

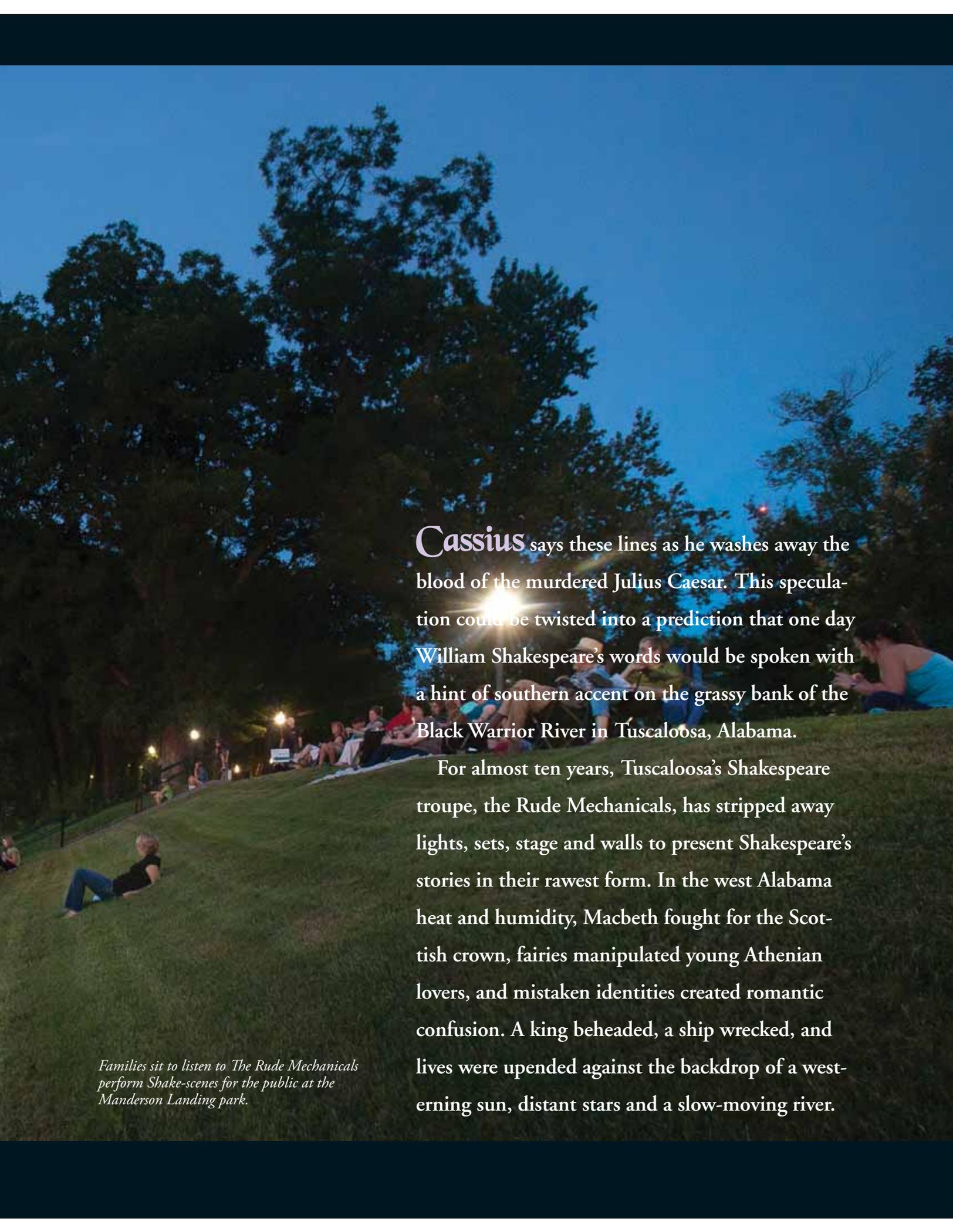
Rude Mechanicals

*How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!*

Cassius "Julius Caesar" Act 3, Scene 1

By Lynn Oldshue

Photography by Porfirio Solorzano



Cassius says these lines as he washes away the blood of the murdered Julius Caesar. This speculation could be twisted into a prediction that one day William Shakespeare's words would be spoken with a hint of southern accent on the grassy bank of the Black Warrior River in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

For almost ten years, Tuscaloosa's Shakespeare troupe, the Rude Mechanicals, has stripped away lights, sets, stage and walls to present Shakespeare's stories in their rawest form. In the west Alabama heat and humidity, Macbeth fought for the Scottish crown, fairies manipulated young Athenian lovers, and mistaken identities created romantic confusion. A king beheaded, a ship wrecked, and lives were upended against the backdrop of a westerning sun, distant stars and a slow-moving river.

