

## NEW YORK THEATER

### Stop Hitting Yourself Review: Rude Mechs Spice Up Lincoln Center with Lots of Cheese

By Jonathan Mandell | JANUARY 27, 2014

“Stop Hitting Yourself,” playful chaos brought to you by the acclaimed Austin theater collective Rude Mechs, is the first stage show I could call cheesy and not mean it as an insult: Before the play begins, a half-naked man is lying unconscious on his side with cheese dripping towards his navel. Near the end of the play, the seven performers smear cheese all over each other, most of it taken from a working fountain on stage that spouts queso. In-between, every now and then, somebody on stage eats some nachos.

Lincoln Center describes this show, which it commissioned for its experimental LCT3 and which runs through February 24<sup>th</sup> at its Clare Tow Theater, as “part Pygmalion, part Busby Berkeley, part self-help lexicon.” I wouldn’t describe the play this way, actually – although, yes, the half-naked man is eventually dressed on stage in a tuxedo; there’s some tap-dancing and a few songs; the audience is asked to repeat the words “improvement,” “charity,” and “queso.” But there is so much else stuffed into this 90-minute show – audience participation, meta fiddling around, digression upon digression – that “Stop Hitting Yourself” is hard to sum up.

Diligent theatergoers will detect something approaching a plot. The seven eccentric characters are competing to win the Queen’s Charity Ball, which each year selects a single worthy cause to benefit from its largesse. A Socialite (Lana Lesley) has kidnapped a Wildman (Thomas Graves) from the forest in hopes that his cause of saving the earth will win the contest. She persuades him to adapt to conventional society, because “a lot of people won’t be able to initially listen because of what you look like and how you behave. So I’ve got two weeks to teach you how to be like one of us.”

There is also an obvious theme, which is established before anybody utters a word. You know something’s up just by looking at Mimi Lien’s slightly deranged, helter-skelter set – not just the unconscious man and the queso fountain, but 17 chandeliers, a Roman arch, a piano, a full set of medieval armor, a life-sized statue of a man with a fig leaf...all of it (except the half-naked man) painted a bright gold. If that’s not clear enough, there is an enormous dollar sign in flashing lights.

“Oh, look: Money,” says the unconscious half-naked man (our Wildman), once he’s stood up and plucked a twenty dollar bill from his wild hair. “Does anybody want it?” He does in fact give the bill to a volunteer from the audience – which is wonderful for that brave soul, since tickets to the show only cost \$20. Later, a different character will give out single dollar bills – but at a price. At another point, the Queen (Paul Soileau, dressed as a drag queen) telephones somebody in Row E (there’s a telephone in front of the seat), and asks that theatergoer to rank the rest of us according to our attractiveness.

That’s not the only randomly inserted scene. Several times, the actors stand before us in a row, break character, and offer random confessions about money or sharing or society – Soileau admits sheepishly that as a teenager he enjoyed reading *The Fountainhead*.

Amid all this busyness are some choice lines by writer Kirk Lynn, one of Rude Mechs’ artistic directors: The Unknown Prince (Joey Hood): “Humans made Styrofoam and hairspray and so nature made that and that is natural. If bumble bees made plastic you would say, ‘we have to protect the plastics.’”

The Maid, who was a classics scholar (Heather Hanna): “I think a real artist selects the aspects of his existence he regards as really big – and then he isolates that big stuff and cuts out everything insignificant and stupid and annoying and all the accidents, so he can present his view of existence how it should be – not copying reality, but as a judgment on it. His selection constitutes a judgment: everything included in a work of art – from theme to subject to pretty colors or rhyming – all that acquires value by the mere fact of its being included, of being important enough to include.” “Stop Hitting Yourself” may not cut out enough to be “real” art, but if you’re open to its anarchy, it’s real entertaining.