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Shawn Sides and Graham Reynolds: Rude and Golden

How two of Austin's top creative stars meld a busy life of art and love

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER, MARCH 25, 2016, ARTS

Well, yes, of course Graham Reynolds and Shawn Sides are a couple. A lot of people are couples. But Reynolds and Sides share more than just a romantic situation, more than merely a domestic living arrangement. There's sheet music strewn across a floor; there's a punked-out muse or two rattling the windows; there are shards of glitter in the oddest places.

Reynolds is a composer, bandleader, multi-instrumentalist, and general all-around maestro of works complex and classical; he's the man who did the music for, among other things, Ballet Austin's *Belle Redux/A Tale of Beauty & the Beast* and *Cult of Color: Call to Color*, Forklift Danceworks' *The Trash Project* and *The Trees of Govalle*, Salvage Vanguard Theater's *The Intergalactic Nemesis*, Richard Linklater's films *Bernie* and *A Scanner Darkly*, and a ridiculous number of Rude Mechanicals theatre productions. Sides is an actor and director and one of the co-producing artistic directors of that Rude Mechs company responsible for such heady, internationally acclaimed spectacles as *Lipstick Traces*, *Requiem for Tesla*, *The Method Gun*, *Now Now Oh Now*, and *Stop Hitting Yourself*. And sometimes – rather frequently, in fact – Sides and Reynolds work together.

They're another Austin-based creative couple, yes – as are the authors Edward Carey and Elizabeth McCracken, who we wrote about a few months ago. As the first week of April sees Reynolds debuting his newest collaboration with Ballet Austin's Stephen Mills (*The Graham Reynolds Project*, April 1-3) and Sides galvanizing the Rudes' first outing of the Yale-commissioned *Field Guide* show (April 7-30), and as the *Chronicle* is working up a whole series of articles on creative couples in Austin, this seemed an especially felicitous time to speak with this particular pair about their life and art.

Austin Chronicle: *How did you guys meet?*

Shawn Sides: We met while we were working on *Cry Pitch Carrolls* at Salvage Vanguard. Graham was doing the music, and I was in it. And, actually, the first time we ever ever met was in the audition for it, when I kept insisting that I can't sing. So we met pretty much as soon as I moved back to Austin from New York. Doing *Cry Pitch Carrolls* was one of the very first things I did – and that was in, like, '97?

Graham Reynolds: Maybe a little bit later, but close.

Sides: Maybe '98.

AC: *And what was that like, that meeting?*

Reynolds: ...

Sides: I'll speak for him. He was ... immediately in love!

AC: *Of course!*

Sides: And he couldn't get me out of his mind. [laughs]

Reynolds: That's pretty much true. [laughs] But, yeah, we met at *Cry Pitch Carrolls* and did that whole run and kept working together – eventually on a couple of Rude Mechs shows as well as a remount of *Cry Pitch Carrolls*, et cetera. So we spent a lot of time together through theatre work.

AC: *What's it like working together professionally?*

Reynolds: In that first show, Jason [Neulander] was the boss. And in all the Rude Mechs shows, Shawn's been the boss. And now we're doing *Pancho Villa* for Ballroom Marfa, which she's directing.

AC: *So it's not just a music performance, it's a whole ... ?*

Reynolds: It's a chamber opera, staged, the whole thing. And Shawn's directing. But, for the first time, essentially, I'm sort of the boss of that one.

AC: So what's the dynamic like there? Difficult? Enjoyable?

Sides: It's very enjoyable, I enjoy it very much.

Reynolds: Yeah.

Sides: Listen, I have the reputation, usually, in the rehearsal room, of being, like, too easy – too much of a pushover. People walk into the rehearsal and can't tell who the director is, because I'm really hands-off and always like, "What do y'all think, what do y'all think?" You know? But Graham thinks I'm a tyrant.