Families sit to listen to The Rude Mechanicals perform Shake-scenes for the public at the Manderson Landing park.

“The Rude Mechanicals is not about a perfect, polished production with lights and a soundboard. It is about rough, sharp edges and finding a truth beyond the edge,” says Andre LaSalle, a former theater student at the University of Alabama who talked friends into joining the first performance. He also directed the first two seasons. “Storytelling and sharing human experiences are more important than special effects. It is a group of people standing under the night sky with their feet planted on the dirt of earth, not on a carpet or foundation, and telling a story to another group of people.”

The Rude Mechanicals found their name in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” where the original rude mechanicals are six blundering, untalented Athenian tradesmen who put on a play at the king’s nuptial celebration. “The rude mechanicals are the comic aspect of ‘A Midsummer Night’s dream,’” says Mark Hughes Cobb, one of the founders of The Rude Mechanicals and an actor in each play. “They are rude because they are spare, rough, and not refined. They are mechanical because they work with their hands. It is a comedy of terrible actors, and that fits us. We do rough, bare bones plays with a low production value and simple costumes, but we do it for the love of the people. That is as rude as it gets.”

“The Rude Mechanical performances continue because

there is a real interest and yearning for Shakespeare here,” says Steve Burch who collaborates with Cobb in artistic direction. “We are filling a niche. 500-700 people show up over the course of a run. People plan major picnics and bring their food and wine.”

There is no ticket or advance reservation. Just sit down and drop a donation in the hat as it passes by. Wear comfortable shoes. Bring the kids and stay a while. You can even laugh and respond to the action.

The primitive theater is informal, but intense preparation is needed to convert plays written when Elizabeth I was Queen and England defeated the Spanish Armada into words that are still filled with emotions and still in the moment.

In the winter, Cobb and Burch select the play, and Burch edits the script. Cutting Shakespeare’s words may seem irreverent, but trimming a two-hour play is for the comfort of the audience. The park does not have air conditioning or restrooms, so a Rude Mechanicals show can last no longer than 90 minutes.

“There is no one way to do a Shakespeare play,” says Burch. “Shakespeare allows actors and directors to find their own responses to material. This varies by director and it even varies each time that the same play is performed. I cut the material that gets in the way of telling the story so



**The Rude Mechanicals
found their name in
“A Midsummer Night’s
Dream,” where the
original rude mechanicals
are six blundering, untalented
Athenian tradesmen who
put on a play at the king’s
nuptial celebration.**



Natalie Hopper of The Rude Mechanicals performs a sonnet.

the play can move and have action.”

Shakespeare’s stories are strong enough for these alterations. Creative casting and development form characters that are slightly bent out of shape, but still recognizable. As long as the actor understands the character, the audience will understand the character.

“We do some gender-bending and make sure the cast is multi-racial,” says Burch. “Non-traditional casting can lead to greater richness.”

In “The Tempest,” Deborah Parker played Prospero, a male role that she always wanted to play. “Gender-bending works because the role is not about gender, it is about people,” says Parker, a regular member of the cast and also co-ordinator of many production details for the Rude Mechanicals. “Prospero is about being a parent and seeking revenge.”

The play is cast in

the spring, but the troupe does not hold open auditions. “We invite people we know and allow the people we don’t know to come in and start small,” says Burch. “The cast is typically 12 to 15 people and about half of these have been in multiple shows. One-third has been in every show. Students make up about half of the cast, and the rest of the cast is from town.”

“We have different levels of performers,” says Burch. “Some are professional actors. Some just want to be in a show. My job is to work with each actor’s strengths and find a place for that strength in the scene. We showcase actors at their best.”

