



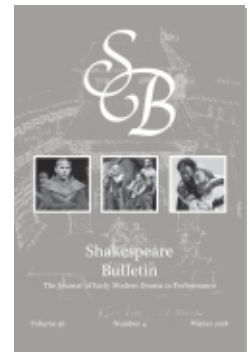
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*Fixing Troilus & Cressida* by Rude Mechs (review)

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(and hardly desirable) to foster any affection for her after the gruesome outing of Gloucester's eyes, which was especially brutal in this production due to the blood that splattered all over the glass cube. Yet, particularly at the beginning, when she and Goneril attempted to appease Lear with their lavish praise, one got the sense that this exercise was something the less-favored daughters were accustomed to, and I felt for them as subject to his ever-changing whims.

While excellent performances were delivered by the play's unequivocally good characters—Cordelia and Edgar—these characters' unwavering devotion to their flawed fathers felt overly idealized, and perhaps explained the pull of characters like Goneril and Edmund—their nuanced, independent, and self-aware responses to their fathers' behavior were more identifiable and understandable. This is not to say that the ending of the play was not moving, or that I did not ultimately feel for Lear and Cordelia, Gloucester and Edgar. However, my sympathies and proclivities for various “bad” characters at other points throughout the play revealed that this production bodied forth a moral universe that, as in life, was rarely black and white.



### *Fixing Troilus & Cressida*

Presented by **Rude Mechs** at **ZACH Theatre Nowlin Rehearsal Studio**, Austin, TX. March 8–31, 2018. By Kirk Lynn, adapted from William Shakespeare. Directed by Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw. Costumes and properties by Aaron Flynn. Lighting design by Stephen Pruitt. Scenic design by Amanda Perry. Sound design and original composition by Peter Stopschinski. Stage management by Madison Scott. Fight choreography by Kenny Chilton. With Catherine Grady (Helen), Crystal Bird Caviel (Cressida), Cassandra Reveles (Pandarini), Derek Kolluri (Paris), Noel Gaulin (Troilus), Rommel Sulit (Hector), Kelli Bland (Cassandra), Lauren Lane (Agamomnem), Jeff Mills (Ulysses), John Christopher (Achilles), Vincent Tomasino (Patroclus), and Mical Trejo (Calchas).

CASON MURPHY, *Iowa State University*

When it comes to *Fixing Shakespeare*, it seems that the third time has been the charm. As staged in Austin last March, *Fixing Troilus & Cressida* serves as the latest—and so far greatest—installment in the Rude Mechs' ongoing project of rehabilitating Shakespeare's least-produced plays (the first two outings “fixed” *King John* in 2013 and *Timon of Athens* in 2016).

The Rude Mechs are a two-decade-old feminist theater collective housed deep in the heart of Texas who have carved out a niche for themselves in the American theatrical landscape by generating edgy, contemporary theater. Yet, despite their *A Midsummer Night's Dream*-inspired company name, the Mechs largely avoided reinforcing the ubiquity of Shakespeare's work until 2013, when their playwright-in-residence, Kirk Lynn, started translating lines from *King John* as a morning writing exercise. The one enduring constant through the series (and one of its greatest boons) has been Lynn, who has recomposed the texts for each entry in the *Fixing Shakespeare* series. Three plays on, he has refined his process of modernizing Shakespeare, as he explains in the program:

I translate [each play] line by line into contemporary English—including the cursing and vulgarity—cutting the number of characters down to about 10, gender screwing them toward parity, and editing the whole thing for joy with no fidelity to the original text. There is a sincere attempt to learn how Shakespeare composes, how his ideas advance, how his characters develop, how his beautiful ideas sit so nicely with his love of dick jokes.

Much like its source, *Fixing Troilus & Cressida* is still a play about the Trojan War. It traces the dramatic action of Shakespeare's three subplots through a set of symmetrically balanced scenes, vaulting back and forth over Troy's wall to follow the major characters in the warring factions of the Trojans and the Greeks. And like Shakespeare's work, the play also actively pivots halfway through from romance and occasional comedy to full-tilt tragedy. Unlike its source, however, that pivot here occurred after the Trojan prince Paris fired a t-shirt cannon at the audience, which showered those of us in attendance in clothing adorned with caricatures of his and Helen's faces accompanying the text "Paris loves Helen. Helen loves Paris. Love is Real."

Another difference is that *Fixing Troilus & Cressida* has had its cast of characters and text both reduced by half (twelve performers carry the 16,000 words of Lynn's script—cut down from Shakespeare's word count of around 27,000). In Troy, only Helen, Cressida, and Cressida's yenta-esque aunt Pandarini remain alongside select children of Priam (though the great king himself is removed)—Hector, Paris, Troilus, and Cassandra. In the even more sparsely populated Grecian camps, fewer bodies appeared—Ulysses, Achilles, Patroclus, the captured Trojan Calchas, and the brilliantly named Agamomnem, the Greek's "head honcha."

