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Austin Power and Light

A guide to 10 companies that are charging up Austin theatre

Every few years brings Austin an influx of new small arts groups that re-energize the theatre scene. The early and mid-Nineties saw the arrival of Frontera Productions, Salvage Vanguard Theater, Physical Plant, the Public Domain, root w'y'mn, and the Rude Mechanicals, among others, and their creative daring and irreverence and imagination did indeed give local stages a jolt. In 1998, the *Chronicle* published "A Survey of Austin's Rebel Theatre Scene" profiling these companies, all of which seemed poised on the edge of success. We've watched the surviving rebels grow into big achievers, locally and nationally, with New York productions and national tours. The crazy kids of yesteryear are now taking charge.

So who makes up the current class of risk-takers and dreamers? In Austin's diverse and thriving arts scene, audiences are never at a loss for a show to see, but it might be hard to know which of the young crop are prepping for the can't-be-missed play of the season.

After a month spent beating the bushes and shaking the rafters, we think we've found the latest class of local companies that are electrifying our stages. Of the 10 groups on this list, there are musicians and dancers, contortionists and activists, and more than a few strange ideas that just might work. We've done the footwork, so pull out your planners and forget your comfort zone for a few months. The atmosphere is way too charged for that.

Rubber Repertory

Head count: Two co-artistic directors, Josh Meyer and Matt Hislope

Background check: The pair first began producing shows as students in Kansas in 2000; *Still Born in a Trunk* was their first Austin show in 2002, imagining a Judy Garland asphyxiation. Their 2005 effort *Holes Before Bedtime*, was nominated for several Austin Critics Table awards, and Hislope and Meyer won for Director of a Musical.

Coming up: Next up is *Red Cans*, which Hislope promises will include "can-on-can violence."

The name: Just watch Matt Hislope squeeze himself into a small red laundry hamper, and it all makes sense. Sort of.

It's amazing how much mileage you can get out of a gift from grandma. Matt Hislope's grandmother gave him a little red nylon laundry hamper with a zipper on top. So, naturally, he and Josh Meyer decided to get inside and waddle around in public to see what would happen.

So charming are these two college buddies that they've convinced a cast of 15 people to join them in their cylindrical sacks. "This is going to be a real test of endurance for the performers as far as a lack of oxygen goes. It'll definitely take a certain kind of masochism," says Meyer.

Rubber's other work frequently touches on the violent and the macabre, with plenty of laughs all around.

Along those lines, future projects include Wallace Shawn's outrageously graphic *A Thought in Three Parts* sometime this fall. On their recent trip to New York as part of the cast of Physical Plant's *Not Clown*, Hislope and Meyer met Shawn, who wished them well, since they seem to be the only people in the United States willing to produce it.

"That might be a show we have to leave town afterwards," notes Meyer.

St. Idiot Collective

Head count: Fourteen full idiots and six associate idiots

Background check: They're out of the gate and running after a fundraiser this spring.

Coming up: *Vaudeville Vanya*, a new take on Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, comes to town for a family reunion July 13-22.

The name: Company members met and studied at St. Edward's University as undergrads. As a group, they delight in the notion of belonging to a "sic" bunch of idiots (sic).

St. Idiot's Collective may be brand new, but in reality, the many Idiots who make up the company have been together for years. Beyond their undergraduate experience, the artists in the collective have worked together in improv and comedy troupes, in various side projects, and in plays produced by the likes of Salvage Vanguard and Refraction Arts.

St. Idiot's is partly an umbrella company to support its members' smaller projects and partly a chance for the artists to see what they can do together. After all, the roster reads like an all-star list of Austin alternative theatre artists.

"We've been working together for so long, so why not?" said company member Jenny Larson. "It makes more sense to pool resources. And the other part of it is, as we've all been working individually with different theatre companies in town, we've been missing our vocabulary."

The "vocabulary" in question comes out of their shared base of actor training. As college students, they were introduced to the Suzuki and Viewpoints methods and continue to train together regularly. Now SITI Company member J. Ed Araiza will direct their first full production.

"That's why it's a special moment," says Adriene Mishler (aka, Idiot No. 9). "This will be the first time that SIC as a company will be able to train with a context as a group."

Yellow Tape Construction Company

Head count: Co-artistic directors Amanda Butterfield and Jonathon Morgan head the company; other associated artists help out. They've even got an intern.

Background check: For *Hobbled*, the first Austin show, Yellow Tape brought in the Lonestar Rollergirls to pump up the crowds. They followed it up with *Come Home*, an "indie-folk, road-trip musical."

Coming up: *I Love My Dead Gay Son: The Musical!*, running June 15–July 1, is a musical version of *Heathers*, that classic Eighties teen angst-fest about suicide and shoulder pads.

The name: "It's construction, it's hard work," says Morgan. "It's an infrastructure of an organization that works hard from the ground up."

All according to spec, former Clevelandites and Yellow Tape leaders Butterfield and Morgan are testing the foundations of local theatre with their original musicals.

For starters, inviting the Lonestar Rollergirls to skate through last year's *Hobbled* gave them a broader-than-usual audience base.

