ve done more than once have changed significantly from the first incarnation to the second,” says Richardson. “In some ways, they’re never done.” Lynn

pseudo-complains that “at any moment, the entire play can get thrown out—that’s not true, it’s almost like clockwork—two weeks before opening the entire play will be thrown out and replaced with what we’re actually going to do,” then confesses, “I think we all agree that we would never want to shut down brainstorming.” He adds: “There’s a game we are playing in *The Method Gun*,” which progresses this spring from research to development. “We are going to try to actually make a sort of draft of some of the play so it can be refined rather than replaced.” What’s business-as-usual for other theatre companies is a “game” to the Rude Mechs.

Over the course of the *GYWO* tour, the cast of five has had two constants: Lesley and Jason Liebrecht. Jason has been a Rude Mechs company member ever since he played rocker Johnny Rotten in *Lipstick Traces* eight years ago. Lynn has been in nearly all *GYWO*’s iterations, including in New York, where two new performers swapped in: Richardson, and Ron Berry of fellow Austin theatre company Refraction Arts Project.

In this New York version, as in all those previous, Lesley opens the play with one of the few Rude Mechs-composed speeches. She takes the stage confidently, wearing a tasteful sweater, skirt and boots, to greet the audience: “Howdy. I’m Lana Lesley. Formerly of the Rude Mechanicals. Before we begin tonight’s show I need to thank the sponsor who

made this tour possible..." Pacing a little, she relates a nearly deadpan story—cracked by a wry smile or two as she meets the eyes of audience members—about the genesis of what we are about to see. People in the seats gradually begin to snicker as they sniff out the facetiousness that will permeate nearly everything that follows over the next hour. Lesley explains, with tongue in cheek, that the Rude Mechs have "rebranded" themselves the Cato Institute Players, after that libertarian think tank of controversial repute commissioned this adaptation:

The first question I asked Mr. Crane was if he didn't think that *Get Your War On* and the Cato Institute made odd bedfellows. Mr. Crane responded that being the founder and president of a major institute like the Cato Institute was really hard work and that didn't leave a lot of time for reading. So instead, he briefly scanned all available comics, and it turns out he liked what he scanned in *Get Your War On*. Mostly, he said he admired the clean-cut characters, who clearly have jobs and a strong sense of decorum.

At the close of Lesley's introduction, energetic music plays and the other four actors, in casual business attire, stride onto stage and assume positions behind a long table that bisects the playing area. On the table are five overhead projectors, the kind that were a staple in high school classrooms 20 years back. (In a case of budget driven serendipity, these quaint machines—scored from a used-office-supply store—formerly belonged to the company Enron, whose disgrace is one of GYWO's many targets.)

The performers stand behind these projectors, all business, flicking the switches so that the words "Get—Your—War—On—!" flash against a long rectangular screen on the back wall. The patches of light serve as a frame—like the panels of a comic strip—for most of the show's visuals. Scenic designer Leilah Stewart has created minimalist surroundings, rejecting sitcom fleshiness for spare office touches: a rolling chair, a table littered with thumbed-through celebrity magazines, a box of doughnuts, a filing cabinet.

Richardson leans into a microphone, bringing the opening sequence to an abrupt end. "Date Stamp: October 7, 2001," she begins, placing the scene chronologically as will happen throughout the show: "Bush has publicly used the term 'Evil Doers' at least 25 times since September 11. Osama bin Laden has taken credit for 9/11 and is hiding in Afghanistan and the U.S. has launched Operation: Enduring Freedom for the sole purpose of capturing him."

A light comes up on Liebrecht crowing into a phone with a dangling cord: "Oh yeah! Operation: Enduring Freedom is in the house!" Other cast members pivot to deliver their own outsized reactions: "Oh yeah! Operation: Enduring Our Freedom to Bomb the Living Fuck Out of You is in the house!" and "Remember when the U.S. had a drug problem and then we declared a War on Drugs, and now you can't

buy drugs anymore? It'll be just like that!" Despite the prop phones, these aren't so much conversations as a series of zingers propelled by energy passing from actor to actor as though they're playing a game of hot potato.