The decision to cut down the dramatis personae never felt like a reminder of absence. Instead it frequently acted as a catalyst for the play,



Ulysses (Jeff Mills) and Agamomnem (Lauren Lane) in *Fixing Troilus & Cressida*, dir. Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw. Rude Mechs, 2018. Photo by Bret Brookshire, courtesy of Rude Mechs.

forcing the major players to continually smash into one another like atoms in the large hadron collider. It also followed Shakespeare's lead in pulling the epic figures down off of their marble pedestals, humbling them and reframing their legacies in some genuinely meaningful exchanges. The men of Troy appeared alternately braggadocious and helpless. Hector eagerly anticipated taking the field for a "one-on-one battle challenge" (a turn of phrase which here supplants that of the ancient *agon*). Troilus meanwhile struggled to get into and out of his flak vest, bemoaning: "I don't have anyone at home to help me get dressed. Only soldiers with rock-solid relationships should be allowed to take the battlefield for Troy." In a particularly clever payoff of limited character combinations, it was Ulysses—not Diomedes—whom Cressida wooed for protection while among the Greeks. The transactional nature of their relationship was undercut by Ulysses's sexualized (mis)reading of Cressida as the stereotypical black Jezebel, heightening Troilus's own uninformed accusations of infidelity against Cressida later.

One of the most useful tools in tracing the play's distance from Shakespeare's text was the augmentation and expansion of the play's female characters. In the original text, Helen does not appear until act three and

disappears after nineteen lines; in *Fixing Troilus & Cressida*, the opening prologue was (literally and metaphorically) put in the mouth of Helen: "Pretend my mouth is the city of Troy. When I smile it's like a festival and then what man doesn't want to come inside?" From the outset, we were clearly in an alternate *herstory*. In theory, Helen's part may have been cobbled together from the scraps of excised characters like Alexander and Aeneas, but her haunting final lines revealed the historical apathy with which she has always been treated: "Isn't that weird, the face that launched a thousand ships and no one ever mentions at which port I came to shore. They were never fighting over me. They fight something broken in themselves." In performance, the sublime Catherine Grady fully realized the surgical precision with which Helen knowingly inserted and extracted herself from the proceedings.

Including Helen, five of this play's twelve characters were female, often doing the heavy lifting. Two of these—Agamomnem and Pandarini—were repurposed from traditionally male characters. Thanks to Lauren Lane's tour-de-force performance, Agamomnem quickly joined the pantheon of powerful female characters found in the other *Fixing Shakespeare* productions, including the ferocious Constance in *Fixing King John* and the unyielding Amazonian Alcibadia from *Fixing Timon of Athens*. Agamomnem's arc as a female leader grappling for power alongside sophomoric men felt particularly timely, Grecian politicking writ large in an American context: "It's hard enough to lead men, but when you're a woman doing it, the men just get to be extra bitchy about it."

Director Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw found myriad opportunities for diversity in *Fixing Troilus & Cressida*, decentering the whiteness and straightness that tend to pervade American presentations of Shakespeare. In fact, Lane (Agamomnem) and Jeff Mills (Ulysses) were the only two white bodies present onstage. This choice poignantly underscored the tragic damage done by the pair. While Agamomnem rained down holy terror on the bodies of color onstage in the final act, Ulysses instead fled, grabbing a baseball cap and windbreaker to disguise himself amongst the primarily white audience, begging for their protection (a humbling moment for the Greek's most cunning tactician as well as the patrons he implicated in his cowardice).

In the strategic casting of Achilles as an actor of color, the towering black physique of the tremendous John Christopher forced me to reconsider my memory of the famed Myrmidon in the mold of the white, heteronormative *Troy*-era Brad Pitt. As Achilles, Christopher emerged from his tent as a titanic presence, juxtaposed against the figure of his

lithe “male varlet” Patroclus who he was tenderly carrying in his arms. The long-suspected homosexual relationship between the pair was made plainly and effectively visible through inclusive embodiment—with the characters affectionately portrayed by queer-identifying actors, giggling about an unheard joke: “Stop making me laugh, Patroclus. Don’t be such a low bitch.” In the production’s most effective moment, after Hector slayed Patroclus, Achilles picked up the young man’s body (mirroring their first entrance), kissed him, and then quietly said, “Patroclus. You died too young.” Dressed as Achilles’s fellow warriors, the other members of the cast quietly emerged amongst the audience, each naming someone who they personally knew who “died too young.” This convention was rendered even more powerful in light of the fact that a serial bomber terrorized the Austin metroplex for several weeks during the run of the show in March 2018, targeting communities of color where many of the cast either lived or had family members. The end result was stunning, when at the performance I attended, even the audience began echoing Achilles in a truly poignant call and response. When loving in a time of endlessly permutating war seems a radical act, we all can still willingly be as “stupid as a Troilus.”

*Fixing Troilus & Cressida* has seared itself into my brain. Considering the Mechs’ goal of trying to offer “a more authentic experience of what a new Shakespeare play might be like than an actual Shakespeare play,” the production capitalized on the successes of its predecessors while adding enough new experimental elements to keep the emerging formula from feeling too formulaic. Ultimately, though, *Fixing Troilus & Cressida* stands as a reminder that the entire *Fixing Shakespeare* project itself seems to function as a Trojan horse. Its existence is a big beautiful trick, disguised as a tribute, that allows a rag-tag band of interlopers access to a vaunted institution in order to throw open the gates to the rest of us. And in this spirit: may the Rude Mechs continue to bring the walls down.

