

Rude Mechs modernizes another Shakespeare play, with dynamic results

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It's easy to see why "Troilus and Cressida" is considered one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." Tonally, it shifts wildly between witty comedy, brooding violence and sensual bawdiness, while its characters' personalities are often enigmatically difficult to understand. Though these issues might be a problem for a classical repertory theater that wants to stage the tragedy, they serve as nothing but an opportunity for Austin's experimental theater collective the Rude Mechs. "Fixing Troilus & Cressida," their latest work, takes "Troilus and Cressida" and turns it into a high-energy, accessible production for modern audiences.



This is the third production in the Rude Mechs' Fixing Shakespeare Series, following "King John" and "Timon of Athens." The idea behind the series, as the program explains, is to "take Shakespeare's least produced plays, translate them line by line into contemporary English, including the cursing and vulgarity, cutting the number of characters down to about 10, gender screwing them towards parity, and editing the whole thing for joy with no fidelity to the original text."

So does "Fixing Troilus & Cressida" actually "fix" Shakespeare? If the goal is to create a nuanced, exciting, darkly hilarious play that showcases the modern complexities of these characters, then it absolutely does.

To begin with, Kirk Lynn's writing is sharply on point, updating Shakespeare's language, especially the extended metaphors and smutty jokes, with a crackling vitality that is at turns downright hilarious and poignantly heartbreaking. Director Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw — aided by the work of costume/properties designer Aaron Flynn, lighting designer Stephen Pruitt, composer/sound designer Peter Stopschinski, scenic designer Amanda Perry and stage manager Madison Scott — has taken that complex text and turned it into an immersive experience, where the line between actors and audience is frequently erased. The intimate staging, for example, gives new energy to Shakespeare's frequent asides; it's hard not to see these in a new light when an actor is giving this speech while looking directly into your eyes.

The cast, for their part, seem to revel in the opportunities provided by playing such linguistically nimble and athletically energetic parts in a uniquely interactive setting. By conflating Shakespeare's large cast down to only ten parts, the text gives each character a variety of different levels to explore, ranging from snarky comedy to jealous rage. The sharp divide between the more broadly humorous first act and the bloodily tragic second act starkly turns characters that had been comic relief in the first half into downright frightening figures in the second. Lauren Lane, for example, plays Agamomenem, a gender-switched version of Greek general Agamemnon, and effortlessly switches from a character whose every line elicits uproarious laughter to a vengeful leader in the midst of bloody warfare.

After the production, I overheard Jeff Mills, who plays Ulysses, say to a friend, "Everybody loves the villain." To Mills' credit (as well as Lynn and Shaw's credit), not once during the production did I actually view Ulysses as a villain. Rather, he was a complex, if at times buffoonish, warrior with motivations that put him at odds with some of the other characters. This is emblematic of what "Fixing Troilus & Cressida" does so well. It takes what is seen as a "problem" in the original Shakespearean text — the contradictions of characters from a playwright who is known for white-hatted heroes and black-capped villains — and turns it into a complicated exploration of decidedly modern characters. **You needn't be a Shakespeare fan to enjoy "Fixing Troilus & Cressida"; you need only be a fan of interesting, dynamic theater.**