The actors almost exclusively talk "at" the audience, if not to us, in the two dimensional manner of a comic strip. Throughout the show it's apparent, as Liebrecht points out, that "this is something that was not written with the intent of saying it aloud." Rees knows from personal experience how tricky that can be: He travels the country reading the strip to audiences, using—surprise!—a single overhead projector.

The GYWO cast takes a cue from Rees's untrained delivery. There's nothing too "actorly" or too literal about their reading. The voices are animated and the exchanges brisk, but the delivery is not naturalistic or even, necessarily, in character. Personality traits do emerge: Liebrecht gets most of the angry rants about 9/11, which is fitting since he's the only one in the cast who was living in New York at that moment in history; Berry spends much of his time bemused and bewildered; Lesley is acerbic and impish; Richardson is brash and assured; Lynn (who's the first one to admit he's a writer, not an actor) gamely plays the straight man when one is needed, paying lip service to "National Sanctity of Life Day" or chiding a "typical East Coast elitist." But good luck trying to trace character arcs—these water-cooler pundits have no backstory. They serve as radio towers, and/or lightning rods, for the roller-coaster emotions many Americans have experienced in regard to U.S. politics over the past six years.

GYWO is not the only Rude Mechs play in which the performers have been addressed by their own names. Maintaining the presence of the actors in the room—asking the audience to enjoy their disbelief rather than suspend it—is one of the first things the copads talk about when asked what all their shows have in common. "We don't try to create a fiction and make the audience believe that," says Lesley. "It's part of the aesthetic, acknowledging that while there are characters on stage, I'm always also me." She points out that Brian Scott, a company member and frequent lighting designer for Rude Mechs shows, often chooses to keep the house bright rather than use darkness to create a fourth wall.

"Pure fiction seems better suited to other modes: the novel, the movies, television," is how Sides explains it. She recalls a scene in *Lipstick Traces*, reminiscent of GYWO, in which Lesley's character, Dr. Narrator, delivered a rapid-fire cultural history of the 20th century. Sandwiched between Dada and Guy Debord was the true story of Lesley's first broken heart [Photo 3]. "*Lipstick Traces* was about inserting yourself into history," Sides says—truly, Rude Mechs's artists can't help but insert themselves into all their shows. Lynn suggests that a vital energy lies in the tension between the reality of the actor and the reality of the character. Keeping both present on stage creates a space in which that energy runs high, as though two attracting magnets were held close

enough that they could almost, but not quite, pull together.

This may be why personal narratives and monologues are such a recurring device for Rude Mechs—the company sees narration itself as a process of adaptation. The program notes for *Decameron* celebrated the power of filtering a story through a unique storyteller: “One of our favorite pastimes is to listen to people describe their favorite moments of theatre and performance.... What happens when you try to share a moment of theatre is you create a new one.”

In the first production of *GYWO*, there was only one projector. Adding four more amped up the staging—in Sides’s words, “made it more like what we would normally do”—and elevated the gimmick into a low tech symphony. Initially, as some actors speak, the rest put up transparencies of Rees’s clip art workers [Photo 4]. The gender of the person speaking and the static figure correspond, as does posture: standing at a three-quarters angle with a hand pinning open a folder, or holding a coffee mug. When an actor switches the phone to the other hand and shifts her stance, a quick flip of the transparency causes the clip art office worker to do the same.

Soon they’re slyly interjecting additional images, such as an unflattering portrait of Henry Kissinger that all turn to gawk at, drawing out a moment of incredulity regarding his appointment as head of the 9/11 Commission. The villain from the *Flash Gordon* comic strip looms over a discussion of anthrax; the 1980s techno superhero Voltron “blasts off” from the projectors in unison with a photo of Bush clutching a flight helmet.

Using static images as snarky punch lines is something the sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* has done with uneven skill over the years, and lately the device has practically become a staple of political satire, thanks to the popular faux-news programs “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report.”

Get Your War On differs in that the onstage efforts to manipulate the projectors and transparent images become one of the most theatrical aspects of the performance. First an actor is responsible for a series of quick, frantic image changes, pushing at the very edge of her ability to keep up. Then several coordinate to create a sort of primitive animation, “floating” an image—such as a corpse from the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina—across all five projectors.

