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## Shawn Sides: An Interview.

by Caridad Svich

Shawn Sides is co-founder and artistic director of the Austin-based theater ensemble Rude Mechanicals. This interview was conducted online September 2001.

**CS:** LIPSTICK TRACES is now set for a Jan/Feb 2002 tour, after a successful run in Austin and at The Foundry Theatre in NYC and the run in Austin. Greil Marcus' book is, of course, a seminal text on the punk movement, but who would've predicted a theater piece would have come of it? How did the project come to be?

**SS:** We couldn't have predicted ourselves until the moment we grabbed the book and said 'Yeah, that's it.' That's really the whole story of how it came about. We were thinking about future projects and the book was right there in front of us and so we grabbed it. We love this book, even though none of us had read it cover-to-cover when we decided to adapt it. It was almost a dare to each other because it seemed impossible, but that challenge was also part of the turn-on. We just work on what gets us going - ideas or people or phenomena that can maintain our interest over months of development and rehearsal. And I think that not knowing everything about the material at the start is important. It helps maintain the interest. It's curiosity, like having a crush. We have to have a crush on the material we make plays about.

**CS:** And how to interpret the British punk scene, the NY punk scene as document and history for an audience who may not even know the difference between the two movements and their corollaries?

**SS:** Well, that's all Greil really - what's there. Actually, there's not much explanation of the difference between the two scenes in the play because - even though it's in the book a bit - that's not the heart of the book. a r'n'r geneology - And with a book of LT's scope turned into a play there's just not time for anything that's not the heart of the material. I think the only people who missed more info on the NY scene were the aficionados, people for whom drawing those distinctions is very important. And I understand that it is important, but there wasn't time to dwell on that sort of 'exposition'. More than anything we wanted to express the feeling - not the feeling of punk - but the feeling of the book, which is the desire for the feeling that punk generated. It's a manic desire, not a nostalgic one.

**CS:** And how has it changed as new performers have taken over the roles originated by members of Rude Mechanicals?

**SS:** The dynamic changed. In New York, although the feeling of ensemble was there I don't think it was as strong. That's natural given that the New York cast had three weeks with the material before opening night, as opposed to a year, not to mention

lacking the years of history in a company with each other. It's a tangible thing, ensemble, but it's very difficult to point to or articulate. It's just a feel - a feeling in the room (the rehearsal room and on stage). The New York cast gave some really knock-you-on-your-ass individual performances. I think both ways, both productions served the play well. In Austin, there was a sense of a group of people trying to tell a certain story together. In New York, it was more these individual voices, each demanding to be heard. Both of those ways of expressing serve this particular play well. In January, we're touring with most of the original cast. Then in September with the New York cast. So it hasn't changed in any permanent way - it switches back and forth..

**CS: Do you feel any pressure now to live up to expectations set forth by LIPSTICK TRACES' success, or do you feel as a director you will just keep doing what you do, and continue to be inspired by your colleagues in Austin and elsewhere?**

**SS:** When we made Requiem for Tesla we were already feeling that pressure, and the result was, in the opinion of the company at least, we made a play that was more successful as a piece of theater than Lipstick Traces. So the pressure is a good thing - to keep cranking up the heat on yourself as an artist. But there's the difference between artistic success and 'attention.' We love attention because we're all exhibitionists, plus we're all broke all the time and sometimes when you get attention you also get a check. But ultimately, that kind of pressure is mostly irrelevant since all we can do about it is continue what we do, getting inspiration from wherever we get it from, trying to make our art better and better. The attention that a particular piece gets couldn't change the way we work.

**CS: You co-founded Rude Mechanicals in 1995. What was the inspiration behind establishing the company, and how have you survived doing work which is so clearly off-center (no pun intended on your performance space)?**

**SS:** Personally, the inspiration was this group of people that I loved and wanted to work with because we shared an aesthetic and work ethic. I knew these were people who wanted to mess around with form and structure as well as content and were willing to be pretty brave about that. I also knew these were people who weren't going to bag when it got hard or boring. And that's also how we've survived - we confide in each other and fight a lot and support each other and clean up after each other's burn out. Not one of us has to carry the giant burden alone.

Austin has been very welcoming to the kind of work we do. We've been very fortunate. We have an audience base that is supportive and recidivistic. No one's ever treated us like we're too 'weird' or anything. I have always felt that as long as we keep a sense of humor in what we do and keep remembering that it's ultimately about the audience's experience, there's nothing we could do here that would be too extreme. It's kind of a dada place, Austin. Maybe it's because it's a college town, I don't know. Most people here are very open to art, traditional or 'experimental' or whatever, as long as it isn't pretentious.

