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Jed Horne

## Is New Orleans Waiting for Godot?

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NEW ORLEANS -- It was hard to know what to expect: a nighttime performance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the weed-choked fields that were once a neighborhood called the Lower 9th Ward. A classic of 1950s absurdist theater set in a part of New Orleans that has become an emblem of Bush-era incompetence.

That the production was conceived by New York art world phenom Paul Chan and mounted by Creative Time and the Classical Theatre of Harlem promised fresh and, as it turned out, brilliant, theatrics. But would Beckett speak to the Big Easy, and could New Orleans be bothered to listen?

The premier, on the mosquito-ridden Friday night in November, was not less than a milestone in the history of *Godot* productions, one to place alongside the versions staged by inmates at San Quentin in 1957 and by Susan Sontag in the war-torn Sarajevo of 1993.

Hundreds showed up, and then hundreds more, so many that several of those hundreds were turned away, only to come back Saturday in droves that warranted ginning up a packed Sunday night performance as well, on only a few hours' notice. (Additional performances were scheduled for Gentilly too.)

The throng, which was served gumbo and led to the bleachers by a raucous brass band, was as eclectic as New Orleans itself. Blacks turned out in large numbers for a play normally considered part of the European theatrical canon. Whites ventured into a part of town that many of them, at least until Katrina, wouldn't have visited in a million years. Tickets were free, and so the poor were able to walk to the performance, while the gentry ventured downriver in limos and fancy rigs that were lined up along blocks now emptied of all but the scraped concrete slabs where houses once stood.

Courage was rewarded.

Even without such touches as Vladimir's deft send-up of New Orleans native son Louis Armstrong during one of the moments in *Godot* that invite improvisation, even without glancing reference to levees and a gesture into the surrounding darkness toward the one that failed along the nearby Industrial Canal, Beckett's tragic-comic howl of a play was weirdly, eerily expressive of the continuing fiasco in which New Orleans finds itself.

In place of federal funding sufficient to atone for the unconscionable failure of the federal levee system, we have been treated to promises -- many of them already broken. In place of hard-headed policy decisions and the wherewithal to execute them, we have been treated to incantation that relies as heavily as Beckett's script on the endless repetition of nostrums. Beckett's were existential. The ones au courant in New Orleans are neo-con code words: privatization, trickle down, market-driven. It's a credo that seems to view leadership -- particularly effective leadership -- as almost a betrayal of the faith.

For all the tax incentives offered to investors -- wildly accelerated depreciation schedules, subsidies and the like, corporate America -- the much-touted "market" -- isn't responding to New Orleans, either as a crisis or an opportunity. There's a simple reason why.

A state-of-the-art flood defense was at the top of every wish-list coaxed from community groups and amalgamated in the unified recovery plan demanded of Louisiana by the president's liaison to the Gulf Coast, Don Powell. Powell, with much fanfare, recently announced plans -- as yet unfunded -- for a flood defense adequate to a hundred-year storm. Corporate America is not deceived. Katrina was a more powerful storm than that and others of similar or greater strength have hit Louisiana not once in the past century but several times in the past 40 years. The Dutch, who once journeyed to New Orleans to learn flood control, defend their coastal assets against weather events expected only once in 10 thousand years.

There was a time when America was known as a can-do nation. We dug the Panama Canal, we split the atom, we put men on the moon. Katrina struck at the beginning of a new century, but for all the breast-beating and cowboy style fashionable in Washington, the fecklessness and passivity of federal leadership seems almost *fin de siecle*.

What has become clear in New Orleans is that the privatized utopia dreamed by the neo-cons is no more adequate to the task of recovery than would be the cracker socialism of a Huey Long. The America conservatives once struggled to conserve is pluralistic: non-profit, for-profit, faith-based, the whole gamut -- but with political leadership unashamed to assert itself.

On a Friday night in early November, the arts community spoke with an eloquence that shames our elected leadership. Meanwhile, we wait. For Bush? For FEMA? For the Democrats? We wait for the richest country in the world to construct a state-of-the-art flood defense around the port that commands the lower reaches of the continent's most active waterway. We wait for the federal government to have done with sniping and the insinuation that somehow we are to blame for the failure of their levees and for the destruction of our homes.

We wait for the next big storm.

*Jed Horne is the author of "Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City" and a New Orleans resident.*

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