

Waiting for Godot in New Orleans:
An Artist Statement

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?

—*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

In November 2006, I visited New Orleans for the first time. Tulane University's art gallery was showing one of my animated projections and the art department invited me to lecture at the school. I readily accepted. It was a chance to see the city for myself. It was also a chance to visit with friends and colleagues, like Bill Quigely. Bill was my lawyer in 2005 and defended me and other members of the Chicago based anti-war group Voices in the Wilderness in federal court. The US government charged that we broke the law by bringing aid and medicine to Iraq before and during the 2nd gulf war. An unjust law must be broken to serve a higher law called justice, Bill argued before the judge. I found it moving and convincing; unfortunately the judge did not. We lost the case.

Bill and his wife Debbie (an oncology nurse) spent five days in Memorial hospital without electricity or clean water or phones, trying to save people from the flooding during Katrina. After the hurricane, Bill and Debbie found refuge in Houston. They returned to New Orleans almost four months later and Bill began to write a series of articles exposing the absurdity of FEMA, the pathetic government response to rebuilding efforts, and the political fight over the rights of returning New Orleanians. Bill's writings were my first encounters with New Orleans after Katrina.

What surprised me about seeing the city for the first time was that, from seeing what was right in front of me, I still couldn't put together a complete picture of New Orleans. I expected comparative contrasts but not wholesale contradictions. Some neighborhoods, like the one around Tulane, seemed virtually untouched by Katrina. But in the Lower Ninth Ward and parts of Gentilly, the barren landscape brooded in silence. The streets were empty. There was still debris in lots where houses once stood. I didn't hear a single bird.

I have seen landscapes scarred by disasters of all sorts. In Baghdad, I saw kids playing soccer barefoot on a wide boulevard and around the concrete rubble that came from US troops shelling the buildings near the Tigris River. I thought I saw the same kids playing in the ghost town known as downtown Detroit on a side street during an enormous labor demonstration in 1999—with shoes but no shirts. Life wants to live, even if it's on broken concrete.

New Orleans was different. The streets were still, as if time had been swept away along with the houses. Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science fiction movie. Waiting for a ride to pick me up after visiting with some Common Ground volunteers who were gutting houses in the Lower Ninth, I realized it didn't look like a movie set, but the stage for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence. What's more, there was a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and funny things people do while they wait: for help, for food, for hope. It was uncanny. Standing there at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes, I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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The longing for the new is a reminder of what is worth renewing. Seeing *Godot* embedded in the very fabric of the landscape of New Orleans was my way of reimagining

the empty roads, the debris, and, above all, the bleak silence as more than the expression of mere collapse. Seeing gave way to scheming. How could it be done? Was it worth doing? I have never worked on a professional play before, much less produced one, outside, in the middle of a street intersection, in a city I have only come to know through one visit and the work of Bill and other writers and activists. Making a play is also an inherently collaborative process and I'm allergic to working with people. If someone were to stage *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of the street in the Lower Ninth and mobilize the given landscape to tell the 20th century's most emblematic story on waiting, that someone would probably not be me.

I started asking around. I went back to New Orleans and talked to people about what they thought of the idea. Bill said, "Great, a public performance, I love it." I respect Bill very much but you can't trust lawyers, even anti-war ones. So I talked to more people.

Ronald Lewis, who lives in the Lower Ninth and runs a small museum in his backyard dedicated to the history and tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians, called The House of Dance and Feathers, had never seen *Godot* and so couldn't say whether or not it was a good idea. But he told me many art projects have come and gone without leaving anything behind. "You gotta leave something behind for the community," he told me. We talked some more. I noticed on the ground the shadow of a tree similar to the leaning tree I saw at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes. I recently finished a series of animated projections that deal with shadows, so I've become sensitive to their mute presence. It occurred to me while listening to Ronald that *Godot* needed a shadow. I asked him what he thought about a fund that would be set up which would shadow the production budget of the play at whatever the cost, and these funds would stay in the neighborhood where *Godot* would conceivably be staged, in order to contribute to the rebuilding efforts. "A shadow fund," I said. Ronald thought about it a bit and replied, "It's a start."

Artist Jana Napoli liked how staging it outside connects with the city's storied tradition of street performance, from Mardi Gras to the Second lines that leisurely snake through

streets and neighborhoods. Pamela Franco, an art historian from Tulane, thought the play should be in two locations, not just one. The sense and nonsense of waiting engulfs other neighborhoods as well, where people still live in trailers almost two years after the storm, hoping for some type of relief to come from city, state, and federal authorities. To bring *Godot* to New Orleans, Pamela thought, meant that one had to expand the place where the tragicomedy of waiting occurs, beyond the borders of one neighborhood. “What about Gentilly?” Pamela asked.

Greta Gladney, an organizer who runs a local farmers market in the Lower Ninth, and whose husband Jim teaches at Fredric Douglass High School in the city, thought that, if a project were to happen, the schools ought to be involved. Ron Bechet, an artist and professor at Xavier University, thought the same thing.

“If you want to do this, you got to spend the dime, and you got to spend the time,” someone said to me. The idea of staging *Godot* in New Orleans, of using the natural collaborative process of producing a play with the necessary give and take of working on the streets in order to reimagine how art—as the form freedom takes without the use of force—can become the opening to enter and engage the myriad dimensions of life lived in the midst of ruin, without succumbing to the easy graces of reducing it to either knowledge or illustration of that life, began to take shape in a way that became unpredictable, which is to say, new. It is fashionable today (still?) to claim that there is nothing new beyond our horizon of art, that everything worth doing has been done. But this seems to me an altogether specious claim, for it ignores the vast undiscovered country of things that ought to be *undone*. In these great times, the terror of action and inaction shapes the burden of history. Perhaps the task of art today is to remake this burden anew by suspending the seemingly inexorable order of things (which gives the burden its weight) for the potential of a clearing to take place, so that we can see and feel what is in fact worthless, and what is in truth worth renewing.

Waiting for Godot has been staged on Broadway (in 1956), at a prison (San Quentin), and in the middle of a war (during the Siege of Sarajevo, directed by Susan Sontag). It is a

simple story, told in two acts, about two tramps (we have other names for them today) waiting for someone named Godot, who never comes. In New Orleans in 2007, Godot is legion and it is not difficult to recognize the city through the play. Here, the burden of the new is to realize the play through the city.

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June 2007

New York City