As the play continues, the actors become more mobile, fully using the downstage space. Liebrecht dons a sci fi astronaut’s helmet to announce that Bush has promised the country a new space age: “Earth is for suckers. True patriots want to live on Mars!” [Photo 5] Lynn dances across the stage to sprightly music, wearing a giant foam cutout of North Korea and white gloves—like a strange version of a Disney theme park mascot—prompting unconcerned remarks from the others: “Who was that?” “Dunno, some new guy.” He creates a ruckus in the corner, drawing startled glances, then waves sheepishly—“It just feels so good when

everyone’s looking at me!”—as the rest indulgently shake their heads: “Crazy North Korea.” During a discussion of the Terri Schiavo “culture of life” controversy, Berry rushes in wearing a giant crimped cylinder and delivers a tirade from the point of view of a feeding tube stuck inside a brain-dead patient and aching for career fulfillment. “Send me to Africa!” he pleads.

What makes such absurd, often tasteless, scenes work is an undercurrent of genuine frustration. Immediately following a sequence accusing the U.S. government of allowing Indonesians to be killed and raped by their own military rather than inconvenience Exxon Mobil, Lesley leans into a mike with a strange smile on her face, her voice trembling with something that might be suppressed laughter or fury. “Remember when George W. Bush was asked who his favorite political philosopher was and he answered ‘Jesus Christ?’” A long pause to let that sink in. “Do you think Jesus would have rolled over in His grave, you know...if He hadn’t already risen from it?” Before the audience’s awkward chuckling registers, she’s moved on to her next cue. Later, after a “Date Stamp” summarizes the host of new abilities granted to the government through the Patriot Act, Lesley whips out a yellowed scroll and feather pen and starts scribbling. She lets everyone wonder for a moment, then looks up to exclaim with the air of someone a little turned on by blasphemy: “Holy shit! Look at what I’m doing! I’m rewriting the Constitution! This fucking rules! It’s much easier than I thought it would be!” A tinge of hysteria creeps in, though the smile stays put. “I’m gonna add an amendment saying it’s OK to NEVER FIND OUT WHO THE FUCK WAS USING THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE AS A PERSONAL ANTHRAX DISTRIBUTION NETWORK!” More scribbling. “And now for an amendment saying WE WILL NEVER, EVER, EVER DEVELOP SOLAR POWER, NO MATTER HOW MUCH FUCKING SENSE IT MAKES!” [Photo 6]

Two musical interludes, Electric Light Orchestra’s “Telephone Line” and David Bowie’s “Life on Mars,” are offered as what Lynn calls a “palate-cleanser,” a relief from the barrage of text. In the first instance, a montage of clip art is the only visual stimulation. For “Life on Mars,” in what Lynn calls “a two-dimensional version of a big musical number,” Liebrecht perches on the edge of the table, grabs a mike and sings along with Bowie as the other four actors perform a buoyant, slow motion dance, waving to one other with delighted smiles pasted on their faces.

Such interludes are in grand Rude Mechs tradition. In *Decameron* Liebrecht performed the Prince song “When You Were Mine” while another actor played air drums. In *How Late It Was, How Late* a Scotsman climbed up on his counter to sing along with a country song about Texas, which the down-and-out character idealized as a sort of paradise. In *El Paraiso*, which actually did place a version of heaven in a Texas bar, original songs were performed by onstage musicians while characters poured their hearts out karaoke style. Darlington recalls that in the early days the copads would hang out at a live music bar in Austin

called the Electric Lounge, and sometimes perform there. "We really liked seeing bands, but we also liked those spaces where you saw bands. We liked the feel, we liked the audience, and capturing that energy is something we want. We want theatre to be like a good rock show." Rude Mechs is not a troupe of trained singers and dancers, though song and dance invariably work their way in, and they never set themselves up as such. As with "Life on Mars" the group rests on a light, cheerfully amateurish approach to musical numbers, emphasizing expression rather than polish.

