Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide

Edited by Paul Chan

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KEYWORDS:
'Nothing to be done," Henri Cartier-Bresson, Satchmo, N'Awlins style, "a mystery wrapped in an enigma," laugh riot, master and slave, little tramp, brainpan, "that bog," Road Home, Dr. Marylin Mell, Dillard University, Ray Vrazel, the joke, weep, mosquito-ridden Friday night, canon, Don Powell, Panama Canal, the moon, Huey Long, Democrats, homes, next big storm

WAITING FOR GODOT
A tragicomedy in 2 acts

By
Samuel Beckett

Estragon
Vladimir
Lucky
Pozzo
A boy

ACT 1

A country road. A tree.

Evening.

Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting.
He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.
As before.
Enter Vladimir.

ESTRAGON:
(*giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

Opening lines from *Waiting for Godot*

Letters TO LAGNIAPPE

Coming for 'Godot'

Friday morning at 7 a.m., my 14-year-old son, wife and mother will start the roughly 560-mile drive from Nashville, Tenn., to the corner of North Prieur and Reynes streets to see a corner lot staging of "Waiting for Godot."

The only Katrina refugee among us is my 80-year-old mother, wiped out in St. Bernard Parish in 2005. She lives in Middle Tennessee with my family now. The rest of us moved from Louisiana in 2003 — before Katrina. But our drive to see "Godot" has more to do with my son, Markus, a young actor and a freshman at the Nashville School of the Arts here.

I want him to see how a neutral ground stage can become a place of social and political comment and a play can be a call to action. I want my son to see theater that touches lives and does more than just entertain. So, we're driving nine hours, lawn chairs in the trunk, to see art.

— Randy McClain New Orleans native now living in Nashville

"Letters to Lagniappe," entertainment news from *The Times-Picayune*, November 2, 2007

Moments from the Lower Ninth Ward performances, 2007. Photos by Tuyen Nguyen

Bikes and signs in the Lower Ninth Ward, 2007

Ronald Lewis, 2007. Photos this and facing page by Tuyen Nguyen

I have no idea, 2007

Second night in the
Lower Ninth Ward, 2007

Act 1, 2007. Photo by Donn Young and Frank Aymami

Act 1, 2007. Photo by Donn Young and Frank Aymami

Act 2, 2007

Lucky entering, 2007

Push pull, 2007

Lucky exiting, 2007

Chicken bones, 2007

It's getting late, 2007

Let’s go, 2007

No light, but rather darkness visible, 2007. Photos by Tuyen Nguyen

(This page and facing) No light, but rather darkness visible, 2007. Photos by Tuyen Nguyen

GODOT IS GREAT

(*The Times-Picayune*, November 6, 2007)

Samuel Beckett's classic Waiting for Godot *arrives on a street corner in the blighted Lower Ninth Ward to overflow crowds, and demonstrates just how powerful and relevant theater can be in post-K New Orleans.*

It was a famous photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who said that the more specific a thing is, the more universal it becomes.

With its performance on a blighted Lower Ninth Ward intersection, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* becomes very much a New Orleans *Godot*, and its specificity is not a contrivance. On the contrary, it illuminates the play.

Christopher McElroen's staging is the most accessible, the funniest, the most moving and meaningful *Godot* we are ever likely to see. It is *ours*, it speaks directly to us, in lines and situations that have always been there, but which now take on a new resonance. McElroen and company accomplish this, for the most part, naturally, with attitude, line delivery and yes, a few interpolations not in the text. (The Satchmo imitation may be a bit much, but the audience loved it.)

This is theater N'Awlins style, with pre-show gumbo, a brass band second-lining us to our seats, and an audience as eclectic as the city itself. It is a simple yet magnificent gift from artist Paul Chan, who provided the concept in concert with McElroen's original Classical Theatre of Harlem post-Katrina staging. It was paid for (to the tune of $200,000) by Creative Time, the New York–based arts presenter.

To that group, let us add the wondrous cast, led by native son Wendell Pierce, who was determined that the *Godot* he played in New York should come "home," and to which he has contributed a characterization of such earthy variety, vigor, hilarity, and passion that as his performance unfolds, so does his status as a great actor.

