

How King John Would Have Preferred to Die, If He Hadn't Been Poisoned by the Crown: The Rude Mechs Fix *King John*

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Abstract

Upon announcing the 2013 premiere of *Fixing King John* at The Off Center, playwright Kirk Lynn and his Austin, Texas theatre company, the Rude Mechs, pledged to make "Shakespeare's least produced works 'useful' again" (Rude Mechs 2013). Now rarely staged, *King John* was once regarded as far more "useful." The conflict between authenticity and the impulse to "fix" *King John* through adaptation is central to its production history. In *Fixing King John*, Lynn adapts the original's language structure, gender representation, and language; while in production, the company transformed the relationship of the performers to their characters and the text through improvisation and autobiographical comment. While appropriating the discourse of "authenticity," the Rude Mechs made *King John* "useful again" for their contemporary Austin spectators.

Introduction

In 2013, the Rude Mechs, an ensemble-based Austin theater collective, inaugurated their "Fixing Shakespeare" series, which promises to "make William Shakespeare's least produced works useful again," with a production of *Fixing King John* (Rude Mechs 2013). Playwright Kirk Lynn developed the script by "translating" several lines of Shakespeare's *King John* into contemporary English each day. Then he combined subplots and characters, reducing the cast from twenty-two to ten. Lynn recalls editing "with no loyalty to the original, simply trying to tell a good story in rich language, and to expose some genuine emotion of mine about self-regard and repentance" (Rude Mechs 2013). The first line of Shakespeare's original, King John's address to the French ambassador,

Now, say, Chatillion, what would France with us? (1.1.1)

becomes

What the fuck? France? Fuck France. What do you want? Wait. Kneel first and say it again (Lynn 2013, 2).

The script, and the production as directed by Madge Darlington, offer a pungent, bellowing, adrenaline-fueled treatment of *King John* that emphasizes the cynicism of domination-based politics and the waste of war.

The audacity of presuming to "fix" Shakespeare is tempered by the Rude Mechs' more pragmatic mission: to return to use a play that has fallen out of favor. *King John* concerns the king's struggles—amidst war with France, civil unrest, and excommunication by the Pope—to hold his throne against rival claimant Prince Arthur. As the son of John's elder brother Geoffrey, Arthur has an equally strong claim. *King John* was one of the most popular Shakespeare plays in the nineteenth century, but today is widely regarded as a convoluted play featuring an un compelling protagonist. If frequency of production corresponds to usefulness, then *King John* is currently Shakespeare's 10th most useless play. Dan Kopf, a data scientist at Priceonomics.com, analyzed nearly 2000 professional productions of Shakespeare in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia between 2011 and mid-2016 to produce a ranking of production by play, or "our revealed preference—a combination of what companies can and want to perform and what people want to see" (Kopf 2016). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* holds the top spot, followed by *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*. Down at the bottom, *King John* outranks only *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, *Henry IV Part 2*, *Timon of Athens*, *Henry VI* (all three parts), *Henry VIII*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Since *Fixing King John*, the Rude Mechs have "fixed" *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and have just admitted another play for treatment: "Fixing the Last Henry" is in the works (Rude Mechs 2018). With *Fixing King John*, the Rude Mechs do make *King John* "useful again" for their twenty-first-century Austin audience, through interventions into its structure, characters, gender representation, language, and the relationship of the performers to the text.

A Brief History of *King John* Adaptation

King John was once regarded as far more "useful" than it is today, and the conflict between authenticity and the impulse to "fix" *King John* through adaptation is central to its production history. *King John* enjoyed some popularity in the eighteenth century, and was among the most popular Shakespeare plays in both England and the United States throughout the nineteenth century, before losing ground in the twentieth.¹ Authenticity was a major selling point of the February 1737 Covent Garden performance of *King John*. The "Shakespeare Ladies Club," founded

