

In Katrina's Wake

When the levees broke in August 2005, everything seemed lost. But a jolt of new theatrical activity is offering New Orleanians fresh perspectives on the disaster and its aftermath.

By Christopher Wallenberg



From left: Artistic director Andrew Larimer, center, with the cast of NOLA Project's *Get This Lake Off My House*, staged on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain (photo by Jeremy Blum); Lance Nichols, Kenneth Brown and Kesha Bullard in *The Breach* at Southern Rep (photo by John Barrois);

New Orleans theatre artist Nick Slie is trekking along a dirt pathway on a warm and bright Sunday in late February, pushing past overgrown bushes and tree limbs in an abandoned golf course within New Orleans's sprawling City Park. The bearded Slie, co-artistic director of the experimental theatre ensemble [Mondo Bizarro](#), is zeroing in on a small grove of oak trees next to a clearing, where a dilapidated wooden swamp shack looks ready to collapse. That forlorn structure is one of the leftover set pieces from *Loup Garou*, a site-specific show that Slie created in collaboration with director Kathy Randels and the poet Raymond "Moose" Jackson and performed here last fall. In the ensemble-generated work, Slie portrayed a Cajun man who's been infected by a mysterious swampland creature and transformed into a howling, feral werewolf.

The solo piece, with its elaborate sound design and live musicians, explored issues of coastal land loss, environmental degradation and the threat of cultural extinction in South Louisiana in the post-Katrina era. It was performed some two dozen times, including during the second-ever [New Orleans Fringe Festival](#) in November. Hundreds of people came out for the show's sunrise and sunset performances, which provided a fiery orange-

and-pink scrim that no amount of money or special effects could reproduce. "On the morning we first opened at 7 a.m., there was fog hovering on the ground up to my knees for the first half-hour," Slie recalls. "And it was just cold enough so that when I began to sweat, there was steam coming off me. It was a completely holy experience."

Still, Slie and company also had to contend with the destructive aspects of Mother Nature, a fickle and unforgiving beast with which New Orleanians have long had an intimate connection. Slie remembers performing the piece one evening as a line of dark storm clouds began gathering along the horizon. Thunder rolled in the distance, the wind started to howl and tiki torches toppled over. As Slie took his final bows after the performance, a torrential downpour ensued, and some 150 people scurried down the fairway to the parking lot. The good news was that a meal had been prepared in a nearby pavilion, where everyone gathered afterward, smiles beaming from their faces despite the soaking rain. After all, New Orleanians are known for their dogged, roll-with-the-punches resilience, especially when it comes to weather and environmental disasters. That steely spirit has long been woven into the fabric of the city, but has become noticeably acute after the catastrophic devastation of Aug. 29-30, 2005, when the levees broke and 80 percent of this historic burg was inundated.

"How do we even begin to wrap our heads around what it means for us to live here, considering what an enormous struggle it is every day? It's both horrific and amazing at the exact same time," Slie observes. "But you look at the do-it-yourself spirit of everyone around you, and you can't help but think, 'Look at how damn creative we've been in rebuilding a major American city.' So you're swelling with pride yet absolutely terrified for what could still happen here."

Loup Garou, a collaboration between Slie's Mondo Bizarro and Randel's [ArtSpot Productions](#), exemplifies the re-energized theatre scene that's emerged in the Crescent City in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's destruction. The new landscape is marked by a grassroots ethos, a reawakened spirit of collaboration and unity among formerly fragmented or territorial groups, the growth of alternative performance spaces and site-specific pieces, and a widespread commitment to creating original and experimental work.

Injecting a jolt of new energy into the scene is an influx of young theatre artists who have begun putting down roots in New Orleans, largely in the post-Katrina period. Centered in the bohemian enclaves of the Bywater and the Marigny, many of these artists have formed ensembles and are devising original performance pieces. Companies like the [NOLA Project](#), [Cripple Creek Theatre Co.](#), [Goat in the Road Productions](#), [New Noise](#), [FourFront Theatre](#) and [Skin Horse](#) are comprised of a mix of New Orleans natives and recent transplants, many whom arrived from New York or studied theatre there.