The time has long since passed when *Godot* was regarded as "a mystery wrapped in an enigma," as Brooks Atkinson famously described it in his 1956 *New York Times* review of its Broadway debut. This is Beckett's merciless, tragicomic view of mankind, playing at life to avoid the specter of death, awaiting an enlightenment that stubbornly refuses to appear. But man, being what he is, will pin his hopes to something as ephemeral as two leaves sprouting from an otherwise barren tree. If that's not us, I don't know what is.

"Nothing is as funny as unhappiness," according to Beckett, and given that standard, *Godot* is a laugh riot.

Vladimir and Estragon (Didi and Gogo), two of the downtrodden dispossessed, meet at the corner of North Prieur and Reynes streets, as they probably did yesterday and most likely will tomorrow. There are fields of weeds where houses once stood. Estragon always arrives after having been beaten for no reason he can discern, but which we can. When Pozzo approaches from afar with lights and siren, Didi and Gogo "assume the position," kneeling down with their hands crossed in back of their heads.

"We are waiting for GAH-DEAUX," Didi keeps reminding Gogo, whose memory is hazy, one day flowing into another (sound familiar?). They are alternately depressed to the point of suicide, or passing the time with verbal ping-pong games of the "Who's on first?" variety, indulging in low comedy shtick (pratfalls, kicks in the shins, groin, and olfactory distress) and endless vaudevillian hat tricks. No one just places his bowler on his head. It takes several W.C. Fields spins to get it there.

Enter the affluent Pozzo, in elitist white. Riding an adult tricycle, he has a long, trailing rope attached to Lucky, his elderly human pack mule, who pushes a shopping cart full of bulging plastic bags and an ice chest. "The road seems long when one journeys all alone for six hours on end and never a soul in sight," says Pozzo. Lucky doesn't count, of course. Lucky is a human abstraction, there only to serve Pozzo's needs and whims, although Pozzo deigns, in condescending fashion, to regard Gogo and Didi as "human beings—as far as one can see." Lucky does what Pozzo commands and when distraction is needed, Lucky dances and then "thinks," in a rambling monologue of seeming gibberish in which nuggets of philosophy whizz by.

Pozzo, megaphone in hand, turns Southern politician on the stump, but can't quite remember what the rabble want him to tell them. Disgusted by his cruelty toward Lucky ("To treat a man like that!"), master and slave take their leave after comically protracted goodbyes. (I half-expected to hear Judy Holliday's "Adieu to ya.")

A boy appears out of the audience to tell them that Godot cannot come today, "but surely tomorrow."

The second act begins in lively fashion with Pierce strutting down the road, giving out with a Mardi Gras Indian chant, a bit of "Hey Pocky Way" and a Beckett lyric set to a New Orleans street beat.

Gogo has been beaten again and the two men try to find "something that gives us the impression that we exist." But everything has changed in a single night. Comedy is momentarily halted by the chill of fearful thoughts and images they have been trying to keep at bay—hell, death, corpses ("You don't have to look."/"You can't help looking, try as one may"), the whispery sounds of the dead talking.

Pozzo returns, bloodied and apparently blinded and calls for help as he and the now completely mute Lucky collapse.

"Let us do something, while we have the chance!" Vladimir cries, not only to Estragon, but to the audience. "To all mankind, they were addressed, these cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, this moment in time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not!"

> Didi and Gogo help Pozzo to stand.
> "Where will you go from here?" Vladimir asks.
> "On," says Pozzo.
> "What do you do when you fall far from help?" Vladimir asks.
> "We wait till we can get up," Pozzo says. "And then we go on. On!"
> As Gogo sleeps, another Boy comes, with the self-same message from Godot.
> At the end, Vladimir and Estragon agree to go.
> But, as the light fades to black, they do not move.

The surprise is how easily the play adapts to what we have experienced over the last two years and the clarity it brings to what some people still find a problematic text. There is no great entity riding to our rescue to "fix" what has been broken. We must do it ourselves, as we have, with the help of compassionate strangers and our own crazy courage.

The play brings light, life, and humanity to a dark corner of the city and the ongoing dark night of our souls.

This is stimulating, adventurous theater of the first order in which we see ourselves in the mirror of a great play.

