

Entertainment

Members of Rude Mechanicals push terror to the limit in *Get Your War On*.

BRETT BROOKSHIRE



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Get Your War On is a political zinger

By EVERETT EVANS

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David Rees began his online comic strip *Get Your War On* in October 2001, a few days after the Bush administration launched Operation Enduring Freedom.

"It began as an online diary expressing my mixed emotions about the war on terror," Rees says. "It became my way of understanding how I feel about President Bush's foreign policy. One of its big themes has been skepticism, mocking the language in which the war on terror is expressed.

"The basic point is that it's very dangerous for a country to go to war or seek a military solution, without simultaneously having a clear understanding of what the collateral damage and cost of that solution will be."

Get Your War On found an avid following on the Internet, also becoming a regular feature in Rolling Stone.

Now, the strip has been adapted into a hard-hitting, lightning-round stage show by Rude Mechanicals, Austin's acclaimed experimental troupe. The Rude Mechs are performing its Houston premiere through Sept. 30 at DiverseWorks — part of a fall tour that also includes Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

Rees' modus operandi is to take clip art (generic line drawings) and slap his own biting dialogue over bland images of office workers. Sometimes, the figures cheer Bush's policies in bursts of mindless jingoism. More often, they argue over, angrily denounce, or just plain ridicule them.

"He takes nondescript clip art and adds a voice of outrage to it," says Shawn Sides, who directed the show. "We (Rude Mechs) are all fans of the strip. It's cathartic to hear voice given to our own anxieties about the war on terror."

Still, it was not one of the troupe, but a friend and patron of the company, Robert Arjet, who initiated the stage adaptation. He wrote to Rees, got permission, set the project in motion, then bowed out to let the troupe create the show.

"I'd had lots of people approach me about adapting it in different ways," Rees says. "I'd always turned them down. It's such a personal project, which came out of my feelings as a New Yorker in the aftermath of 9/11, that I didn't think I wanted anyone messing around with it. But (Arjet's) letter showed such an understanding of the material. He made it clear the Rude Mechs would respect that."

Even in the format of a satiric revue, one wondered how an assemblage of brief exchanges and non-sequitur rants would hold together.

"We grouped the pieces by like subject matter," says Kirk Lynn, one of the five cast members and lead adapter of the material. "The show progresses chronologically, from the start of the war on terror to the present."

"It reminds us of all the crappy stuff we've forgotten," Sides adds. "The anthrax scare. Henry Kissinger pulled back into public service. It's a good antidote for our historical amnesia."

As demonstrated at Thursday night's energetic opening performance, Rees' mordant material proves a perfect fit for the Rude Mechs' self-described aesthetic of "brave new works" with "politically nervy" content. Lynn, Lana Lesley, Jason Liebrecht, Amy Miley and Chad Nichols deliver the political zingers with sharp timing and biting sarcasm.

The show's recurring themes and chronological timeline lend cumulative impact. It reinforces disbelief at the events of the past five years — not only Iraq, but also the color-coded terror alerts, the Enron debacle, Congress' meddling in the medical decisions of Terry Schiavo's family, the fundamentalists' fight against the teaching of evolution. As one pointed line puts it: "The place for intelligent design is in a biology class, not in Iraq policy."

The exchanges brazenly send up such simplistic and arrogant notions as "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists." (How dare the leaders of France and Germany determine their own foreign policy, based on the views of their own citizens, rather than the goals of George

RESOURCES

GET YOUR WAR ON

• **When:** 8 tonight-Sunday and Thursday-Sept. 30. Also, 10 p.m. Friday-Sept. 30.

• **Where:** DiverseWorks, 1117 E. Freeway

• **Tickets:** \$15; \$6 students; 713-335-3445

W. Bush?)

The show may be at its funniest when an onstage figure leaps to Bush's defense, as in the aftermath of his 2004 State of the Union address:

"You think just because the words are garbled in his *mouth*, they're garbled in his *mind*?"

Get Your War On certainly shakes up complacency. Of course, those not already in agreement with its outlook are not likely to attend.

"To those who say the show is 'just preaching to the choir,' " Sides says, "we would only remove the word 'just.' The choir needs a sermon every now and then, so that everyone can say 'amen!' We need to remind ourselves of what's happened and what's happening. And that we are a community."

"It's great that they've taken my material and made something new," Rees says. "Great that these ideas can live in a different form than the one I gave them."

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