in 1736, successfully "persuade[d] London's theatrical managers to give Shakespeare a greater share in their repertoires," supporting productions of long-neglected plays including *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, and *King John* (Avery 1956, 153). Billed "as written by Shakespear" and produced "at the Desire of several ladies of Quality," the production was understood as a retort to Colley Cibber's adaptation, *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John* (Avery 1956, 154). Cibber, "mocked for his arrogance in believing that he could improve on Shakespeare's original," withdrew the script in the middle of rehearsals (Cousin 1994, 4-5). Cibber later produced the adaptation in 1745, as the allied menaces of French invasion and Jacobite rebellion threatened a return to a Catholic monarchy in England. Garrick performed a rival version at Drury Lane Theatre, giving London theater-goers a choice between Shakespeare's original and a new adaptation in which Cibber sought to "fix" what he saw as an alarming ambivalence towards the debate over papal vs. royal authority (Cousin 1994, 5-6). Cibber's script and production were not well-received, however. The most lasting legacy of Cibber's adaptation is probably its role in inspiring Henry Fielding's hit 1737 play *The Historical Register for the Year 1736*. Fielding satirized the Cibber affair, with a narrator figure approving of Cibber's presumption on the grounds that "as Shakespeare is already good enough for people of taste, he must be altered to the palates of those who have none; and if you will grant that, who can be properer to alter him for the worse?" (quoted in Cousin 1994, 5).

Producers continued to "fix" *King John* in the nineteenth century, cutting lines and scenes in order to shore up John's claim to the throne, represented in Shakespeare's original as no better than his rival's. In 1803 and 1804, London again saw major productions of an adapted and an original *King John*, both "capitalis[ing] on the current atmosphere of public danger"—in this case, the Napoleonic wars (Cousin 1994, 12). Spectators' tastes in the nineteenth century for moments of high drama and pathos, and for virtuosic performances of impassioned rhetoric, were well served by *King John*'s episodic nature. For Charles Kemble's 1823 Covent Garden revival, the antiquarian James Robinson Planché's innovative research into the garb of the thirteenth century inspired a "new era" of spectacular productions designed with "what was taken for historical accuracy of costumes, often called the archaeology of staging" (Beaurline 1990, 15). In the context of *King John*'s production history, these "archaeological" productions mark a crucial confluence of "authenticity" and adapting the production to the times: promoting design as an aspect of originalism and accuracy, while "fixing" the prevailing tendency to costume Shakespearean history plays in a haphazard manner. They informed a popular sense of the past as distinct from but contiguous with the present, contributing to the formation of a romantic conception of English national identity.

Beerbohm Tree's 1899 revival at Her Majesty's Theatre bookends the era of sumptuous archaeological costume drama. This "swan-song for the grand old way" adapted the script to conform to received notions of King John's historical significance by inserting "a dumb-show of The Granting of the Magna Carta" (Beurline 1990, 4-6). Tree filmed three excerpts from the production, the first Shakespearean performances ever captured on film (Shaw and Rusche, 2019). At least one fragment, featuring Tree playing John's death scene in Act 5, scene 6, remains extant (Richmond, 2016). During World War II, the play's availability as a paean to patriotism and unity recommended it to London producers and audiences (Cousin 1994, 48). Beurline argues that politically motivated revivals drew in spectators who were quite surprised when they "discovered that it is an engaging drama" (Beurline 1990, 7). Still, *King John's* association with spectacle and nationalist pageantry contributed to its increasingly marginal status as tastes changed over the twentieth century.

The Rudes Fix Shakespeare

King John's production history, defined as much by extensive adaptation as by its waxing and waning popularity, makes *King John* a particularly appropriate choice to inaugurate a series of adaptations of lesser-known Shakespeare plays. The Rude Mechs trace their own lineage out of Shakespeare: the company was founded in 1995 by alums of Shakespeare at Winedale, an intensive summer program offered by The University of Texas at Austin's Department of English. Winedale students spend a summer in a converted barn in the Texas hill country, performing Shakespeare plays in repertory productions that give primacy to language and meter over spectacle. In a tribute to the influence of Shakespeare at Winedale on Austin theater, Lynn writes, "it is a ludicrous proposal that Shakespeare either can or should be performed by kids in a hick town in Texas at the height of the summer's battering heat. The spirit of that proposal lives on in the Rude Mechs' hope that the American avant-garde theater can and should have [a] home in Austin, Texas" (Lynn 2004).