Reynolds: [laughs]

Sides: He literally called me a tyrant, in rehearsal for [*Requiem for*] *Tesla*. So I don't know which one of those I actually am. Maybe everybody else is just flattering me, and he's the only one who will tell me the truth – about how bossy I am.

Reynolds: I took the collective part of the Rude Mechs' aesthetic and process very literally. And, ah, so I have projects where I own the music and I get the final say. If I'm making an album or doing a show or something like that. Or there are things where I have no final say, nor do I own the music – like some films, where the director gets to choose whether the music is used at all, never mind anything else. And then there's the whole spectrum in between. So figuring out what, in a collective-style, decision-making environment, how you're also going to have a hierarchy at the same time ... it was just figuring out how that's gonna work. And if I'm offered power over my music, I will take it. And so, it was in figuring out that dynamic ...

Sides: I can't remember what it was specifically that provoked you to call me a tyrant. Do you remember what it was?

Reynolds: I did say "benevolent."

AC: A benevolent *tyrant*!

Sides: That's right, that's right!

Reynolds: But the point was, I can make all the music I want – and that's great. But, ultimately, Shawn will decide whether it goes into the show or not. And so, the *benevolent* is "sure, make whatever you wanna make," and the *tyrant* is "Graham doesn't have final say over anything to do with the music." I can voice my *opinion*, and it'll be taken into consideration, but I don't get to actually decide.

AC: Shawn, are the other elements of a show that you're directing, are they like that? That the actors can do whatever the fuck they want, but then you'll say this part will be in there and that part won't?

Reynolds: They perceive it differently.

Sides: Yeah, well, I think we *do* operate by consensus. But I'll definitely be the one who has those opinions first. I think that's what I'm *entrusted* with. Like, "We're gonna make a bunch of stuff, all of us together in the room, and then Shawn is gonna sort of stand outside and pick and choose among those things." But – always, always – if someone disagrees? Especially if they disagree *strongly*? Like, if I think something is *out*, but somebody else definitely wants it to be *in*, then we'll just keep playing with it and playing with it, just keep trying. Until either I go, "You were right, thank God we kept that," or then the other person is like, "You were right – this sucks."

AC: How is it, working professionally and also having a personal relationship? Does one part bleed over – and does that enhance or cause problems?

Reynolds: It's a *plus*, for me.

Sides: I like it.

Reynolds: A lot of people like to separate work and personal. I work out of our house, and I love it. I walk across the hall and I'm at work. And if I have an idea on a Sunday morning, I can work on it – I don't have to go *in to work*. I chose a job where the *job* is personal, too, so working all the time is great by me – not that I don't take the time to do non-work things. And since those lines are blurry, it seems like picking a life partner, more time is more better. Just like walking-across-the-hall-and-I'm-at-work, and that's fun, being with the person that I'm working with makes it more fun, too.

AC: What about when your jobs take you in different directions? Different schedules completely?

Sides: Like, physically?

AC: Yeah, *physically* – but also just *timewise*. Because you're both so busy, and often it's on completely different projects?

Sides: I think that we actually – because I also spend a lot of time working out of the house. Technically, I work out of the Off Center – but I spend a lot of time just working at the kitchen table. So I feel like we actually get more time together than a lot of people.

Reynolds: Than a lot of couples who have typical day jobs.

Sides: Yeah.

Reynolds: But, at the same time, she'll be out of town for a chunk, and I'll be out of town for a chunk, on separate things. And I think that's healthy, too. Just, you know, personal time, alone time, however you want to call it.

Sides: It makes him not ... scratch my face off. [laughs]

AC: *What, if any, is the greatest challenge being a couple and being two strong-minded artistic people?*

Reynolds: Well, what we were talking about before is the biggest point. Since I run a band and I do things where I'm totally in charge – and I'm very comfortable being in charge – my idea of having a role in decision-making is maybe different? And so I think that's our biggest area where we end up in conflict. Like, you know how you do "notes" at the end of rehearsal? We started doing notes at home – because it would take so long.

