

THE CULTURE

Katrina and the shock waves

Anna Hartnell admires a piece of experimental theatre that asks audiences to bear witness to the slow death of post-hurricane Louisiana

Come to a place that's on the front line of the 'end times' in our country...come to our great state of Louisiana, to New Orleans, and witness one of the largest environmental catastrophes ever, the loss of the coast...Come and witness with us."

Such was the apocalyptic challenge to theatregoers issued by Nick Slie, artistic director of experimental theatre ensemble Mondo Bizarro (and performer in *Cry You One*), in a 2010 interview. His call comes from a sense that "in New Orleans the environment is so much more interesting than theatre – and after the storm it just became incomparably interesting".

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which led to the flooding of 80 per cent of the city in the late summer of 2005, New Orleans itself became a stage that attracted the eyes of the world. While attention has drifted, Slie and a host of other theatremakers have turned increasingly to site-specific theatre as a way of exploring the myriad issues of social justice thrown up by the post-Katrina city, as well as its geographic proximity to what many say is the fastest disappearing land mass on Earth. In their work, New Orleans and the Gulf South continue to provide the larger stage on which they tell their stories.

The loss of the Louisiana wetlands is the central concern of *Cry You One*, produced by Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot Productions. Led by Slie and Kathy Randels, these groups predated Katrina, but they are important presences in a theatre scene that has experienced something of a renaissance since the storm.

In New Orleans, newcomers are unlovingly known as "transplants", a label that gained new meaning as the city was overwhelmed by an influx of usually well-intentioned outsiders, eager to help rebuild a city that has, for the past few decades, failed to attract new blood. Relations between natives and transplants

have often been tense, not least because the newcomers are part of the processes of gentrification that have shaped New Orleans' reconstruction and displaced long-time residents and communities. Somewhat ironically, therefore, the reinvigorated theatre scene has often assumed the role of articulating the painful issues raised by gentrification – race, class and environmental injustice, loss of home, the importance of cultural memory – while also being part of these same trends.

As Slie – himself a Louisiana native – put it, in the wake of Katrina engaged artists and performers realised that "one of the nation's most unique cultures was visibly threatened, on the verge of extinction. Like the plants that immediately bloomed after the storm as a means of survival, our job was to flower into action immediately." Along with many others, Slie and Mondo Bizarro turned to storytelling as a way of rebuilding community solidarity and nurturing roots that had been so violently displaced. This began with the 1-10 Witness Project, a digital storytelling platform that gathered the tales of dispersed New Orleans residents, and which evolved into a process of "storymapping" the Central City area of New Orleans – as a way of reclaiming it from media representations that habitually reduce it to a story of crime and drug abuse. Mondo's latest piece also includes a digital component.

Cry You One's headquarters, as it were, is Los Isleños Cultural and Heritage Society Museum in St Bernard Parish, a suburb to the east of New Orleans. The museum preserves the history of the Isleños people who started arriving in South Louisiana from the Canary Islands in the 18th century. Audience members are greeted by guides who promise to take them on a journey to the "edge of Louisiana". Before boarding the bus that transports the audience and performer-guides alike into what is fascinatingly described as "the nature", the boundary between performers and spectators is already blurred.

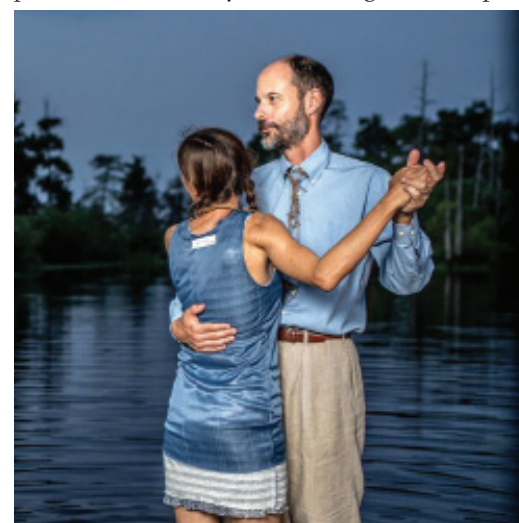
For anybody who dreaded drama classes at school, this is not the most comfortable experience, but one soon realises that it's not meant to be. Audience members are initiated into one of four groups: Alligators, Boars, Spiders and Snakes. "Zelda", who hosted the 'gators of which I was a part, encourages