"It's about creating work for people other than ourselves," says Butterfield. "I actually think we've managed to do that pretty well. Some of our audience members have been NASCAR watchers. ... It's about theatre reaching people on a gut level."

Plans for the future range from the adventurous – "There have been rumors of a rock opera in our future," says Morgan – to the practical. Butterfield, who has a dance background, says they also want to get their own space with a sprung floor, possibly even with free classes.

"I think it would be good for the dance community just to have a dedicated dance space," Morgan says.

For now, Butterfield looks forward to opening *I Love My Dead Gay Son*, which she choreographed. "This show is really funny, because I decided to stage it in the manner of jazzified, Fosse-fied, modern-dance style."

Shrewd Productions

Head count: Four founding members, all on the feminine/ist side

Background check: A bare-all beginning with *Xmas Unwrapped: A Holiday Burlesque* in 2005 gave Shrewd the necessary padding for two spring shows. The Shrewds' spring production of Cyndi Williams' *Where Are They Now?* won the Austin Critics Table award for Production of a Drama.

Coming up: Plans are to stage one of fellow Shrewd Monika Bustamante's plays this fall, followed by a repeat of the Xmas fundraiser.

The name: A catchy reference to *Taming of the Shrew* lends weight to the company members' notion that being a shrew isn't so bad after all.

When asked what sets Shrewd Productions apart from the other Austin companies who focus on new work, founding member Shannon Grounds points out their status as one of the few all-women-run companies. Or, to put it less politely, the occasional topless appearance at their Christmas burlesque fundraiser really pulled in the crowds.

"I think there's just a little bit more of a focus on women's voices in the art that we produce," says Grounds, "but we work with a lot of very talented men."

After several years of working in Austin theatre, Grounds joined with Monika Bustamante, Andrea Skola, and T. Lynn Mikeska to put together their own production company. Now, aside from learning the ropes of arts management, they also get to enjoy a little more artistic control.

"In the end, it's the art we're interested in," she says. "It's the whole aspect of what we can produce."

Capital T Productions

Head count: Mark Pickell heads a crowd of four who run the company.

Background check: For its first show, Capital T adapted *Edward II* and staged it at Austin High School in FronteraFest 2006's Bring Your Own Venue program.

Coming up: *A Brief History of Helen of Troy* by Mark Schultz runs, briefly, June 22-July 8 at Hyde Park Theatre.

The name: The "Capital" part points a proud finger to the company's home turf in Austin; the "T" part? Well ... Pickell says, "The shameful, adolescent answer is that in Seminole, Texas, where I grew up, there was a place called the Burger Shack that served a triple-meat, triple-cheese hamburger named the Big T."

Capital T Productions might get its name in part from a burger, but Pickell is not about to ask if you want fries with that.

"Capital T was conceived to give artists of vision professional opportunities in the early stages of their careers," he says. "We strive to foster and grow new theatre artists. Our goal is to create opportunities for directors and designers who find it very difficult to get their foot in the door."

Pickell, a Southwestern University grad who has taught high school drama, wants to make this leg-up for early-career artists a great show for the audience, too.

"We also have a commitment [to] doing theatre for the audience's sake instead of art for art's sake."

Coda Theater Project

Head count: Coda reports 23 or so members.

Background check: The company fondly remembers 2005's *Ondine*, which packed a cast of 22 into the Blue Theatre.

Coming up: Edward Albee's *The Play About the Baby* runs July 13-Aug. 5 at play! Theatre.

The name: "It has to do with the musical term," explains artist and board member Matthew Ervin. "It summarizes everything and brings the piece together."

Size may not be everything, but it's a pretty big deal with Coda Theater Project. The general idea is: The more cooks in the kitchen (or artists in the theatre), the better.

The idea is to bring artists from widely varying fields into the same theatre and see what happens. "Coda was formed because the original group noticed there wasn't too much cooperation between artistic disciplines in Austin," says Ervin.

So far, that's meant inviting architects, visual artists, DJs, and others to help design the set and sound for productions.

Coda member Daniel Brock, a photographer by trade, enjoys the unique opportunities: "It enables me to have another outlet to express myself and work with other individuals who know how to emote and project and tell a story."

The approach involves challenges, too. "You can't take six months to produce a single piece, and from the theatre perspective, you're making something that we're not intending to keep," says Lisa Scheps, who owns and runs the play! Theatre, which Coda now calls home.

Coda's residence at play!, complete with a full rehearsal period in the space, has been a big step for the company. For Coda, it's an opportunity to be comfortable at a home base. For Scheps, it's a good rent-payment plan.

"I'm not in this to make money," she says. "I just want to break even."

Getalong Gang

Head count: Three co-artistic directors: Zenobia Taylor, Spencer Driggers, and Michael Federico

Background check: The trio recently finished their second show with a two-week run of *Talent Show 1989*, a romance-laced spoof on those timeless junior high spectacles. That followed the FronteraFest 2006 Long Fringe production, *The Candy Dish*.

Coming up: They're looking to stage Driggers' play *We Have Separation* in Austin after a 2003 run in New York. Also in the works is *Talc*, a movement piece with live music.

