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'Get Your War On': Precision Weapons Of Mass Derision

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Invective can be a wonderful tool. Especially when it's wielded as brilliantly as the verbal gunslingers brandish it in "Get Your War On," which contains some of the funniest ridicule of a president and his policies I've ever heard on a stage.

The five performers from Rude Mechs, an Austin-based theater gang that has come to Woolly Mammoth's D Street space for an all-too-brief run, have other weapons in their arsenal: contempt. Fearlessness. A hilarious grasp of absurdity. And perhaps most important, a nifty array of targets, from the dubious authenticity of some of the CIA's intelligence-gathering to the intelligence of the president himself.

Let's make it perfectly clear that the Heritage Foundation and the Republican chairperson of Orange County will find less to admire here than will avid supporters of Moveon.org. "Get Your War On" is not an equal-opportunity basher. It's not generous, and it's far from charitable -- which may be why it's so effective. The anger on the left these days seems to be pitched at such an intensity that anything on the comedy dial less ferocious than take-no-prisoners wouldn't provoke even a giggle.

No worries about niceties here, though -- absolutely nothing is sacred to the creators of the 70-minute show. Based on David Rees's popular clip-art-style Internet comic strip, the foul-mouthed production owes its sensibility to the mocking deadpan of Stephen Colbert, the sour indignation of Lewis Black and the suffer-no-fools-gladly outrage of Bill Maher. Watching "Get Your War On," you are reminded how lily-livered the political skits have become on "Saturday Night Live," long the nation's main outlet for topical satire.

Then again, a show this scorching -- the live-theater equivalent of a wildfire -- would send network censors straight for the economy-size bottles of Stoli. Rees's strip, begun in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, takes as its sardonic *raison* the administration's war on terrorism. The stage adaptation closely follows the strip, with profanity-laced lampoons of all of the signature news events and code words of the '00s: the Enron scandal, colorized terror alerts, "freedom fries," red-state/blue-state, weapons of mass destruction, Halliburton and "Mission accomplished." The show gives each its scalding turn in the hot seat, and takes swipes at the deficit, Hurricane Katrina and Israel's war with Hezbollah.

Like the strip, the production's format is both retro and devilishly au courant. The show's creators, as if they wanted to conjure images of a middle-school current events class circa 1971, mount five overhead projectors on tables. (Was this not the age of transparency?) Panels from Rees's strips -- often clip-art graphics of office workers gabbing on phones -- are beamed onto an oblong screen as the actors replicate the strip's poses and conversations.

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Most of these sarcasm-laden exchanges cannot be reported here, and even those that can lose something when not being uttered with perfect glibness by the personable, conservatively attired actors, who are all swell: Lana Lesley, Jason Liebrecht, Kirk Lynn, Amy Miley and Chad Nichols.

Each is well-schooled in a machine-gun-style delivery that compels an audience to stay on its toes. "Did you listen to the president's State of the Union address last night?" one cast member asks another. "It felt like rubbernecking a highway accident made entirely of words."

Worried about the degree to which the theory of evolution is under attack, another cast member wants to tone down the confrontational rhetoric, so that the red states won't try to further dilute the science curriculum. "We've still got the law of gravity," he says. "Let's not blow it!"

North Korea -- embodied by an actor wearing a foam cutout map of the country -- repeatedly barges in on the proceedings. Mostly, it just wants attention. A dozen degrees more tasteless is a guy dressed as a feeding tube who purports to be a refugee from the Terri Schiavo case. (As I said: Nothing here is sacred.)

Director Shawn Sides and the team of writers led by Lynn ensure that much of the show's heavy artillery is aimed at George W. Bush. In one instance, the projectors flash "42%" on the screen -- signifying the president's popularity rating at this juncture of the company's Bush administration chronology.

"When I saw that number," one of the actresses reports, "I kept looking for a decimal point." Doubtless, the scalding "Get Your War On" will be savored most by those eager to add one.

Get Your War On, an adaptation by Rude Mechs of the Internet comic by David Rees. Directed by Shawn Sides. Set, Leilah Stewart; lighting, Brian Scott; sound, Robert S. Fisher; costumes, Laura Cannon. About 1 hour 10 minutes. Through Saturday at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 641 D St. NW. Call 202-393-3939 or visit <http://www.woollymammoth.net/>.

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