While the director attends meticulously to the details of character and intricate comic business, he also makes great use of the broad canvas at hand, in spatial relations, stumbling forays into the weeds and the dramatic entrance and exit that two trees in the distance on North Prieur Street provide. The lighting and sound are excellent, given the circumstances, and as a bonus, tugboats from the Industrial Canal provide haunting echoes.

Pierce, who swings between funkily antic and broodingly morose, becomes a figure of moral stature by play's end, roaring his anger into the void as he clings to the small green leaf of hope.

J Kyle Manzay's entertainingly complaining Estragon has the most cosmic line, "Do you think God sees me?" plangently delivered. He is the loopy Laurel to Pierce's Hardy, and is as dexterous verbally as he is physically. The easy rapport between the two men, their camaraderie, the irritating essential each is to the other, is brilliantly realized.

Tall, thin, and angular T. Ryder Smith's Pozzo is the oppressive "have" to the have-nots; the self-satisfied exploiter, user, and abuser. To this, Smith adds notes of dizzy, addled eccentricity, throwing himself into Pozzo's blind bumbling in the bulrushes like a man who is rag-doll drunk.

Mark McLaughlin is the very essence of Lucky, the aging "servant" Pozzo arbitrarily punishes, insults, and orders about. McLaughlin stands there stoically, laden down with suitcases, the burdens of the human race. He will dance foolishly but purposefully as a man caught in a net—his life story—and pontificate when his hat is placed on his head, as if all knowledge resided there. He is every soul plodding through life at the caprice and cruelty of others.

Completing the cast are Tony Felix and Michael Pepp as The Boys, played as polite Catholic school kids and handling their lines with disarming aplomb.

The shadows of silent movie comedians have always hovered over *Godot* and after bows had been taken opening night, the six players turned around in unison and walked down the road, like Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp.

They also walked into New Orleans theater history.

Gentilly crowd, 2007. Photos this and facing page by Tuyen Nguyen

Gentilly street closure, 2007

Gentilly lines, 2007

The Pinettes leading the audience to the Gentilly site, 2007

More lines, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

Gentilly site, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

Robert and Lois waiting for
Mayor Nagin, 2007

The Pinettes before the
performance, 2007.
Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

Act 2, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

J Kyle, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

The house, 2007

The routine, 2007. Photos this page and facing by Tuyen Nguyen

Tony Felix, 2007

Blindness, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

Intermission, 2007

View from inside of Gentilly house, 2007. Photo by Tuyen Nguyen

ANNE GISLESON

THAT TREE, THAT LEVEE

Anne Gisleson searches for the ultimate meaning of the Ninth Ward production of Waiting for Godot.

I started noticing the signs in mid-October, on telephone poles across the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Wards. Down Claiborne Avenue, St. Claude Avenue, by the Lafitte housing projects, in front of the Saturn Bar, the Sound Café, across from the bus stop at Montegut and Royal. Black lettering on white: "A country road. A tree. Evening." Beckett's spare opening lines to *Waiting for Godot*. The plastic corrugated signs niftily appropriated the visual vernacular of post-K New Orleans, those ads that overran neutral grounds, sprouted from poles and trees soon after the storm as more sophisticated communication broke down—advertising gutting services, contractors, what schools and businesses were opening, who was hiring, or running for what office during our seemingly interminable election cycles.

The signs were connected to the upcoming productions of Beckett's seminal play by New York-based Creative Time, a public art presenting organization. Once I noticed them, I couldn't unnotice them. They were reminders of the 1,000-plus pages of Beckett I tried to read during grad school that settled unsettlingly somewhere in my brainpan. *Godot* seemed an interesting choice to make some sort of statement about New Orleans; it was created in a post-war landscape, purportedly influenced by Beckett's experience in the French Resistance, underground, under siege, waiting for messages, for signs, shadowy encounters in which enormous things were at stake, passing the time under duress with humor and rumination. Quietly fighting the good fight. The signs were getting me generally hyped about the Lower Ninth Ward production of the play near the newly rebuilt levee.

