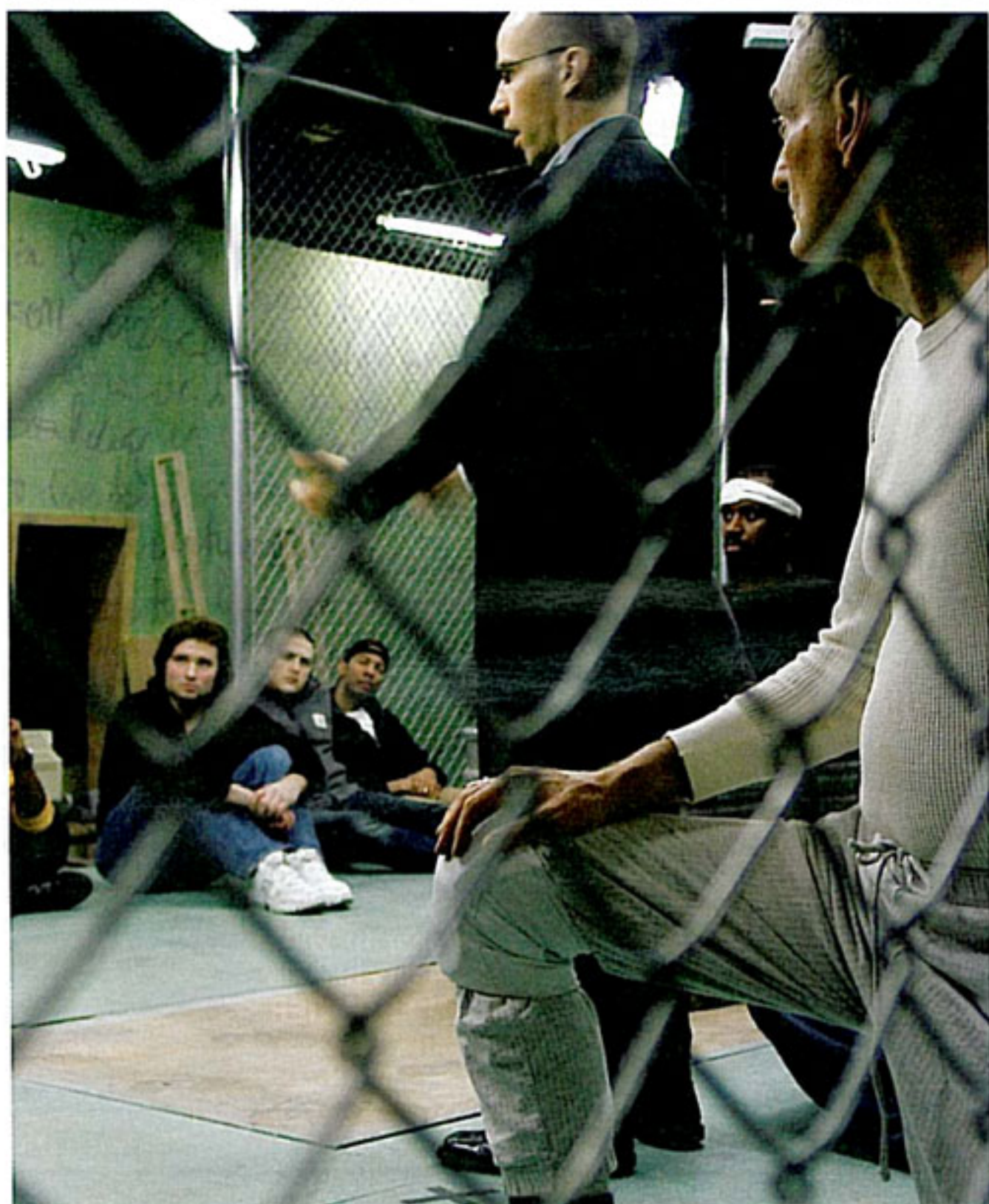


MODERN PAINTERS

November 2007

WORKING PRACTICE Christopher McElroen



By ALEXIS SOLOSKI

Fifty years ago a troupe of actors, led by dramatist Herbert Blau, entered San Quentin prison. They had arrived to act Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the prison's first live performance since Sarah Bernhardt had visited in 1913. A lunchroom full of hardened convicts must have seemed an unlikely audience for an avant-garde European drama that had puzzled critics. In the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson described *Godot* as "a mystery wrapped in an enigma"; another critic called it "the strange little play in which nothing happens." In fact, the play's call to the disenfranchised had begun almost as soon as it was written in 1949: in 1953 it was put on by inmates of the Lüttringhausen prison near Wuppertal, Germany. (And, famously, in 1993 Susan Sontag directed a performance of it in Sarajevo amid the Balkan war.) So rather than booing or rioting, the inmates watched rapt and applauded lustily. They seemed to understand the play's meaning more intuitively than Atkinson. A teacher in

the prison explained that the prisoners "know what is meant by waiting."

Residents of New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly districts also know what is meant by waiting—for housing, for schools, for government aid, for a return to life before Hurricane Katrina. Many of them, like the poet-tramps in Beckett's play, are waiting still. Enter director Christopher McElroen, activist-artist Paul Chan, and actors including *The Wire* star and Gentilly native Wendell Pierce. Together they will present site-specific productions of *Waiting for Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly this month, under the auspices of the public-art organization Creative Time.

McElroen, executive director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), staged a New Orleans-infused production of *Godot* in New York in 2006. Starring Pierce, the play had a set that included 15,000 gallons of water and a sunken rooftop. Meanwhile, Chan was also mulling a New Orleans *Godot*. (The text has figured in several of his previous works.) During a November 2006 visit to the city, Chan found it

a grimly apt setting for the play. "It was unmistakable," he's written about the project. "The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side, with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence."

When a CTH subscriber introduced McElroen to Chan, they agreed that New Orleans needed *Godot*. Chan viewed the staging of the play as an opportunity for renewal: "Seeing *Godot* embedded in the very fabric of the landscape of New Orleans was my way of reimagining the empty roads, the debris... the bleak silence as more than the expression of mere collapse." Leaving McElroen's watery production behind, they decided to create a new version—crafted for and with residents of the afflicted neighborhoods—using the bleak panorama of the present day. McElroen would direct New Yorkers and New Orleanians; Chan would design the props.