The "Fixing Shakespeare" series is more rebellion than tribute, substituting an impudent, even "rude" spirit of experimentation for Winedale's characteristic reverence for Shakespeare's language. The title is a deliberate provocation—to "fix" presumes something is broken. Is *King John* broken? Perhaps. Its protagonist is opaque and unappealing, its plot lacks coherence (particularly in the second half), and the play fails the demands of many contemporary performers and spectators. For example, the few women characters vanish from the story in the final two acts. The play stands at a great distance from contemporary spectators, as it concerns complicated issues of legitimate succession, civil war, and conflict between the English monarchy and the Catholic Church. A spectator expecting a play about King John to feature Robin Hood or the Magna Carta

will be disappointed. As Emrys Jones argues, "of all Shakespeare's early plays this is the one that has receded furthest from us, so that a special effort is needed to recover it" (Jones 1977, 235).

The play does feature compelling characters, however. Faulconbridge, the illegitimate son of Richard the Lionheart, also known as the Bastard, is beloved for his humor and honor. The role of Constance, Arthur's mother, is challenging, encompassing enormous ambition, rage, cunning, and sorrow. Her speech beginning "grief fills the room up of my absent child" is as deeply felt and evocative as any mourning-piece in the canon (3.4.93-105). *King John's* themes—legitimacy, dispossession, power, "self-regard and repentance"—offered playwright Kirk Lynn scope to "tell a good story."

Lynn writes that *Fixing King John* was inspired by listening to The White Stripes' cover of Robert Johnson's "Stop Breaking Down," and remembering poet Charles Simic's "list of all the things a writer might be trying to do in a work of art":

. . . among them the contradictory effort to honor the classics while at the same time to overthrow them and to make some room for him or herself. A feeling developed. 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: an attack borne [sic] out of respect (Rude Mechs 2013).

This "attack borne out of respect" premiered November 7, 2013 in the Austin warehouse theater The Off Center and ran through November 24 (Rude Mechs 2013). Lynn's text "attacked" the original language, structure, characters, and gender representation, making *King John* "useful again" for his company, who contributed production design, direction, and performances.

Profane Authenticity

The text distinguishes *Fixing King John* as an adaptation—a writer's project—rather than a "reimagining" or interpretation—a director's project. Lynn's text is blunt and rhythmic, reminiscent of blank verse but composed of modern, often vulgar, vocabulary. Critic Phillip John of *Arts and Culture Texas* suggests "the vulgarity of the language did not in any way inhibit moments of utter beauty":

I was deeply moved by the war scene in which King John is marching around with his fly open screaming "I'm going to fuck you," Constance is spraying holy water at the audience "blessing us all to hell," the Bishop is drinking from his holy-water flask, and everyone else is doing something utterly terrible. The pulsating mass of profanity invoked the Dionysian

principle that united all onstage and all observing into a web of horror. That communicated the experience of war in a way that choreographed sword fights will never achieve (John 2013).

The giddy abundance of contemporary profanity in *Fixing King John* supports an argument that to adapt Shakespeare is to profane a sacred text. But as Lynn argues, "Shakespeare was nothing if not committed to cursing and smut" (Rude Mechs 2013). Far from being an act of illegitimate desecration, the performance of profanity is necessary for the Rudes to fulfill their audacious promise: "In some ways, we're offering you a more authentic experience of what a new Shakespeare play might be like than an actual Shakespeare play. In other ways, not so much" (Rude Mechs 2013). Lynn updates Shakespeare's curses to jolt a twenty-first-century audience into a mode of uncertainty and discovery, perhaps one verging closer, "in some ways," to an Elizabethan spectator's experience of a new play.

This "fix" creates a claim to authenticity that differs in significant ways from those offered by "original practices" (OP) theater companies. *Fixing King John* is not an original-practices production: the Rude Mechs did not experiment with early modern rehearsal practices, space and architecture, nor universal lighting, nor hand-made costumes. Most tellingly, *Fixing King John* eschews the practice of performing Shakespeare's original text. Rather than original practice, *Fixing King John* is in some sense an original play. However, the company's goal (defined on the *Fixing King John* landing page as "a more authentic experience of what a new Shakespeare play might be like") has recourse to OP rhetoric. In his essay "A Partial Theory of Original Practice," Jeremy Lopez suggests:

The rhetoric of pedagogy and outreach characteristic of original practices, which is consistent across companies even where the practices are not, indicates that what is perhaps more at stake than anything else is the mode by which we, experts in the field, communicate about the material we love and study to our students and to the theatre-going public Thus Ralph Alan Cohen [project director of the Blackfriars Playhouse and co-founder of the American Shakespeare Center] advocates an original-practices pedagogy: "a classroom, rightly configured, can show students how the Elizabethan stage unlocks an understanding of Shakespeare's words. . . ." (Lopez 2008, 314)