Then I started asking people what they thought of the *Godot* signs. The reactions ranged from thoughtful bafflement to outright dismissal. No one I talked to connected them to the play, so the signs weren't quite marketing. The quote was enigmatic, innocuous, lacking the provocative spirit of most street art—a missed opportunity in my eyes, since they were going to all the trouble of breaking the law by affixing them to public property. As it turns out, artistic director Paul Chan placed them there to illustrate that the play could've been performed on any street in

New Orleans, a gesture in line with the expansive and generous nature with which he approached the project, working hard with members of the community to make sure it was executed as sensitively as possible. But after hearing so many I-don't-get-its, the signs began to give off a whiff of "those who know, know" while keeping the guys hanging out at the Wing Shack on North Claiborne Avenue at arm's length.

But I still was very psyched about the production.

We'd heard that scores of would-be playgoers had been turned away for Friday night's premiere, so we arrived an hour early, as did about a hundred others. The sky darkened. The crowds grew. The program promised a "Gumbo Reception" followed by a "Second Line—Follow the Band to the Play."

One reviewer said the fake secondline and gumbo made it feel like a real "Nawlins" production. What felt most "Nawlins" to me was that, while hundreds of us stood around in line for a ticket, some for over an hour, joking around, grumbling, spraying ourselves with free mosquito repellent, VIPS with lanyards sailed past us, as did some neighborhood residents who tried to argue that they'd lived there their whole lives and why should they have to wait?

After getting the ticket and being admitted to the staging area a block down from where the actual play would be performed, I had a moment's sense of unease while in line for the port-a-let across from a graffiti-riddled storm-trashed house. Down one side of the road were hundreds of people in a soup line and on the other side was a mob crowding some police barricades, waiting. There was speculation that this was a shrewdly engineered part of the pre-play experience. By the time many folks got to their seats, it would have been about a two-hour wait.

While I know the free "gumbo party" and perfunctory brass band were meant to be gestures of generosity, tributes to our unique culture, etc., for me, they also came off as patronizing, or pandering, and wholly unnecessary. Is this what New York thinks we do down here every time more than ten of us get together? We know that's what L.A. thinks. Or, it could've been the brainchild of a well-meaning local. It may seem like the apex of cynicism to bitch about free gumbo and paid musicians, but joyless artificial second-lining makes even natives feel like awkward conventioneers. With all this post-Katrina cultural boosterism, I feel as though we're in danger of self-parody and provincialism, always pointing our fingers back at our own "uniqueness" but always at the same uniquenesses, which become more and more commodified, less and less attached to their origins and ultimately threatening the true cultural strength of the city. But I heard John Folse's gumbo was pretty good.

Great art experiences are often about opening up and connecting with something outside of yourself or synthesizing your own experiences with someone else's vision. And that's eventually what happened for me when we finally made it to our seats.

The Lower Ninth Ward setting at the intersection of Reynes and North Prieur was so full of drama and pathos it would've been a full night of theater to just sit in folding chairs on the risers and look at the landscape. The performers were truly, as billed, world-class. And there was Beckett, gazing into the void and filling it with vaudeville, friendship, meager hope, questions, venereal disease, abuse, poetry, and despair. Among other things.

If your brain got temporarily shorted out by the elliptical dialogue or you couldn't actually see the actors because of your bad seats, it didn't necessarily lessen the experience. In the distance, the "set" was framed by the Claiborne Avenue bridge on the left and the Florida Avenue bridge on the right, a dark stretch of newly constructed levee between them, holding back the unseen Industrial Canal, a loaded symbol of so much even before the storm, of economic promise and the civic neglect it created. Bottom-lit, expressionistic oak trees fronted the levee. Electrical towers along the canal towards Lake Pontchartrain flashed intermittent warnings. Ninth Ward resident Robert Green Sr.'s FEMA trailer far to the left and a blighted, abandoned cottage off to the right. The road, North Prieur, appears out of darkness, fields of weeds on either side, the ragged dashes of the lane divider hinting at its former existence as an urban street. The setting is a testament to how quickly and thoroughly nature reclaims its own here in the subtropics, to the beautiful and sad tenuousness of civilization.

That was just the background. The immediate "stage" where most of the action occurred had its own stirring composition. Left to right: an upright utility pole, a north-leaning storm-bent pole, an upright artificial stage "tree" in the center of the road as a sort of visual fulcrum and to the right another north-leaning signless post, and a rusty fire hydrant, used for full comedic effect. The soundscape was just as integral: distant police sirens, tugboat and train horns, the sharply wailing birds, all pulsing quietly in the background, muted by the once-treacherous canal and the empty lots of former homes.

