

By [I.B. Hopkins](#) - March 18, 2018

There is a reason Shakespeare’s “Troilus and Cressida” is his least performed play. It’s clunky, pessimistic, abstruse, and often cannot decide if it is meant to be a tragedy or a comedy.

Rather than sidestepping these shortcomings in his adaptation, however, Austin playwright Kirk Lynn besieges them headlong. Together with the company he co-founded, the Rude Mechanicals, Lynn’s latest installation in his “[Fixing Shakespeare](#)” series offers a trim and engaging retelling of the fall of Troy.

Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw directs the cast of 12 (pared down from the Bard’s 27) through language that is contemporary, colloquial and often vulgar. In the [Zach Theatre’s Nowlin Studio](#), the Rudes have set up camp rather like warring Greeks since their own [home venue](#) was a casualty last year of Austin’s real estate boom. A wall visually dominates Amanda Perry’s scenic design, but the surrounding white tents between which the audience must find their seats ask us to join the rank of the Greeks ourselves — craning our necks up at Troy, eavesdropping on Achilles, perhaps complicity. We all even drink from the same keg. Seriously.

Helen, portrayed strikingly by Catherine Grady, potently delivers the prologue that Shakespeare gave to a chorus. We land many years already into the siege of Troy, at a time when generals and princes are losing their patience. For the woman whose face launched a thousand ships, however, a decade of war is happening to her, and Lynn’s attitude that Helen is a person making decisions every day for survival is clear.

The Rudes have developed a true adaptation, a cover of the original rather than a theater event inspired by Shakespeare, so the scenes roughly follow his schema. Cressida’s (Crystal Bird Caviel) first words to Troilus (Noel Gaulin) capture at once the contemporariness, sweetness and the absurdity that these two characters took so many scenes to even meet: “Finally, hey.

In what feels like the most purposeful deviation, the dozen actors in the ensemble present many kinds of bodies without the casting seeming deliberate. It’s a version of the Trojan War in which it matters that Achilles (John Christopher) is a gay black man and it’s often hard for *Agamomnem* (Lauren Lane) to command respect as a woman leading an army.

It seems fitting, then, that Ulysses (hilariously and fiendishly played by Jeff Mills) keeps much of the sentiment of the famous “degree and order” speech in which he insists that the world is at its best when everybody stays in their place — as delivered by a cis-gendered, white, able male. Mills plays it for laughs.

The original play is, of course, a love story gone wrong. It’s also a plot gone caput, though, and that’s not easily put right in any retelling. Truly moving scenes in which characters confront the nature of love, of legacy, of what it means to psychologically transform oneself into a soldier awkwardly abutt lectures and jeremiads.

The Rudes’ production chooses instead to launch into parades with t-shirt cannons or unsettlingly beautiful shadow puppets. It invites the audience to celebrate the characters’ victories and replaces the confusion of the final battle with an upbeat full company musical number celebrating mortality.

The Rudes have “fixed” everything but the plot of “Troilus and Cressida” and that they have chosen to embrace the chaos that is war, that is history and that is love.

By the end of the play, we see exactly what Helen told us in the prologue. There are no heroes here, although their names are Achilles, Cassandra, Troilus, or Cressida. Instead, we glimpse people making choices every day for survival, aware and not aware of what historians will make of them.

To this refreshing, human adaptation I say, “Finally, hey.”