

TDF STAGES: A THEATRE MAGAZINE

Your passport to life behind the curtain!

I'm Rich and Crazy for a Reason

by Mark Blankenship

The careful chaos of the Rude Mechs' *Stop Hitting Yourself*

Even if they never talked to us or invited us to strip naked for money, the Rude Mechs could still make a point with their latest show.



Now premiering as part of Lincoln Center Theater's LCT3 program, *Stop Hitting Yourself* wonders if it's possible to be truly generous in a wealthy society. On the most literal level, it asks this question by following a contest in a queen's palace. The queen is so wealthy that everything in her ballroom is made of gold and her fountain spews a bubbling stream of queso dip, and by promising to grant the contest winner a request, she dangles the dream of similar luxury. After all, who wouldn't want to be a nobleman or own a queso fountain of their own?

The status quo is subverted, though, when a "wild man" enters the game, startling everyone with his tangled hair and earnest love for plants. If he wins, he says, he'll ask the queen to take better care of the world, which seems to create a tidy contrast between the selfish rich and the generous poor.

But the Rude Mechs, a [theatre collective](#) from Austin, Texas, are never that simple. They create their shows themselves, which gives them the freedom to detonate our expectations of what a story is supposed to do. In *Stop Hitting Yourself*, for instance, the tale of the queen's contest gets interrupted by tap dances and odd little pop songs and explanations from the Wildman about what's going to happen at the end of the show.

More importantly, the plot gets sidetracked when the performers drop their characters and speak as themselves. Sometimes, they step to the front of the stage and tell personal stories about times they were wasteful. Sometimes, they put audience members through increasingly embarrassing paces to see what they'll do for money.

These detours are vital to the show. "It's very important that we have those moments where we break out and are just ourselves, so we can acknowledge that we are in the space with you," says Lana Lesley, a performer in *Stop Hitting Yourself* and one of the company's six co-artistic directors. "As we're talking about money and wealth and greed and the idea of charity, we can really examine ourselves."

And that, she continues, can keep the show from feeling too preachy. "When we tell personal stories

or ask personal questions, it says that we are *all* complicit, and to me, that eases the production into a place where it's a conversation and not some one-way condemnation of American society. Because *all of us* are American society, and if we're just up there condemning the watcher, it's boring and hypocritical."

The Rude Mechs create their work with the same communal spirit. Typically, they develop shows without a clear picture of what the end product will be, and even though each project has a lead artist, everyone contributes to the conversation about what's being created. "Maybe we have this bit of found text and that bit of original text, and maybe we're interested in exploring these weird dances," says Shawn Sides, who directed *Stop Hitting Yourself* and is also a co-artistic director. "The next steps are really dictated by the content of the piece as it develops." Lesley adds, "Our personal lists of things we want to do eventually start to come together, and it eventually gets massaged down to this revelation of, 'Oh, this is what we're talking about. We're talking about whether you can possibly follow a Christian ideal of charity and belief and also be an Objectivist.'"

But even when they're excited by an idea, the group doesn't get attached to anything. "We throw out at least half the material we generate, if not more," Sides explains. "We'll work on it for hours and hours and hours, and half of it always goes. But it means we really believe in what stays."

Want to know more about how the Rude Mechs operate? Check out the video for [Devised Theatre](#) in TDF's Theatre Dictionary.

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