These upstart young Turks have found a welcoming home among the city's established theatrical ensembles, such as Mondo, ArtSpot, acclaimed local director Carl Walker's All Kinds of Theatre, and [Junebug Productions](#), run by a godfather of the New Orleans theatre scene, John O'Neal, one of the co-founders of the seminal [Free Southern Theatre](#). These new companies have also meshed remarkably well with the city's big-league arts institutions, including [Southern Rep](#); the Shakespeare Festival at Tulane University; the [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#); and [Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carré](#), the oldest continuously operating community theatre in the country (now under new management after years of financial trouble). The [Contemporary Arts Center](#), whose once-vibrant role as a theatre

presenter has diminished in recent years, and the [Anthony Bean Community Theater](#), the city's thriving African-American theatre, are two of the city's other principal players.

"Something that many of us are really invested in is the question of: How do we start to scaffold the theatre scene here? And how can we continue to raise the bar on the level of work?" says New Orleans theatre artist Emilie Whelan, a member of Cripple Creek and performance coordinator for the fringe festival, which has become a galvanizing force in the theatre scene over the past few years. "I think the post-Katrina period really brought in a talented mix of people to get a good party started. But we have to continue to lay down the groundwork so that theatre can be something that New Orleans is really known for."

Local playwright and pontificator Jim Fitzmorris, a professor at Tulane University and co-artistic director of the Shakespeare Festival, believes that "if we come to accept that we're never going to be Minneapolis, Seattle or Chicago, then we can be a heck of a double-A franchise. My vision is for New Orleans to become this great petri dish of experimentation—a place where artists know they can find a community that's going to support their efforts, where they can come and try out their stuff with no consequences other than learning and development, and then hopefully make a name for themselves nationally."

Some of the most remarkable new work to have emerged in the wake of the storm has grappled with common post-Katrina themes, including the nature of home, memory, loss, environmental decay and destruction, the city's insider-versus-outsider dynamic, racism, and economic and social justice.

Post-Katrina plays that dealt sometimes directly, sometimes symbolically, with the storm and its aftermath arrived in several waves. The first could be termed what local author John Biguenet calls "from rage to page to stage." These plays were written in the first few years after the storm, when emotions were still raw and the anger and frustration with local civic leaders, the Army Corps of Engineers, the federal government and the pace of the recovery efforts neared a boiling point. Many of the plays found the writers recounting their own harrowing Katrina experience and the still-palpable psychic wounds.

One of the touchstone post-Katrina plays that gained a national reputation was Biguenet's *Rising Water*, which became the best-selling show in Southern Rep's 23-year history and has been subsequently seen across the country. Commissioned by the Rep and debuted in spring '07, *Rising Water* is a Beckettian drama about a husband and wife stranded in the attic and then on the roof of their house as the storm waters rapidly rise. They grapple with the anger and helplessness of their predicament, as well as the emotional scars of a 30-plus-year marriage. The multi-level shopping center in which Southern Rep is located burned in the chaos after the storm, and Biguenet says you could still smell lingering smoke in the theatre at the time of the production. Needless to say, emotions ran sky-high throughout the run, especially during post-show talkbacks, where many audience members shared their own survival stories.

José Torres-Tama, who has been making performance and visual art in the city for 25 years, wrote and performed *The Cone of Uncertainty*, a multimedia protest piece that recounts his own dramatic escape from the flood-ravaged city in a stolen school bus three days after the levees breached. Premiered locally in March '06 at the Ashé Cultural Arts

Center and subsequently performed around the country, the piece explores issues of forced exile, displacement and social justice using what Torres-Tama calls his "magic-realist Latino voodoo aesthetic."