There are humor-free moments in the play, when anger comes to the fore, but only one purely sorrowful one. Following the "Date Stamp" announcing the president's reelection to another term, the cast turns upstage to stare at a row of images of a victorious Bush. The blocking recalls an earlier scene, when the cast contemplated Bush's premature declaration of "an end to major combat in Iraq: Mission accomplished." But this time, they seem reluctant to turn around and continue the show. A patriotic marching band tune grinds to a halt. Even with their backs to the audience, the performers radiate dejection and defeat. The moment of silence allows everyone to reabsorb the results of that election, in the context of all the grievances the play has just reviewed.

Richardson reveals that in *GYWO*, when the ensemble is scribbling notes in the background, seemingly as office-appropriate stage business, they are actually exchanging performance-specific messages such as "We're losing the pace in this section" or "Don't pull back from it, you guys." Richardson points out that in the wider theatre world, "that violates the fundamental rule—actors don't give actors notes, period. A lot of people coming from the outside world would be thrown off kilter by that. It's a matter of trust."

Actors also usually don't hang lights, but when touring *GYWO* to New York, Berry, Lynn and Liebrecht did so, according to designer Scott's instructions; Liebrecht reports he was proud to be mistaken for an electrician. Rude Mechs is marked by such flexibility among disciplines. Darlington, who often takes charge on the technical side of things, points out that when the group was founded, "We were all really hungry to learn everything. We all learned how to do marketing, how to write grants, and how to do technical aspects, and in the early days we were really trading around those roles a lot on stage and off."

In addition to the five copads there are currently 24 company members. There are no codified duties or perks of company membership. While it's not necessary to be a member to be part of a Rude Mechs show, those who stick around long enough usually get the designation. Many are



Photo 5: *Get Your War On* (2006). Jason Liebrecht gets excited about the U.S. invasion of Mars.

Photo: Jacques-Jean Tiziou

affiliated with other companies, such as Scott, who designs for SITI Company in New York. Tina Van Winkle was a participant in the group's teen theatre camp then moved into stage managing before becoming at 18 the youngest person ever tapped for membership. Richardson says,

In the early days we felt like membership ought to be an extremely precious commodity. Over time we've found it becomes clear—by how people work in the room and how much time they spend coming to the theatre and helping, cleaning the toilets, mowing the lawn—who really feels that being a part of this company is as meaningful to them as any individual role they might play.

In 2005, the company size nearly doubled when the entire cast of *Cherrywood*—after an exuberant tour to the National Ensemble Theatre Festival in Blue Lakes, California—was invited into the fold.

What company members do have in common is an affinity for collaboration and consensus. Over the years the copads have refined a method of governance that depends on friendship, respect and honesty. The idea of consensus rule was so rare in the theatre world when they started that they had to turn to groups such as Bikes Not Bombs and the Lesbian Avengers for practical suggestions. In the administrative offices and likewise in rehearsal, no single opinion or ego is allowed to steamroll all others. Liebrecht says that with Rude Mechs, as compared to working with other com-

panies, "I have much more control over what I do on stage. And I genuinely feel that what I bring to the table is seriously considered."

Lynn says the copads flout the cliché of too many cooks spoiling the soup because they share a similar taste, but also because there's no mincing of words. "Because we've been with each other 12 years, we can be so much more direct and critical, knowing that there's no cruelty involved." Out of necessity a director and playwright usually make the bottom-line artistic calls—but everyone in the room, actors, designers, technicians, interns, have a hand in both script and staging. "It doesn't necessarily mean all voices are equal," says Richardson, "but it does mean all voices are heard. We don't limit the notion of where a good idea can come from."

In fact, each new Rude Mechanicals project expands that notion, proving that good, fresh theatrical ideas can come from anywhere—from comic strips and novels, from pop music and philosophy, from quirky challenges and playful collaboration...and yes, of course, from Texas.

SOURCES

Darlington, Madge, Lana Lesley, Jason Liebrecht, Kirk Lynn, David Rees, Sarah Richardson, Shawn Sides. Personal interviews. August 2006, December 2006, January 2007. Moore, Steve. "Payback as Comeback." *Austin Chronicle* 16 Apr. 2006. "Program notes." *Decameron Day 7: REVENGE!* The Off Center, Austin. April/May 2006.



Photo 6: *Get Your War On* (2006). Lana Lesley rewrites the Constitution.

Photo: Jacques-Jean Tiziou