Production begins with table work that allows actors to meet and explore their characters. Rehearsals run four to six weeks, three hours per day, six days per week. Lead roles take additional time to absorb their lines.

“I do this because I love wrapping my



People sit on the lawn to listen to The Rude Mechanicals perform Shake-scenes.

mouth around Shakespeare's words," says Parker. "The Elizabethan language can be difficult, but once the actor keys into what the character is feeling, the language barriers disappear. We are as a group passionate about Shakespeare. We would do anything to be a part of his plays."

Shakespeare's language is poetic and musical, which helps actors express emotions. He used hard, choppy words for anger and softer sounds for romantic words. Speaking naturally and clearly in Shakespearean verse is more demanding on an actor than contemporary plays. Wavering or uncertain Elizabethan English is hard for the audience to understand.

"We work hard to make these plays listenable," says Cobb. "We want the words to be beautiful, but you have to be understood and clear in your intentions. It has to be as intense as if it is happening for the first time."

In a stripped-down Rude Mechanicals' performance, the words must be strong enough to carry the meaning, color, and action of the show, without the support of costumes and props. Costumes wilt in the summer heat.

"Since we have limited costumes, we utilize the audience's creative imagination," says Burch. "They become our co-playmates and fill in what isn't there. We use tunics in basic colors and they can be converted to capes or ponchos. In 'Comedy of Errors,' we used matching ball caps to show the two sets of twins."

There are actions, like sword fights and beheadings, which demand more than imagination or a fake prop. "We used real swords in 'Macbeth,'" says Cobb who played the

title role of Macbeth. "Two guys banging sticks together wouldn't cut it. We needed the clang."

Shakespeare used music to set the mood of comedy, grief, internal struggles, love, and desire. The original music disappeared but Shakespeare's lyrics survived. The Rude Mechanicals sing these lyrics set to new melodies written by Cobb. "These songs are not for distracting the audience," says Burch. "All songs are integral to the story." Each performance begins with 30 minutes of pre-show music of cover songs and familiar tunes to help the audience relax. Musicians Koji and Laurie Arizumi, and other musicians as needed, play the harp, flute, guitar, mandolin, percussion, and horns.

"The audience is a part of the performance," says Laurie Arizumi. "We don't want the audience to be quiet. We want them to laugh and make noise. That gives performers more energy. We like feedback."

"You can feel when an audience is with you," says Parker. "You can feel when they are

uncomfortable, or that you are pulling them in and charming them. They are feeling what you are feeling. We are on an emotional journey together."

In an outdoor theater, the mood can be interrupted by inventions that Shakespeare never imagined, like a passing speedboat or helicopter. "Sometimes the Bama Belle comes by playing party music," says Cobb. "We try to ignore it and keep going."

Next summer, the Rude Mechanicals celebrates its 10th season as a Shakespeare storyteller. Some of the original cast members will return to perform the two productions from the first season in 2003, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on May 30-June 2 and "Twelfth Night" on June 27-30. The dates are still tentative. For more information, visit the Rude Mechanicals on Facebook or



As night falls, an audience watches Wescott Youngson perform while, seated from left, Austin Whitver, Nic Helms and Jerrell Bowden wait. The Rude Mechanicals performed Shake-scenes for the public at the Manderson Landing park.



As night falls, The Rude Mechanicals sing and perform Shake-scenes for the public.

email Burch at sburch@as.ua.edu or Cobb at markhughescobb@gmail.com.

Each production runs for at least four performances at the Park at Manderson's Landing. Most seasons the group also performs the lighter "Scenes, Songs, and Sonnets" during the second weekend of August.

The physical world has changed since the death of Shakespeare, but people haven't. Shakespeare gave his characters real personalities that even today reflect our flaws, our decay, our messiness, and our vulnerabilities. Through the Rude Mechanicals, we watch others choose self-defeating paths. We cringe when their lives crumble. We recognize ourselves in the tensions and the tragedy.

"Shakespeare wrote 400 years ago, but he still connects to our human spirit and what is eternal," says LaSalle. "His works will continue to live on past us."



Steve Burch, center with back to camera, briefs the company as The Rude Mechanicals prepare to perform Shake-scenes for the public at the Manderson Landing park.