

# Introduction: The "Fixing Shakespeare"

## Appropriations in Performance Cluster

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### Is Shakespeare Broken?

What would it mean to "fix Shakespeare" by adapting his works? The three essays that follow engage with the "Fixing Shakespeare" adaptation series, put on in Austin, Texas by local theatre company The Rude Mechs. The series so far comprises playwright Kirk Lynn's adaptations of *King John*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. By "fixing" these plays, the Rude Mechs seek, as their website proclaims, to "make Shakespeare's least produced plays useful again" (Rude Mechs 2013). Kathryn Van Winkle, Loren Cressler, and Kristin Perkins each address one of these productions, tackling such questions as what does it mean to make a play "useful" by adapting it, and how does one go about doing so? When adapting a Shakespeare play, what, if anything, does the playwright "owe" to Shakespeare? What are the risks of reshaping Shakespeare's plots and characters with the goal of speaking to contemporary concerns? Is Shakespeare broken? Can his works be "fixed?" If so, did Lynn and the Rude Mechs succeed in fixing them?

Founded in 1995, the Rude Mechs—whose name, of course, is an irreverently abbreviated version of the moniker Puck gives the amateur theatre troupe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—do not limit themselves to Shakespearean adaptations, instead producing what they describe as a "genre-averse slate of original theatrical productions peppered with big ideas, cheap laughs, and dizzying spectacle" (Rude Mechs 2016). As this list suggests, the company places significant emphasis on producing theatre that is entertaining as well as thought-provoking. Their approach to making theatre emphasizes "the use of play to make performance, the use of theaters as meeting places for audiences and artists, and the use of humor as a tool for intellectual investigation" (Rude Mechs 2016). The Fixing Shakespeare adaptations pursue this mission by extending a playful hand to audiences to guide them through the mostly unfamiliar landscapes of these stories. Lynn's versions of the Shakespearean texts take an irreverent approach to the work of a venerated playwright, using contemporary language and sprinkling the theater's air with liberal and liberating doses of profanity.

Lynn, who is a professor of playwriting at the University of Texas at Austin, is one of six Co-Artistic Directors of the Rude Mechs. He has written or adapted over twenty plays for the company. Inspired to "fix Shakespeare" by listening to The White Stripes' cover of Robert Johnson's "Stop Breaking Down," he says, "I wanted to cover a classic of the theatre and make it sound as wild and new as the White Stripes had done to 'Stop Breaking Down.' I wanted that same tension" (Rude Mechs 2013). Lynn describes his approach to adapting these little-produced plays as "an attack borne out of respect." By treating these plays without reverence, Lynn's work paradoxically shows its respect for Shakespeare by finding the most valuable and interesting elements of these works and highlighting them for a modern audience.

### How Do They Fix It?

Each of the essays that follows engages with one play in the series. Kathryn Van Winkle's discussion of the first Fixing Shakespeare production, 2013's *Fixing King John*, argues that the Rude Mechs did succeed in making the play useful to a contemporary audience. Van Winkle characterizes Lynn's adaptation as "much more rebellion than tribute." She analyzes the play's interventions into *King John* in the context of the Shakespeare play's adaptation-filled production history. Comparing Lynn's claim to authenticity for this play to analogous claims made by the Original Practices movement in Shakespearean production, she argues that *Fixing King John* trades in "contingency, encounter, and surprise." By dispensing with Shakespeare's original language and transforming its structure, characters, and gender relationships, she contends, the adaptation becomes "useful" both to the company and to its audience.

In his examination of debt in *Fixing Timon of Athens* (2016), Loren Cressler asks whether playwrights and theatre companies that produce Shakespearean adaptations owe something to the original text, and, if so, what that debt might be. He argues that in this case, the play does not take on a debt to Shakespeare and Middleton, but rather "offer[s] a performance that entertains, refines, and critiques." Employing the idea of "value added," he lays out several examples of how *Fixing Timon of Athens* succeeds in its quest to "present a mode of adaptation as criticism." By making Timon's betrayal by his friends more personal, showing more clearly how Timon's wealth has isolated him, and transforming Timon's epitaph into a sign of self-pity, Lynn "creates for us a satisfying narrative of a play that, flaws and all, tried to do and say something important, and it celebrates that effort." Thus, while *Fixing Timon of Athens* does not necessarily incur an explicit debt to the original play's authors, it nevertheless respects the original text even as it alters much of it.

Addressing the portrayal of queer identity in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, Kristin Perkins engages with another meaning of the word "fixing," that is, to set in place, to solidify. She examines

how the play fits into the legacy of historical portrayals of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. From Homer onward, authors have often been ambiguous as to the characters' sexuality, as she shows. *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, however, explicitly portrayed them as a gay couple. Perkins expresses appreciation for this representation, but she also critiques its effect on the play's ability to engage with queerness in a broader sense. By rendering Achilles and Patroclus as clearly queer, she argues, the play loses a valuable element of earlier portrayals: "the audience for *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* witnesses a gay relationship but does not contend with the historical queer 'other' who suggests broader possibilities for queer existence." Lynn makes these characters and their relationship too familiar, she claims, and thus denies the audience a valuable opportunity to contend with challengingly distant versions of queer identity.

### Futures

The Fixing Shakespeare series is not complete: the Rude Mechs held a staged reading of *Fixing the Last Henry*, Lynn's adaptation of *Henry VIII*, in June 2019. In producing and witnessing these "fixed" adaptations, the company and their audiences will doubtless continue to wrangle with the questions that arise in these essays. Even for those who never get the opportunity to see one of the Fixing Shakespeare productions, issues such as the extent of an adapting playwright's "debt" to Shakespeare remain vital for those interested in appropriations of his work. By engaging with this particular series of Shakespearean adaptations, the critical explorations that follow provide new lenses through which to examine these questions.

### References

- Rude Mechs. 2013. "Fixing King John." *Rude Mechs*. Accessed October 8, 2019. <https://rudemechs.com/shows/fixingkingjohn.html>.
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