Fixing King John, in contrast, seeks to "unlock an understanding" of the Elizabeth stage by jettisoning Shakespeare's words entirely. Lopez warns that, while the "energy that goes into original-practices productions . . . always has the potential to become powerfully, beneficially

communal," it "does not necessarily have a rigorous intellectual component; and it can be dangerously misleading if mistaken for or enforced upon scholarly inquiry" (Lopez 2008, 315). While "rigor" as much as "energy" characterize the theatrical experiments of the Rude Mechs, the company tempers its promises with disclaimers and humor. Take the claim to "a more authentic experience" with a whole shaker of salt—the production website also claims that "attending *Fixing King John* will fix everything that's wrong in your life" (Rude Mechs 2013). Rather than an original-practices "authenticity" grounded in archival authority and mediated through what Lopez calls the "mystif[ied] craft of modern actors . . . through which we conjure an embodied and authentic past" (Lopez 2008, 315), the "more authentic experience" claimed by *Fixing King John* is grounded in contingency, encounter, and surprise.

Fixing King John in Production

Fixing King John shares an interest in spontaneous interaction between actor and audience with most original-practices theater. Beyond Lynn's adaptation, the Rude Mechs collaborated to make *King John* "useful again" by taking care of their audience. The simplicity of the production design and the house-party vibe, complete with a keg of free beer and abundant red solo cups, contributed to an atmosphere of welcome and accessibility. Towers of platforms and ladders—recycled from the Rudes' recent recreation of *Dionysus in 69*—surrounded the playing area. As spectators, we climbed and perched on and under different levels of scaffolding, while the actors performed in the round and amidst the audience. John recalls Robert S. Fisher as the Dauphin "marching about throughout the crowd . . . interrogating audience members as to their national allegiance, England or France" (John 2013). Costume designer Olivia Warner outfitted the cast in street clothes and symbols. The Dauphin (here pronounced "Dolphin") accessorized his jeans and turquoise plaid shirt ensemble with a sword and dangling feather earrings, while E. Jason Liebrecht as King John wore football pads over a white tank top, and a crown fashioned from a metal-studded belt and golden wire.

The simple production design also foregrounded the story, which Lynn and the Rudes made accessible for an audience hazy on Plantagenet history through judicious condensation of subplots and characters. Shakespeare's twenty-two roles become ten. The Bastard's brother is combined with Cardinal Pandulph as "the Bishop," a mash-up that streamlines domestic and foreign policies of villainy. In this "bastardization" of *King John*, Faulconbridge, here called only "Bastard," takes an even larger role in the proceedings. Lynn's adaptation merges the characters of the Bastard and Hubert de Burgh, so that it is the honorable Bastard who must reckon with his liege's rash suggestion that he "take care" of young Prince Arthur ("Arfur").

Most notable is the transformation of the Citizen of Angiers into a central, ultimately triumphant secondary protagonist. In Shakespeare's play, the armies of England and France threaten the walled town of Angiers with siege and devastation until a Citizen suggests an alliance of marriage between King John's niece Blanch and the Dauphin of France. Blanch is wholly subject to her patriarchal society: her response to the Dauphin's marriage proposal is "My uncle's will in this respect is mine" (2.1.510). On her wedding day, France and England nevertheless go to war, and with the following lament, Blanch vanishes from the play:

The sun's o'er-cast with blood: fair day, adieu!
 Which is the side that I must go withal?
 I am with both: each army hath a hand;
 And in their rage, I having hold of both,
 They swirl asunder and dismember me. (3.1. 326-36).

In Lynn's adaptation, Blanch has been vacationing in Angiers, and the Citizen bargains using her location: "We thought it might be better both ways not to let you know where Blanch is at. The French might try to snipe her with an arrow and you Brits might be more careful with your catapult if you don't know which part of the city not to smash to save her bones" (Lynn 2013, 17). After suggesting the marriage plot, the Citizen reveals himself to be Blanch in disguise.