In June '07, a bus tour took audiences to five different sites in the city's Lakeview neighborhood along Lake Pontchartrain to view visual and performing arts installations. Dubbed [LakeviewS](#), the bus tour was part of the "Home, New Orleans?" project, a multi-disciplinary collaboration that incorporated Kathy Randels's solo performance *Spaces In Between*, performed inside the storm-gutted house where she grew up. Randels also directed *Coming Forward* in the bare-bones remnants of a church where her father was a pastor for 35 years, with a cast featuring eight of the remaining members of the congregation. The bus tour concluded with *Generations*, a performance by the NOLA Project at the site of a cherished neighborhood restaurant, Bruning's, the third-oldest eatery in the city (open since 1859) before it was leveled by Katrina. Afterward, a meal was served for audience members on the former site of the restaurant.

Three years after the storm, performer Diana Shortes combined poetry and movement in *Ventriloquist Verses: Voices from Beneath the Water's Edge*, a meditation on the search for identity in post-Katrina New Orleans that was staged at the Alamo Underground, a makeshift arts space where Shortes and friends holed up for 14 days after the hurricane. Race and race relations have also been on the minds of New Orleans artists and writers since Katrina, especially after outgoing Mayor Ray Nagin's divisive, controversial and widely derided ["Chocolate City" speech](#) stoked tensions throughout the city. Torres-Tama's *Cone of Uncertainty* touched on the exploitation of immigrant workers in rebuilding the city. Biguenet's *Shotgun*, produced at Southern Rep in spring '09 as a follow-up to *Rising Water*, is set four months after the flood and tells the story of a white man and a black woman falling in love as neighbors under the same roof of a shotgun-style house. *Story Circle*, written by John Grimsley and directed by John O'Neal, seeks to ease racial tension, mistrust and misunderstanding through honest civil dialogue, with black and white characters of all ages and walks of life telling of their own real-life experiences with race and racism.

Focusing on women's perspectives on Katrina, *Swimming Upstream* was a collaboration between Eve Ensler's [V-Day project](#), the Ashé Cultural Arts Center and a slew of New Orleans artists, in which local women told their stories of survival. The piece was performed in April '08 at the Superdome, and there are plans to remount the piece in New Orleans on the fifth anniversary of the storm.

"What's happened with the writers, actors and other artists from New Orleans is not that they're trying to use what happened—they're trying to understand what happened," Biguenet observes. "And maybe not even explain what happened, but to phrase questions that the community needs to think about and discuss if we're going to put ourselves back together again."

Not all the plays and performance pieces created since Katrina have been about illuminating the pain, suffering and raw emotions of the time. After all, the city has never taken itself too seriously (it isn't called the Big Easy for nothing). Indeed, many local theatre artists mixed gallows humor and sly wit to satirize the predicament in which New Orleanians found themselves. One of the first original pieces performed after Katrina turned the city into a ghost town was cabaret artist Ricky Graham's *I'm Still Here, Me!* Staged at the city's premiere cabaret venue, [Le Chat Noir](#), only a few months after the

storm hit, Graham's solo vaudevillian satire skewered the long wait for FEMA checks and the insanity of returning to a largely uninhabitable city. Another piece that used satire as a kind of cathartic release from frustration and anger was the NOLA Project's *Get This Lake Off My House*, an adaptation of *The Tempest* staged on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in June '06 and featuring a guy dressed as Katrina spilling a kiddie-pool full of water over a miniature sandcastle city of New Orleans. More recently, Fitzmorris penned *The Thanatos Brass Band*, a piece that drolly imagined the Greek gods as the civic and cultural leaders of New Orleans and explored post-Katrina themes.

