

Austin American-Statesman

ENTERTAINMENT// ARTS

'Not Every Mountain' traces time, loss and resilience for Austin's Rude Mechs

Show at Fusebox Festival recalls the loss of troupe's Off Center space

By [Michael Barnes](#), Columnist | April 13, 2026



"Not Every Mountain" is a poetic meditation on permanence and the passage of time. The show plays the Fusebox Festival this week.
Bret Brookshire/Texas Performing Arts

In May 2017, the Rude Mechs — one of Austin's most widely recognized theater companies — lost their space, the Off Center, located in an old warehouse a block off of East Seventh Street.

Rough around the edges, it had been their home base for 18 years.

It also provided an anchor for other creative groups. In fact, it helped promote a whole Austin scene around "warehouse theaters" and "warehouse studios and galleries," not just in East Austin.

Then those warehouses, many alongside railroad tracks, started to disappear.

A few pioneers, like the Vortex and later Women & Their Work, purchased their properties, providing a degree of security and permanence.

The Off Center property, however, was owned by the University of Texas, which ran an elementary school nearby. In 2017, UT had other plans for the land.

<https://www.statesman.com/entertainment/arts/article/austin-rude-mechs-every-mountain-fusebox-festival-22196360.php>

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The theatrical troupe had enjoyed 18 years of low rent. The loss of that lease hurt, and not just for financial reasons. For some, it still hurts.

Just five years earlier in 2012, the Rude Mechs, which have performed their singular shows all over the country, had been named the university's theater company "in residence," a rare honor.

That relationship continued in various forms. Rudes taught — and still teach — at UT.

In 2019, just two years after the Off Center closed, the group restaged "Method Gun" — its wonderfully rambling take on acting gurus and their obsessive followers — at UT's Payne Theatre, the flagship space of the theater and dance department.

It looked as if the Rude Mechs could, indeed, survive the loss.

International crisis and artistic hiatus



The Rude Mechs' "The Method Gun" featured, from left, Jason Liebrecht, Lana Lesley, Shawn Sides and Hannah Kenah.

Alan Simons

You know where this timeline is going: The very next year, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Some quiet work continued under relatively safe conditions at Crashbox, the Rude Mechs' small "clubhouse" space in East Austin.

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For some Rude Mechs, the suffocating atmosphere of the pandemic still hasn't lifted.

“Right now, I find myself adrift, like I'm drafting on everyone's interest and energy,” says Lana Lesley, one of the company's leaders. “That happens. I'm not worried. I'm still committed, and I still think we are badass playmakers. And I'm happy so many of us are creating so much new work this year.”

Meanwhile, Kirk Lynn, the company's primary playwright, is philosophical about their situation. “The Rudes especially have always loved the hours after a show, when we sit around, drink beer and talk to audiences and each other,” says Lynn, who teaches playwriting at UT. “The great hiatus — brought about by the pandemic, and then the stresses that put on people's lives and finances, and the funding realignments from the national and local governments and the major foundations, (and) the stress on our individual donors and patrons — all of that made me more grateful for the Rudes. We have a commitment and a stubbornness that exceeds our good sense.”

Back on the theatrical trail



Kira Small and Eric Ramos were incandescent in Rude Mechs' inventive and moving version of "Our Town," staged with the utmost simplicity by Shawn Sides.
Provided by Rude Mechs

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By 2024, the Rudes had swerved back into creative form with a luminous staging of “Our Town,” directed by Shawn Sides. The ultra-simple concept included audience members reading selected passages from Thornton Wilder’s heartbreaking classic about the passage of time.

For the most part, the response was rapturous.

In 2025, this staging of “Our Town” won the inaugural prize for outstanding play from the newly constituted Austin Theatre Critics Awards.

“I’m the one who doesn’t really feel like the last few years have been a hiatus,” says director Sides. “There was a hiatus, for sure. But it ended for me when we did ‘Our Town’ in 2024. Since then, although we haven’t been cranking out work like it’s 1999, we’ve been meeting regularly and making plans and always stewing on something, even if it’s not formally in the rehearsal room.”

In other ways, the Rudes are still reemerging after their pandemic hiatus. A rare true collaborative with five co-producing artistic directors, they come to their projects in a roundabout way, sometimes at retreats or during travel or just over long lunches. Ideas fly. The best concepts burble to the top.

“Used to be every few years one of the artistic directors would try to quit and get talked back into it, or convinced to delay,” Lynn says, “but now, I think we have decided there is no way out.”

‘Not Every Mountain’ on the big stage



The Rude Mechs come fully out of their post-pandemic hiatus with "Not Every Mountain."
Bret Brookshire/Texas Performing Arts

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One of the Rudes' most poignant shows returns to the stage April 17-19. "Not Every Mountain," the piece that grew out of their feelings of loss after the Off Center closed in 2017, will play the UT Payne Theatre.

Presented by Fusebox and Texas Performing Arts, it is part of the Fusebox Festival, which has presented hundreds of daring works since 2005. (Tickets: texasperformingarts.org)

In this original show, the company, slowly, poetically, employs various building materials to create and uncreate mountain ranges.

Festival material calls it: "A mellow meditation on change, permanence and our place in the natural world. It tells the story of the life cycle of mountains and the processes by which they are born and eventually laid to rest, an invocation of tectonic force and geologic time."

Reviving "Not Every Mountain" makes a statement about the company's 30th anniversary. Things may come and go, but the Rude Mechs never stop creating.

"Thirty years of Rude Mechs is a testament to radical persistence," says Madge Darlington, one of the company leaders. "I am profoundly proud of this anniversary — a three-decade commitment not only to the arts, but to one another. Even as Austin's rising costs squeeze out the very creators who built its cultural identity, we have remained," she continues, "We found a way to endure — to keep paying artists for work that matters, and to be a resource for the community and young artists making new work. The next 30 years are about more than just survival — they are about deepening the communities we create through performance in liminal, third spaces."

Right now, Lynn relishes the people and the work of the post-hiatus era.

"There are very few people who know me as well as the Rudes," Lynn says. "They've seen me struggle and fall down. They've seen me really struggle and grow a little. They've been with me through a lot of sadness and a mountain of good times. And we have this club where we can get in a room and not know things together. We cannot know big things, like what our lives mean and how to keep going, and we cannot know small things, like how to make a play about the Wright Brothers, or Austin. And sometimes we can use our ignorance about the big things to fuel the small things, and sometimes we can use our struggle with the small things to forget about the big things for a while."