It was all so well executed by the Classical Theatre of Harlem director Christopher McElroen that Beckett's characters seemed to emerge from this landscape, to have always been there. Gentilly native Wendell Pierce played Valdimir, J Kyle Manzay was Estragon, T. Ryder Smith was Pozzo, and the local theater veteran Mark MacLaughlin played

Lucky. Interestingly, or maybe not at all, each of the principals, save MacLaughlin, have appeared in *Law & Order* episodes.

Woven throughout Beckett's story of two men waiting by a road for the elusive Godot who never shows, there were crowd-pleasing local references, Mardi Gras Indian chants, and even an Armstrong imitation by Pierce. One of the more obvious script changes occurred when Vladimir and Estragon argue about whether or not they're in the right place, Vladimir querying about "That tree… that levee." Beckett's original line had Vladimir referring to "that bog" with stage directions for him to point out into the audience, presumably the morass that is humanity. This tiny change shifts attention away from the audience to the levee, our ubiquitous symbol of failure. The set never lets you forget either—whenever Estragon sat exhaustedly at the base of the north-leaning pole, that stuck storm compass, my heart nearly broke.

Vladimir and Estragon are played as amiable neighborhood guys, by turns easy and joking, peevish or anguished. Pozzo is clearly "The Man" in his ruined Tom Wolfe get-up and megaphone, his swaggering but addled authority inextricably bound to Lucky, the object of his abuse and derision. Talk about a metaphor for living in New Orleans. He arrives on the scene on his three-wheeled bicycle, Lucky tethered to a shopping cart bulging with plastic bags and miscellaneous street garbage. Surveying the situation, the decimated landscape and its weathered residents, Pozzo whips out a disposable camera and aims it at the abandoned house at the edge of the weed patch, a nod to the crass voyeurism the disaster scene sometimes invokes. His line, "It's a disgrace," is followed by the grating, amplified winding of the camera, and then a hollow click. "But there you are," he concludes.

One of the most moving moments was in the second act, when Vladimir runs off through the man-high weeds to a small platform, shouting out the lines that express the core of nearly all of Beckett's work. "Astride of a grave, a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on his forceps… the air is full of our cries!" Vladimir's voice echoes beyond the audience, across the empty foundations and sparse progress of the Lower Ninth Ward and down towards the trailers and packed bars of St. Bernard Parish.

When Pozzo and Lucky return later in the play, in tatters, Pozzo, blinded and bloodied, crawling along the ground, the scene takes on the intricate despair of a Brueghel painting. Everyone gets dragged down in the end, and yet people carry on despite it, because, for the most part, that's what human beings do. The play ends, famously, with the final exchange:

> vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
> estragon: Yes, let's go.
> *They do not move.*

Theater being both a communal and individual experience, there was a variety of reactions among the audience. Some thought it too long or too uncomfortable and left at intermission, some didn't get it at all; some, maybe most (myself included), deemed it just extraordinary, and one, my husband and first time Beckett-goer, thought it should've been six hours long. There was some griping about too many New Yorkers at the Friday night show, too many white people at the Saturday night show, too much money being lavished on an out-of-state production, not enough of the Lower Ninth Ward community in attendance. But even if it were just for the few, for Mr. Green, whose trailer served as the dressing room and a distant set element, and who lost his granddaughter and mother to the storm near that very spot, then I imagine it was worth it.

I think the *Godot* production succeeded grandly on many levels—it brought some national and local awareness, engaged some locals and neighborhoods in ways that reaffirmed the magnitude of their experience, and reassured them that they weren't completely forgotten. Plus, something was really happening down there. A writer friend who lives in Holy Cross said that the most exciting part of the event for him was seeing hundreds of people hunting for parking in the Lower Ninth Ward. And it's true that all the activity was heartening, the presence of a sense of purpose, of resources being expended (though later carted away) and care. All in all, it's what vision, talent, and money can accomplish.