**CS: This year marks the first time in your season that you have brought artists outside of Austin to work with Rude Mechs. Darron West has come in from NY to direct Chuck Mee's BIG LOVE, with which you are currently in rehearsal. Exciting, provocative artists like Darron bring their unique energy to your company work. What are you learning, and do you foresee other kinds of collaborations in the future?**

SS: Working with Darron has been great for us. He's very much a collaborator in the rehearsal room like we are and he was always open to our ideas. It takes a certain kind of person to work with us, we all have our opinions about how a scene or a moment should play and none of us is shy about those opinions and often our opinions contradict each other. Darron has an amazing sense for when to let go and when to hold tight. For a while we've been incubating our process and our style, but at some point you want to open that up to outside artists and ideas or you stagnate. Working with Darron has given us an opportunity to incorporate a different aesthetic and we've learned a lot from him. Still, we collaborate with different artists on almost every project we work on. There have been very few Rude Mech shows that have been fully cast, directed and designed by company members because there just aren't that many of us.

CS: Austin has such a strong music scene, and the theater is thriving. Yet, there is always the lure of NY. Any company in the US feels it. Think of Steppenwolf, for instance. How do you maintain a company in the US, especially one dedicated in part to breaking boundaries? The Wooster Group and Mabou Mines are such rare examples/models.

SS: We all work on outside projects all the time, but we always come back to the company because that's where get the most satisfaction. We have a history and a vocabulary and a shorthand with each other. And a shared vision. That's so rare, and at the risk of sounding mushy, it's a gift (a blessing-gift not a talent-gift). We're very collaborative and I think most of the companies that survive are collaborative. If you don't feel some ownership, if you don't feel like your ideas and vision matter deeply to the whole, then there's no reason to stick around.

CS: We live in a culture which is needlessly based on Freudian concepts. So much of the art, especially in the theater, is still bound by cause-and-effect, and a sense of victimhood and societal blame. Yet interestingly enough, music and technology are more and more dictated by concepts of randomness and alternative methodologies for ordering material and information. In making work, how do you find ways to speak to your culture and at the same time transcend it?

SS: I think Strictly linear, psychologically-driven plays speak less and less successfully to our culture. Maybe that's arrogant since all I really know is that they don't speak successfully to me. I just get really bored watching them. I keep wishing, when I'm watching those plays, that some character would do just one thing that is seemingly unmotivated or that like, I don't know, a hundred feral cats would run through the space or something. I don't feel let-in to those plays, like, The play is finished, with or without me; and the fictional world is closed and tidy; and so, why, exactly, is my presence as an audience required? I'm a product of my culture, so I think by making the kinds of plays that I would want to go to we are speaking to that culture. I don't think we can transcend it - I don't know how that would be possible. But we can ignore the traditions that have become obsolete (or transform them) and exploit the ones that still resonate.

CS: The American theater tradition is based to a large extent on minstrelsy, music-hall, and vaudeville - that is our performance tradition. Ephemeral at best, because it is not a tradition based necessarily on the written text, and yet it seems US work is only "legitimized" when primacy is given to a theater that is literary in focus. How do you embrace the ephemeral and make an audience understand the necessity for the "illegitimate?"

SS: I think American audiences understand it already. We want to be entertained at the same time that our brains are being engaged. We understand slapstick and song and dance and variety show structures. That's what we were all raised on. and we just understand those rhythms - and those rhythms and structures aren't shallow. Of course, as theater artists we could make something facile and silly out of them. But they can also be used - are often used - to make pieces that are quite sophisticated. It's a difficult thing to capture on paper if you're, say, sending out a script, and I guess putting things down on a piece of paper is what allows them to be 'legitimized.' I'm still not sure how to put them on paper. Charles Mee can do it. "countrysongcountrysongcountrysongcountrysong" - that does it (Huh? I don't get it. Maybe a footnote for those of us who don't get the reference to "countrysongcountrysong....").

CS: Who have you learned from, or are still learning from?

SS: The other Rude Mechs, Anne Bogart and the SITl Company, The Butthole Surfers, my boyfriend Bucci, Carol Burnett, Kim Gordon, Deb Margolin, Brecht, Marlene Dietrich, Melanie Joseph at the Foundry, Elevator Repair Service, Saturday morning cartoons.

CS: How do you keep yourself dreaming?

SS: I drive. I have a really squeaky old '81 Cougar that I inherited from my grandmother so I don't usually go very far. But really, I'm a terrible procrastinator and daydreamer and I have to work to keep myself focused or else I'll just sort of wander around all day.

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