The name: "It's kind of silly, actually," admits Taylor. "We were just thinking about how we'd get along if we formed a company together, and that led to Getalong Gang."

In a program blurb, Getalong Gang calls itself a "little chimera" between theatre and dance. Which half is the head and which one is the back end isn't specified.

The three founders met as students at SMU in the 1990s. Taylor studied in the dance program, and the others were across the hall in the theatre. After a few years of working in New York, the Gang members arrived in Austin in 2004 and decided to set up shop with their own blend of the different disciplines.

"It's kind of natural for me, because a lot of my choreography is theatrical, and I've always enjoyed working with actors who move well," says Taylor.

They're now aiming to clear a little space for themselves in Austin's thriving playwriting scene. "Spencer and Mike are both unique playwrights and vary widely from each other, and that, combined with my dance background, is something very different," she says.

Gobotrick Theatre Company

Head count: Nine company members, with founders Juliana Nichols and Jessica McMichael still leading the charge.

Background check: Their track record since 2002 shows a steady diet of contemporary plays by local and nonlocal writers.

Coming up: Nothing until the fall, when they stage a new bilingual play by Miguel Martinez and then tour it to Coastal Bend College.

The name: "It's a theatrical term that means 'trick of the light,'" McMichael explains.

Gobotrick has a different way of running things. For every production, the company partners with a local nonprofit to promote the show, and in return, it gives part of the proceeds to that charity. For example, for last season's *Do Something for Yourself: The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, it linked up with Literacy Austin.

"Sometimes it works out really well, sometimes it's to our detriment," says McMichael. "If the charity that we work with pulls their weight, it works out great."

For some producers, letting nonartists in on the artistic process might create trouble, but McMichael says the more input, the better. The idea is to foster a greater and broader sense of community cooperation in Austin.

"There weren't any other theatre companies in Austin that were reaching out to the community [when Gobotrick started]," McMichael says.

Community outreach isn't Gobotrick's only aim. There's also the artistic angle. "We want to be educating, enlightening, creating. People [should] leave the theatre talking, but they shouldn't be thinking, 'What the hell's that?'"

RoHo Productions

Head count: Five displaced Orlandoans

Background check: Most recently, Rocky Hopson wrote and directed *Irene Is a Cactus* for FronteraFest 2006. That followed the group's Austin debut, *La Putain Avec les Fleurs*.

Coming up: Roho brings back *La Putain Avec les Fleurs* (that's "hooker with flowers," for all you Francophobes) in the fall. "Now that I know the play a little better," says artistic director Hopson, "I want to do the show again."

The name: If South of Houston Street can be SoHo, then why can't Rocky Hopson be RoHo?

It's a long, long way from Orlando to Austin. Hopson says he and fellow RoHo-ers feel the difference since they arrived in Austin in 2005. The fact that they had good audiences for *La Putain's* first Austin run, despite their newcomer status, was one of the first things they noticed.

"[Orlando] was probably more challenging from what we've seen; we had to work hard to get an audience. We came in with that idea of having to work hard to get audiences. ... It's just exciting to see how eager people are to see theatre here."

It's also been a transition from big-fish, small-pond status to being a "medium fish in a big pond."

Strong reviews have been a boost, but Hopson wants to avoid biting off too much ambition at once: "We're just gonna take it one show at a time and get some momentum going."

Loaded Gun Theory

Head count: Eight, at present. "We all help run the company one way or another, when we have time," says Gun-member Ian LeClaire.

Background check: Regular performers at FronteraFest, Loaded Gun has produced one or two original plays each year since 2001.

Coming up: Loaded Gun hosts its 24-hour play festival, Slapdash Flimflammy 3, July 8 and is making plans for the tentatively titled *Bitten!: A Zombie Rock Odyssey* in late September.

The name: Company member Timothy Thomas says "Loaded Gun" comes from the Chekhov idea that a loaded gun in Act One has to go off by Act Three. Plus, he says, there's that "cocked and ready" aesthetic they love so much.

Watch for zombies at Austin City Limits and other big events this fall. Also watch out for actors dressed as zombies. The latter will be publicizing Loaded Gun Theory's original musical *Bitten!: A Zombie Rock Odyssey*.

"There's a certain lightheartedness," says LeClaire of the company's typical mode of operation. "We try not to take ourselves too seriously."

In that vein, Loaded Gun Theory has a habit of mounting shows that deliberately take on some questionable subjects: cults, fake wars, Scoutmasters crossing the line.

"Hopefully, if we do it well, they laugh a lot," says LeClaire.

Loaded Gun members take turn offering scripts and ideas for production, but a distinctly irreverent flavor has emerged as their standard m.o. "There's a certain sensibility that does come across in the broad scope of what we deal with," LeClaire says. "I think a lot of it has to do with a certain sociopolitical consciousness."

For the future, Loaded Gun members are considering a possible residency with Arts on Real, as well as juggling busy personal lives.

"We're in kind of a transitional period. A lot of our members are finding that they have other commitments," says LeClaire.

"Children," Thomas supplies.

LeClaire shrugs. "People are having children."

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