Sides: [laughs]

AC: *Wow, that – it really does bleed over.*

Sides: But let's be clear. Because usually I'm the director, and, *usually*, the director is the person who's giving notes.

Reynolds: And I would *argue* with the notes, is what would happen.

Sides: And also you would have your notes for me – and those would be very detailed.

Reynolds: [grins] Yes.

AC: *In the context of a Rude Mechs production, does the person who does the music also get a say in the play in general, the parts that maybe have nothing to do with the music?*

Sides: Yes, I think so.

Reynolds: Yeah.

Sides: But "say" is a bit ...

Reynolds: I get a *voice* in.

Sides: Yeah, that's it. Because we do our very best for nobody to actually have a "say." Like, if everything is working right, there's not a lot of conflict about what something should be and one person gets their way. What we're aimin' at is, *everybody please help us make this, all of us together*. We make it collaboratively, and so Graham's opinion is absolutely necessary in order to make the show. But, hopefully, there's not a fight between, like, Graham thinks it should be a *comedy* and Thomas [Graves] thinks it's a *tragedy*, and now they have to have a cage match and decide!

Reynolds: But everybody does all sorts of work that's not to do with their role, from the beginning of the process.

AC: *Graham, are you originally from Austin – or, at least, Texas?*

Reynolds: I'm from Connecticut, but I was actually born in Germany – when my dad was in the Army. I moved here to play music. I was done with school, I'd been through Austin, and I liked it. The music scene was strong; I'd gone to South By as well. I was debating about New York and San Francisco, and those were so prohibitively expensive. And I also played drums and piano – both of those are large-footprint instruments that you can't really do in an apartment, and I wanted to be able to compose and rehearse everything where I lived, and this seemed the city most viable for that.

AC: *Shawn, you're from Canton, out in East Texas. And if a person lives outside of Austin in Texas, of course they're going to move to Austin –*

Sides: Yes!

AC: *– but why specifically?*

Sides: I came here for undergrad at UT, so I was bitten by the bug way back when. And then I went to New York to go to grad school. And I met Kirk [Lynn] and Lana [Lesley] in New York, and we worked on some plays there. And then they came back down here and were like, "Oh my God, you have got to come home, *this* is home." People were doin' plays in, like, bank lobbies.

AC: *It was going nuts then, wasn't it?*

Sides: It was going nuts; it was cheap; you could have a part-time job and get by and make your work and sit around and drink beer and talk about it. So, yeah, the siren song brought me back.

AC: *With the way that Austin has changed so much, what keeps you here? Especially since both of y'all have fingers in pies all over the world – so you could be in any bakery you wanted to, so to speak. What keeps you in Austin?*

Reynolds: We do a lot of work out of town, so there's not a lack of exposure to the rest of the world. So there's no burning need to get out in that way. And, also, our work networks and our friend networks – but particularly our work networks – are so deeply embedded here, that to start over somewhere else seems too daunting. And we have good lives here. We have a nice house, we make work and *like* our work. We're just happy.

Sides: Every now and then I get in my curmudgeonly this-town-is-ruined-I'm-leaving mode – usually that happens on I-35. But then I'll think about it for five minutes, think about "Where am I gonna go?" And I'll be like, "Ewwww," and I'll get really sad. And I'll admit that I don't want to be anywhere else: This is *home*.

Ballet Austin presents The Graham Reynolds Project April 1-3, Fri. & Sat., 8pm; Sun., 3pm, at Dell Hall in the Long Center, 701 W. Riverside. See more information at www.balletaustin.org.

The Rude Mechs present Field Guide April 7-30, Thu.-Sun., 8pm; except Thu., April 7, 9pm; Sat., April 9, 2pm; and Sun., April 10, 4pm, at the Off Center, 2211-A Hidalgo. More info at www.rudemechs.com.

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