There's already been a whole lot written about the connection of the play to the city's current state of affairs, emphasizing the idea of the New Orleanians' "waiting." Waiting for FEMA, waiting for Road Home money, waiting for neighbors, waiting for a master plan, etc. This, I imagine unintentionally, emphasizes a certain passivity to the reconstruction that mischaracterizes the enormous, historic, exhausting amount of civic activity down here. I've never seen the town so goddamned busy, so many sunken eyes and jittery nerves and bleeping BlackBerries and calloused hands. In fact, many, many people did not wait and are not waiting for government help, but are rather moving forward and doing. And I'd say most who *are* waiting for that Road Home check aren't just sitting on the stoop engaged in entertaining, esoteric banter, they're gutting, rebuilding, hiring contractors, or doing it themselves, trying to keep from being ripped off, or making ear-numbing numbers of telephone calls to try to get that check in their hands. Or just plain getting the hell out.

Beckett once said that he wrote out of "impotence and ignorance." His quiet acknowledgement and relentless exploration of the impossibility of the human condition eventually earned him the Nobel Prize for literature. Though everyone on the planet faces his own extinction and demise, in New Orleans we've had the rather rare experience, at least in America, of facing it publicly, collectively. The production made me think that a true memorial to the place, the people, and the moment would be to erect permanent amphitheater-style seating on that same spot at North Prieur and Reynes, where people could come and just look and listen and be silent.

ANDREA BOLL

PUKING MY PUKE OF A LIFE

(NOLAFugees.com, November 20, 2007)

NOLAFugees correspondent Andrea Boll examines the Lakeside production of "Godot."

We are instructed to follow, to dance actually, behind the Pinnettes Brass Band along Robert E. Lee Boulevard over the levee you still can't drive across. They take us to the edge of Warrington Street where we give our tickets and walk to the bleachers set up in front of a two-story house that looks more like a beat-up wooden box, empty and exposed to the elements. All the houses are like this except the one next door which appears to have been completely rebuilt. Before the play begins, the production team of *Waiting for Godot* thanks the owner or possibly the tenant for allowing them to put it on here. She was the only neighbor who had to give her permission because no one else is back. We clap and cheer for her success, for her wide smile we take as happiness to be home.

Nobody, however, thanks the owner of 6205 Warrington, the house chosen as the setting for this production. What is their story, I wonder, as I always do when I pass the sagging homes of my non-existent neighbors, a game I call Where Have All the People Gone. Probably they didn't want their abandonment or their indecisiveness acknowledged by a thank you in front of an audience. Because really, what are they being thanked for, but for letting their house rot to such a state that it is a perfect setting, a symbol even, for neglect and despair. I too might choose to remain anonymous.

To be honest, I have no business reviewing the quality of this particular production of *Waiting for Godot* (although that was how, at 6:35 PM Friday, after countless had been turned away or given up, I was able to finagle a ticket from the kind people at Creative Time by flashing my NOLAFugees press pass). I have never seen it performed and other than a feeble ten-or so-page attempt to read it one summer when I was trying to expand my literary horizons, I've never studied it. For this reason, I will rely on those with more expertise for a brief technical review.

I first asked Dr. Marylin Mell, a professor of English at Dillard University, who has studied *Godot* extensively as well as having seen it performed

multiple times. She said it was by far the best production she had ever seen because of the actors' impeccable timing. Later, Ray Vrazel, a professor of Theatre also at Dillard, told me he found the acting to be excellent, but the pronunciation of Godot as GODot to be ridiculous and believed it ruined the rhythm. He especially disliked the use of the gutted house as a prop, finding it "distracting."

And for what it's worth, while I haven't seen *Waiting for Godot* acted badly (a painful experience, Marylin explained), I have seen plenty of other plays that have tortured me with poor acting, where rather than allow me to experience an escape, a suspension of disbelief, the acting forced me to seek an escape, typically the exit sign. In *Waiting for Godot*, however, I believed completely that I had stumbled quite accidentally upon the lives of Gogo (Estragon) and Didi (Vladimir), where they pass the time waiting for Godot by talking shit and horsing around, yelling, and philosophizing. Of course, it is quite possible I was so easily able to suspend my disbelief because there was no real disbelief to suspend. Their reality, along with Pozzo's and Lucky's, is not so far removed from my own, not only in terms of geography (I have my own tragicomedy ten blocks away), but also because I know those men, have met them in this city at a neighborhood bar on a late night where dawn brings its own kind of twilight and insanity.