A number of plays written by non-natives have earned accolades but have also rankled some in the artistic community (more on that below). *The Breach*, staged at Southern Rep in September '07, was a series of interconnected stories about the storm and its consequences written collectively by non-Louisiana playwrights Tarell Alvin McCraney, Catherine Filloux and Joe Sutton. In their dynamic and visceral staging of *Ameriville* at Southern Rep in February and March of this year, the Bronx-based ensemble [UNIVERSES](#) used Katrina as a launching point to talk about fear in America and how the bungled preparation and response to the storm is a potent symptom of the nation's larger ills.

Following the devastation of Katrina, more than 100,000 New Orleanians have not had the financial means to return to their native city. And many others who did return were unable to survive in a place where employment plummeted and the cost of living skyrocketed. So former residents have scattered to cities like Houston and Atlanta, creating the so-called Katrina diaspora. One of those people was theatre artist and playwright Jamuna Yvette Sirker, who began shaping her poetic memoir piece *Hell and High Water* while she stood in endless FEMA and Red Cross relief lines. She continued developing the piece, recently seen at the Hudson Guild Theatre in New York, while she was homeless and unemployed. Sirker now lives and works in western Massachusetts and has still been unable to return to New Orleans.

For those Crescent City artists who have managed to survive and keep working despite financial struggles, the storm cemented the reasons they chose to stay. "One of the big things that Katrina did was solidify my New Orleans nationalism," Randels avows. "I think that's true for a lot of people. When you've gone through something like that, you feel very protective of the place."

One welcome change that many artists have observed since Katrina is how much more cohesive, tight-knit and collaborative the community has become. While artists caution that there's still a lot to be accomplished in that regard, especially when it comes to racial divisions in the arts community, most agree that companies and artists are far less segmented, territorial and backbiting than they used to be, more willing to reach out across the aisle and embrace what their fellow artists are doing.

A number of the upstart theatre ensembles regularly share resources, borrowing everything from props to lights, and helping out as ushers, stagehands and set builders. When Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot recently collaborated on a new work called *Flight*, they needed to move the show's steel sculptural set pieces to the performance space. So they called friends from other companies, and a small fleet of pick-up trucks showed up to help them haul the giant mechanical pieces to the venue.

"New Orleans has a very diverse theatre ecology, but it's still small," says Ashley Sparks, an ArtSpot company member. "So one of the lessons of the storm has been that we can't just continue to operate in our own insular worlds and not have a wider perspective. We're all related now, so there's a need for us to work together, because otherwise none of us are going to survive. It feels very different than somewhere like San Francisco or Chicago, where everybody can still operate in their own bubbles."

Still, challenges to building a truly cohesive, collaborative and nationally renowned theatre scene remain. Many local artists agree that the community isn't organized or united in ways that could reap the most benefits. "I can tell you that we have a vibrant scene, but it's still very fragmented, disconnected and racially divided," says Torres-Tama. "There are little theatre fiefdoms, and it's rare that real collaborations are being forged."

Yet strides have been made to foster stronger ties. Established institutions like Southern Rep and the Shakespeare Festival at Tulane have made tangible efforts to reach out to the crop of new ensembles setting up shop in the city. Southern Rep, under the artistic leadership of Ryan Rilette and now Aimée Hayes, has established a number of programs to help foster original work by local writers, including the New Play Bacchanal, the Crosstown Reading Series and PlayLab.

For Carol Bebelle, the executive director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, a locus of theatre in the African-American community, the lack of talent focused on the business side of theatre organizations is evident. "We have a lot of companies and artists who want to do work, but we need more people who are committed to the administrative side of building arts institutions," she contends.

Randels remains conscious of the loss of the city's elders in the wake of the storm and feels protective of those who remain. "There are people who were really major players in theatre in New Orleans before Katrina, and because of age, finances or whatever, they haven't come back yet—or they're here but they're not producing work the way they were before. So while I'm grateful for all of the new work that's being made now, it's important to balance that enthusiasm with the ground that was laid by the people who came before us."