By borrowing a familiar trope from Shakespeare's comedies, Lynn creates a new Shakespearean heroine, witty, willful, and ruthless: a Portia in a fever-dream history play. Blanch, played by Adriene Mishler, seduces the Dauphin into premarital sex. After her new husband's death in battle, Blanch conspires with the Bishop against John. She convinces King John to crown himself again. He places the crown on his head, but it is poisoned. In the Shakespeare play, John is poisoned by a nameless monk. The Bastard survives, swears fealty to John's son Henry, and ends the play with a solemn hymn to national unity:

This England never did, nor never shall,
 Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
 But when it first did help to wound itself.
 Now these her princes are come home again,
 Come the three corners of the world in arms,
 And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue,
 If England to itself do rest but true (5.7.110-18).

This conclusion made *King John* "useful" to historical theater-makers whenever England was threatened by foreign powers and civil unrest. For a twenty-first-century American audience, the Rudes made *Fixing King John* useful partially through an examination of gender roles and power. Blanch is pregnant, and her child will be heir to both France and England. A dying John asks, "How do you know your baby's a boy?"

BLANCH: With a crown on its head and a robe and standing at a distance on the ramparts, who'll ever know the difference? A citizen of Angiers taught me that. I think you met him I commanded the Kings of England and France from that position, and so will my kid, boy or girl. You taught me how to do this sort of thing (Lynn 2013, 81).

Blanch takes the places of the Citizen of Angiers and Prince Henry, who enters Shakespeare's play only in the final scene. She orchestrates peace between warring powers, first through the use of her own body and position, and perhaps lastingly through the use of poison and pregnancy.

Despite the possibility of a lasting peace, Lynn's ending is more chilling than Shakespeare's appeal to English unity. John ends the play in a mood of renunciation: "fuck being King of England. I wasn't even good at being king of myself. I never did anything the way I wanted to. Not one fucking thing" (Lynn 2013, 81). Blanch offers John a spoonful of golden honey from his kitchens, food for more self-recrimination: "To have it this whole time and never taste it 'til now—Jesus. I fucked my life up so bad. Give me a little more. Wait. Listen" (Lynn 2013, 82). "Listen," says King John, who rarely listened in life, and dies.

These are the final lines of the script, but the actor playing John continued speaking. After each death, the script calls for that character to say "as honestly as is available to her, how she would have preferred dying, if not of a heart attack in the palace" or "in an arbitrary act of folly" or "stabbed by this traitor" or "poisoned by the crown" (Lynn 2013, 55). For these moments, the performers stepped out of character and proposed their own ideal deaths, calmly and thoughtfully. Elizabeth Cobbe of *The Austin Chronicle* writes that "even with the raucous fun of most of the play, these times when the actors are able to say something honest and unadorned are what make *Fixing King John* the sort of show that sticks with you, days later" (Cobbe 2013). For John, this device of "hypothetical deaths tie the work to the present moment. The Bastard would have rather died on his porch in south Austin listening to jazz and smooching his wife. Arfur would have traded a hot tub and beer for his 'arbitrary folly'" (John 2013). *The Austin American-Statesman's* Cate Blouke describes these as "some of the loveliest moments . . . seemingly minor flourish[es] that nevertheless remind us of the grim realities of war" (Blouke 2013). The performances in *Fixing King John* echoed Lynn's "translation" of the original verse into a contemporary idiom.

The text of *King John* was "useful" for the acting styles popular on British and American stages in the nineteenth century, but became less and less useful for twentieth-century performers. Cousin argues that the turn to naturalism disadvantaged actors cast to deliver "highly complex, rhetorical speeches" that "invite expression in a heightened, declamatory style of performance which a modern susceptibility finds artificial and unconvincing" (Cousin 1994, 18). By providing an opportunity for improvisation and autobiography to intervene into the "translated" Shakespeare, the Rudes' production makes *Fixing King John* "useful" for the performance styles prized by their own twenty-first-century, ensemble-based company.

Do recognition and awards indicate a play is useful? *Fixing King John* won several awards for production, direction, original script and performances from the Austin Critics Table and B. Iden Payne Awards. With the 2013 production, the Rude Mechs simultaneously overthrew tradition and inherited a venerable legacy of "fixing" *King John* for present purposes. Scholars and classically trained actors might miss Shakespeare's verse and complex insight into Tudor politics refracted through a Plantagenet lens. But King John knows how to answer a challenge to his legitimacy: "Let's do it. Fuck you. No big deal" (Lynn 2013, 33).

Notes

1. The following discussion of production history owes much to Geraldine Cousin's *Shakespeare in Performance: King John* (1994).

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