MELISA CARDONA

us to stomp through the grass to warn spiders and snakes, and to point out "ant communities" to "colleagues" so we can studiously avoid them. She also provides us with sunscreen and "bug spray" that offers protection against some of the largest mosquitoes I have ever seen.

Zelda's ostensibly friendly disposition is gradually offset by the challenges she presents us with. Her first question, "What would you like to dispose of?", is closely followed by one that becomes a refrain throughout the performance: "Are you dreaming?" Her slip-



MELISA CARDONA

periness as a possibly unreliable guide encourages the feeling that perhaps we *are* dreaming.

By the time you are dancing a last waltz for Louisiana, having been asked by "Mr C" (capitalism?), who claims to have seduced everybody, what you might save from the debris of the landscape, this sense of being in a dream is fully realised. While some details of this extended ritual were lost on me, this last dance, followed by a display of destroyed artefacts of late capitalist society – radios, televisions, computers – and then the invitation to put mud on our faces, was clearly about saying goodbye to a world devastated by human intervention.

The next "act" involved boarding a boat that took us to the other side of a canal and delivered us to the man-made levee that borders St Bernard and supposedly protects it from the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and the outlying waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The drowned cypress forest that was dramatically presented to us, spread out as far as the eye could see, was a disturbing lesson in how incredibly beautiful images of destruction can appear to the human eye.

The levee, we were later told, had stopped the Mississippi and its tributaries from depositing the natural sediment that builds the land. The extensive system of canals constructed by the oil and gas industries had allowed for salt



MELISA CARDONA

The line of terrible beauty *Cry You One's* audience members are helped to realise their 'interconnectedness with each other and the land'

“The drowned cypress forest that was dramatically presented to us was a disturbing lesson in how beautiful images of destruction can appear”

water intrusion, killing the river's ecosystems. This means that the Louisiana wetlands, which consist of barrier islands that have offered some protection to coastal communities against hurricanes, are rapidly disappearing.

This set the scene for a funereal procession for a mile or so along the levee, followed by a horse and carriage that provided transport for weary mourners. As is the tradition in South Louisiana, this funeral was framed by pleasure as much as by pain: the walk was punctuated by performances, song, installations. Bread and fruit were thrown out to audience members, and there was even a shower of what looked like champagne on offer to those willing to catch it in their mouths. The lively Cajun-inspired fiddle gave way to the beat of a drum that transformed the occasion into a kind of jazz funeral – the African American tradition for which New Orleans is famous. If this was a goodbye, a last supper, it was also a celebration.

For me, the least successful aspects of the experience were the more "constructive" moments. Audience members in the final act were asked to voice the various possible "solutions" in ritualistic fashion: "composting", "wind power", "petitioning the oil and gas companies" and so on. It's not that potential solutions don't need to be tabled, but this didn't seem to be the place for it. What worked so well was the initiation of audience members into a temporary community that came together to realise their own interconnectedness, with each other and with the land. It was a dramatisation of various forms of solidarity, of fun, and the challenging and apocalyptic message that all this might be lost. *Cry You One* is a magical realisation of Nick Slie's sense that in South Louisiana, "everyday life is heightened to an art form". It invites audiences to participate in a powerful and frightening act of witnessing.

Anna Hartnell is a lecturer in contemporary literature at Birkbeck, University of London and the author of *Rewriting Exodus: American Future from Du Bois to Obama* (2011). She is currently a visiting scholar at Tulane University, New Orleans, where she is working on her next book, *After Katrina: Race, Transnationalism, and the End of the American Century*.