And possibly, because I've met these men or at times been these men, what resonated with me during the play was not how, like Gogo and Didi, many in New Orleans are waiting for Godot, with Godot symbolizing whatever did not happen or what was not received after the hurricane. Rather, the theme of the play I understood as most closely paralleling our lives is how exhaustion combined with the disorientation of living in a desolate landscape where only one tree grows, where change happens at the pace of two leaves per day, and where the only other people around are lunatics, will, over time, force you into a mental and physical space where you will wait for Godot. In fact, you will think it is a GREAT idea, even though you secretly know Godot will never bring or be what you need.

"What is there to recognize?" asks Gogo. Yes, what is there to recognize anymore? One day you wake up in your formaldehyde FEMA trailer, and somebody has chopped down all the trees on your street because even though they appeared to be alive, they were actually dead. An entire block of houses has been demolished. Everybody has left except you.

You, like Didi, will ask yourself, "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?" Questions that will remain unanswered.

While staring at your broken house, paralyzed by the amount of work that needs to be done, you will cry like Didi to no one in particular, "It is too much for one man."

You will confess like Gogo to your best friend, your neighbors, your contractor, yourself, to anybody who will listen, "I can't go on like this," and have them pat you on the back and say with amusement like Didi, "That's what you think."

And when yet another person asks you with that incredulous tone why you or anybody for that matter would choose to live and rebuild in New Orleans, you will explain with Gogo's exact words, because "I puked my puke of a life away here…"

The lights fade. The play ends. We applaud. The cast disappears into the black night as does the audience. And yet, the setting remains: a destroyed house in a sea of destroyed houses. Not a backdrop, but somebody's life they do not know what to do with. And yes, it is distracting, but distracting in a way that all obvious suffering is. We'd rather not know or be privy to it. So when a blind Pozzo asks Didi what it looks like out here and Didi replies, "It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing," "nothing" takes on a different connotation than the setting Beckett had imagined as "A country road. A tree. Evening." This sort of nothing is worse—more terrifying because this sort of nothing has been created by loss, by the absence of what was once living and whole, filled with light and possibility rather than a nothing that is nothing because it never existed.

So in the end, there is "nothing to be done." And possibly, this is why Samuel Beckett called it a tragicomedy rather than a straight tragedy, because our tragic heroes never have the epiphany, the recognition, as it were, that their current situation might stem from their own doing. And thus, as the audience, we are denied our catharsis, what Aristotle argued in *Poetics* as the reason humans enjoy tragedy, because it "achieves through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents." Or as I understand it, we experience catharsis in tragedy because we learn the lesson without having to actually go through it. But by the end of *Waiting for Godot*, nobody learns a lesson. There is no fall, no release for them and, in turn, ourselves from the terribleness of our fate. No blind seer comes to point out the obvious—Godot ain't coming, baby. We are blinded like Pozzo and not given any reasons, any insight, or the gift of prophecy. Life only becomes harder.

So we try to laugh it off. We try to call it comedy and trade hats, fall down. Except we can only laugh at our absurdity for so long until we no longer remember what the joke was. Then we weep.

IS NEW ORLEANS WAITING FOR GODOT?

(*The Huffington Post*, November 14, 2007)

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 Ninth Ward. A classic of 1950's 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 premiere, 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 improvization, 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 forty years. The Dutch, who once journeyed to New Orleans to learn flood control, defend their coastal assets against weather events expected only once in ten 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 siècle.

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.

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Christopher McElroen is the Co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), for which he produced forty productions between 2000 and 2009 that yielded thirteen AUDELCO Awards, six OBIE Awards, two Lucille Lortel Awards, and a Drama Desk Award. Selected directing credits include *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, and *Marat/Sade*. He has also directed at numerous venues, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Duke University, and the Walker Art Center.

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Nato Thompson is Chief Curator for Creative Time, where he has organized major projects, such as *It Is What It Is: Conversations about Iraq* (2009), a project that encouraged public discussion of the history, present circumstances, and future of Iraq. Prior to Creative Time, he worked as a curator for MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions, such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, a survey of political art of the 1990s. His most recent book, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production*, is available through Autonomedia.org.

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