Although McElroen portrays a pleasant collaboration, surrendering control of the play's design—yielding stage lights and scenes to natu-

of the folks we talked to said, "Well, we're not waiting for anything. We're taking rebuilding efforts into our own hands." Perhaps the city residents' resolute self-sufficiency will alter the portrayal of the *Godot* characters.

In order to get local feedback, Chan and McElroen will host community dinners to discuss the play and address concerns. This fall, while Chan teaches art courses at universities in the area, McElroen and his cast will lead clowning and vaudeville workshops. Chan and Creative Time have also organized a fund that will raise an amount equal to that spent on the play to be donated to various local organizations.

Workshops and shadow funds aside, is *Godot* what New Orleans needs? This is, after all, a play in which, in the words of Estragon, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Yet McElroen insists that "there's great hope in that action of going to the tree every day. When the moon rises, they part ways, but they always come back in the morning." Although McElroen doesn't promise

Like the poet-tramps in Beckett's play, most New Orleanians are used to waiting.

ral ones—proved difficult. "The last thing that CTH did was *Marat/Sade*," McElroen says. "We had a cast of 40 people and turned the theater into an asylum. To go from a project like that to one in which it's just two actors standing on a street corner—it's challenging." Another trial was avoiding accusations of carpetbaggery, of visiting artists exploiting the city for their own ends. "This isn't just about the play," he says. "It's about community development." He plans to spend the first days of rehearsal driving around the city, talking to people, and "letting that inform our work." Recalling one conversation about *Godot*, he says, "One

that the production will restore audiences' faith, he admits, "That would be nice." His more modest goal: "to do a show that's entertaining and will promote social discussion." As with the prison performances 50 years ago, he wants to give New Orleans audiences a situation analogous to their own, one in which the pain, poetry, and bewilderment of their struggle is reflected back at them, thereby affirming that they and their city are much more than, as Chan wrote, the "expression of mere collapse."

For more information on Christopher McElroen, turn to Index, p. 110.

PHOTO: THE CLASSICAL THEATRE OF HARLEM