John Grimsley, who's been a driving force in New Orleans theatre for decades but has largely ceased producing work with his Dog and Pony Theatre since the storm, laments what he sees as a lack of opportunities for the city's talented acting pool. "There are a lot of brilliant actors who aren't working in this city right now," he says. "And the reason is that there's nothing being offered to them. What's happening is that these groups are just doing their own thing and using their own members in all their shows. I don't see some of our great actors working very often, and that's unfortunate."

Almost everyone agrees that lack of adequate performing spaces and the struggle for artists to make a living wage remain two of the biggest challenges for the community. Performing venues seem to pop up and then disappear. Still, a few alternative spaces have become mainstays in the Marigny and Bywater enclaves. Dennis Monn, who co-founded the fringe festival, now runs the [Marigny Theatre and AllWays Lounge](#), which presents performance art, small-scale theatre and live music events. The Backyard Ballroom, a raw space inside a converted warehouse behind a historic home in the Bywater, and the [Sidearm Gallery](#), located in a former laundromat, both house alternative performance.

"There are some of us who have dreams of buying a big building, renovating it and

making it the home for grassroots/alternative theatre in New Orleans, with both performing and rehearsal spaces," says Goat in the Road co-founder Rachel Carrico, who moved to New Orleans several years ago.

In November '07, a site-specific production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, staged by the [Classical Theatre of Harlem](#) outside a storm-ravaged house in the Gentilly section of New Orleans and on a devastated block in the Lower Ninth Ward, became a galvanizing theatrical event in the city. New Orleans native Wendell Pierce, known for his portrayal of Bunk on the HBO series "The Wire," starred in the production. Thousands of people had to be turned away, and each night a jazz band played music before the show while a gumbo dinner was served. Spearheaded by New York artist Paul Chan and produced by the nonprofit Creative Time, with a great guerrilla marketing campaign, the production generated waves of national attention and became a unifying force for many in this traumatized community.

"I think *Godot* was done right. And it represented a sea change for theatre in this city," suggests Kristen Evans, co-founder and executive director of the fringe festival. "That was a critical moment, because it proved to a lot of people that New Orleanians will come out to theatre in droves."

But while many local artists had nothing but praise for *Godot*, more than a few strenuously admonished its organizers and other "carpetbagging" outsiders for their approach to creating Katrina-related pieces. While *The Breach* and the recent *Ameriville* were largely embraced, some locals have expressed serious reservations about the idea of non-natives telling the city's story.

"Now we can't say that the people and artists of New Orleans have total ownership of the story of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath," concedes Torres-Tama. "But \$200,000 to perform *Waiting for Godot* in a devastated landscape? How is that a measure of healing for a traumatized community? Couldn't that \$200,000 have been distributed more wisely or fairly to so many of the New Orleans artists who were here and experienced the storm and its aftermath?"

"I don't want to be the art brat who's all, 'You can't come to my home and make art!'" reasons Slie. "And no doubt *Godot* engaged people in the community and raised money. But ultimately, Creative Time and Paul Chan came down to make a name for themselves, and I haven't heard a peep from them since then." He adds that "for the last three years since that \$200,000 was spent, we've watched organizations struggle to keep the doors open and have their budgets slashed, and I've watched my colleagues struggle to keep their lives afloat."

Despite the sundry challenges of creating theatre in New Orleans post-Katrina—lack of money, resources, space and organization—many of the performing artists in the Crescent City have found a way to bring themselves and their city back from the physical devastation of the storm, even if the psychological scars remain. Yet many of these artists are compelled to ponder deeper questions about the relationship between art and the rebuilding process.

"Do we want to make our work so that people can come and applaud it and be happy that they had a cultural experience? Or do we want our work to change something about this place?" asks Slie rhetorically. "As the wise John O'Neal says, 'There's not much we can do alone.' And I know that what each of us is doing is visibly changing our home. I can

see it when it happens. Everyone standing strong and acting fervently on the thing that they're doing—that's what's making this place not only come back to life but thrive artistically."

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