

LIVING

ARTBROKEN

A battered post-Katrina neighborhood provides a tragic, real-life backdrop for a surprisingly joyful evening of only-in-New Orleans theater.

A ribbon of family photos rings artist Jan Gilbert's Mouton Street family residence for her exhibit, 'Biography of a House,' that was part of the 'Lakeviews' tour. BELOW: Actress Kathy Randels plays the role of a ghost recalling life in her Lakeview family home, as the audience looks on through gutted walls.



EVEN by art-theater standards, this was no ordinary night on the town.

Theater-goers clambered aboard yellow school buses for a circuitous trek to five different flood-damaged Lakeview sites, where they witnessed symbolic art installations, poetic monologues and skits performed by actors and Lakeview residents, winding up at the lakefront slab that used to be Bruning's restaurant for an al fresco dinner at dusk.

Organizers called it "Lakeviews," and the neighborhood tour that debuted on Friday and wrapped on Sunday was a rollaway success. One hundred seats on two school buses were

sold out long before the opening of the three-night run. Co-producer Jan Gilbert said she was "thrilled" with the turnout, especially among ordinary folks.

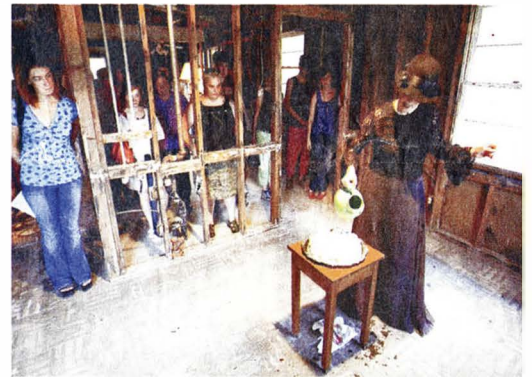
"I was struck by how many people really were not the usual art-theater crowd," she said. "It found its way deeper into the community."

By Doug MacCash
Art critic

The challenges inherent in staging a show on far-flung sets, with a cast of 25 professional and amateur performers, while leading the audience through a series of time-consuming boarding and disembarking logistics, did not prevent the "Lakeviews" creators from maintaining an

See 'LAKEVIEWS,' C-3

Audience members study Gilbert family photos affixed to the flood line around the house.



LIVING

'Lakeviews' a surprising evening of only-in-New Orleans theater

'LAKEVIEWS,' *from C-1*

even pace and tone.

Despite the destruction that scrolled forlornly past the bus windows, there were no damn-the-Corps-of-Engineers or throw-the-City-Hall-bums-out moments in "Lakeviews." In fact, there was no post-storm political finger pointing whatever. Instead, the creators and performers used Katrina as an avenue for personal, mostly affectionate, sometimes spooky recollections.

One of the most touching moments was also the least scripted. With the aid of her son Larry, 87-year-old Helen Gilbert teetered slowly from the car that had delivered her to the sidewalk outside of the Vicksburg Street home where she had lived for 53 years. It was the first time she had returned to the yellow brick ranch house since she fled Hurricane Katrina almost two years ago. Now under renovation by a new owner, the modest house bore a lifetime of memories.

Gilbert's daughter Jan, one of the Crescent City's premier conceptual artists, grew up there. Her artistic challenge was to see to it that Katrina did not wash away the memories that still circled the house for her mother, her siblings and herself. Her solution was eloquently simple: She transferred hundreds of family photos, some badly damaged by the flood, to a long ribbon of paper that she strung around the outside of the house at the 8-foot flood line.

As the "Lakeviews" audience wandered the sandy perimeter of the house where there once was lawn, they scanned the sort of photos that reflect all of our lives: long-ago weddings, proms, Halloweens and family gatherings. The ribbon of memories echoed the shared experience of the thousands of Lakeview residents that once occupied the damaged houses stretching in every direction.

Punctuating the ribbon were photos of a younger Helen

primed for a night on the town. Whenever she got dressed up, she explained with a pride undimmed by the passing years, her late husband was ready with a camera to capture the moment, emphasizing his adoration. It's no wonder the couple's daughter came to understand the symbolic power of photos.

At first, Helen Gilbert's appearance at her ruined home only added to the elegiac tone of the already haunting art installation. But the gaily dressed old woman refused to wallow in regret. Instead she immediately sought to lighten the moment, explaining to all within earshot that she was steadied by her son because, "I'm old, you understand, I'm not drunk."

Amid audience giggles and guffaws, she went on to describe the house's high times and low extemporaneously, with a good humor implying that life is what you make it — hurricanes included. Despite the loss, the overall tone of the Gilbert family's "Lakeviews" contribution was unexpectedly joyous.

Despite the grimness of the surroundings, the performances at the other locations were equally uplifting.

Maritza Mercado-Narcisse was magnetic as a sort of androgynous ghost, wandering the rutted roads of the poignantly weed-choked Holt Cemetery. In an intimate, nonjudgmental monologue, she channeled a series of reincarnated men looking back on the trials of fatherhood from the vantage point of the great beyond.

At the end of the hypnotic performance, Mercado-Narcisse startled the crowd by suddenly breaking character with the words, "Time to get back on the bus!"

Well-known performance artist and "Lakeviews" co-producer Kathy Randels was sweetly strange as a Southern Gothic specter haunting the gutted skeleton of a suburban ranch house. Her performance, like most others, was made more powerful by its authentic-

ity. The house was not arbitrarily selected; it was, in fact, Randels' childhood home. When she described sneaking out the back window to meet an adolescent beau, it seemed to be as much a recollection as lines in the script.

Members of the Lakeview Baptist Church charmed the crowd as they recalled the early days of the congregation in a stylized series of speeches, hymns and prayers in their flood-ravaged sanctuary. Rick Randels, the long-time church pastor and Kathy Randels' father, drew laughter when he facetiously warned the audience that when he got behind the pulpit, he might just do a little preaching.

What he and the rest of the congregation should not do is repair the gutted altar — as a focus for prayer, it can't be improved.

Andrew Larimer's comic play "Generations," staged on the cement slab that marks the former location of Bruning's restaurant, brought the bus trip to a surrealistic close. The giant crab and crawfish that climbed over the seawall to try out life on the dry side provided the perfect slapstick release valve. And the gumbo and salad dinner served by the actors in the sea breeze was a marvelous coda.

New York University professor and former New Orleans resident Richard Schechner suggested the neighborhood performance art tour that eventually became "Lakeviews." The result — an expression of authentic sadness without anger; stagings that are artsy without being pretentious — should make him quite proud.

Discussions about a reprise of "Lakeviews" are ongoing, but no future performance dates have been set. For more information, visit www.ny2no.net/lakeview or call (504) 251-4968.

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