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Cover Story

## Staging War

An Austin theater troupe brings *Get Your War On* to life — sort of.

by Brian Howard



Three panels. Seven clip-art images. Seven undeveloped, interchangeable characters exchanging pointed, deadpan riffs on the repetitious blundering of an empire at war. On paper, David Rees' hugely poignant *Get Your War On* comic strip doesn't sound like much: Office drones quip dryly, sarcastically and incisively about American military efforts, first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. But on a computer screen (at [GetYourWarOn.com](http://GetYourWarOn.com)), it is one of the more consistently right-on critiques of what passes for U.S. foreign policy. Its format, however, hardly seems like something that could work on stage.

Consider the thespians of Rude Mechanicals unfazed by matters of what should and shouldn't work theatrically. The Austin, Texas-based troupe has spun Rees' comic into a 70-minute stage production made up almost entirely of the strips' verbatim dialogue — it even incorporates many of the actual strips into the set via overhead projectors.

"We always get into things we don't know we don't know how to do," admits Kirk Lynn, one of the troupe's five artistic directors. "Two or three months down the line [with *Get Your War On*] we were like, 'This is the hardest fucking thing we've ever done.'"

Rude Mechanicals, which has also adapted Griel Marcus' rock criticism-as-sociology tome *Lipstick Traces*, Donald Barthelme's postmodern novel *Snow White* and James Kelman's written-in-first-person-Scottish-working-class-slang *How Late It Was, How Late*, does not shy away from difficult-to-stage source material. "We got so carried away with the emotion of it all," says Lynn of *Get Your War On*. "We connected to this the way we connect to music, the way we connect to great visceral theater."

Lynn and company embarked on their adaptation with the blessing of Rees, who says he's denied other productions the right to adapt GYWO. "The Rude Mechs people seemed to really understand the comic," Rees explains. "They didn't just see it as a 'shocking' profane thumb-in-your-eye type of thing. They seemed to appreciate all the mixed emotions that drive the comic: anxiety, fear, anger, etc. ... I knew they had

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adapted *Lipstick Traces*, so I figured GYWO would be a snap."

It probably helped that Rude Mechanicals had no intention of adding any of those pesky theater contrivances like character development or concrete setting, aiming only to capture the angst and incredulousness embodied in Rees' intentionally underdeveloped, everyman/everywoman characters.

"We keep it two-dimensional," says Lynn. "We don't want to embody these characters. We want to be honest with the audience. We don't want them to pretend they're receding into a fiction. We abandoned the idea very quickly that these guys are actual characters. David said in an interview, or maybe in a letter we got from David, that they're not characters of consistent thoughts and beliefs. It's not set at desks, though a lot of times we are holding a phone to our face — without cords, because we think that's funny. We did try having it set at desks, but it starts to sound like a bad sitcom."

Having twice seen Rees read his own comics, Lynn and Rude Mechanicals decided to let the comics speak for themselves. The production consists of five actors onstage speaking the actual dialogue of *Get Your War On* comics while five overhead projectors display the panels being enacted. Sometimes the actors are in chairs holding phones without cords. Sometimes they're at a break table. (Both settings are consistent with the comic.) There is some singing — "a performance of the clip-art people singing 'Oh, Telephone' to the audience," says Lynn, "and Bowie's 'Life on Mars' when Bush is talking about Mars in that great State of the Union address" — a montage of world leaders on the phone and a grand finale involving doughnuts, a water cooler and manic overhead projectors.

The production has received rave reviews in Austin, which should come as no surprise. Rude Mechanicals' performance at the Live Arts and Fringe festival will be their first outside their liberal incubator. And while they figure their stops in Philadelphia and later Washington, D.C., will be warm and welcoming, the troupe is also planning stops in Houston and finally Marfa, Texas, a tiny West Texas town with a population around 2,100 that's 464 miles from Austin and seemingly that far from anything else. "There's some weird, eclectic people [in Marfa]," says Lynn. "But there's also a lot of people from West Texas." That's a nice way of saying not the sort of liberal, Bush-hating peaceniks the comic tends to appeal to.

Which isn't to say Rude Mechanicals has only been preaching to the choir with *Get Your War On*. "We get people who are upset. People have walked out," says Lynn. "We had a soldier who stayed with us for two hours and forty-five minutes afterward [discussing the play's politics]. The people who get really pissed off often comment that we're not offering a counter solution, like clip-art cartoons are supposed to offer a counter foreign policy."

But the production does have its fans among people who could influence foreign policy. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, who represents Austin in Congress, is purportedly a supporter of the troupe, and while it's not certain he'll be in attendance when they bring *Get Your War On* to D.C., Lynn says he's heard that several of his staffers plan to attend.

One guy who won't be seeing the play is Rees himself. "I'm a real control freak," says Rees, "so I'm afraid that if I saw the adaptation and it wasn't exactly like how I imagined it, I would make a bunch of suggestions or try to take over the production and add a bunch of shit like a grumpy old man robot or a laser light show, and I wouldn't know what I was doing and would make an ass of myself and come across as a nut, and since I believe in the Rude Mechs and I don't want to make an ass of myself and have them talk shit about me, I figure I should just stay home and watch TV."

On a more serious note, Rees adds, "I think it would be weird to see the performance, because the comic is so personal to me ... it would be like seeing other people interpret my thoughts or something. Like seeing my mind onstage. Does that make me sound crazy?"

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*Get Your War On (Rude Mechanicals)*, Sept. 13-15, 9 p.m.; Sept. 16, 7 and 10 p.m., \$15, The Arcadia Stage, Arden Theatre Company, 40 N. Second St., 215-413-9006, [www.livearts-fringe.org](http://www.livearts-fringe.org).



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