

PRODUCING *WAITING FOR GODOT IN NEW ORLEANS*

Paul Chan’s vision was first relayed to me very casually, on the way to a meeting or perhaps crossing paths in the elevator with Creative Time’s new curator, Nato Thompson. I was told something to the effect of “Paul wants to stage *Waiting for Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward. What do you think?” This question—enticing and loaded beyond belief—sounded like a dare more than a proposal. I felt, however, that I had been preparing for the challenge for some time.

I’d joined Creative Time in 2005 as part of an effort to transition out of my practice as a set, lighting, and projection designer in the “downtown” experimental theater scene. In my undergraduate training I had in fact studied, performed, and directed Beckett, but in the five intervening years my attention had been turning steadily to site-specific and processional ways of working, following a persistent fascination with the writings of performance anthropologist Victor Turner, the work of the British art and theater company Welfare State International, and the study of celebratory cultural forms. I had become interested specifically in what I thought of as “the parachute question”—in a nutshell, the riddle of how to work intensively, responsibly, and collaboratively in locales that are not your own. You can imagine, then, that my answer to Nato’s question was along the lines of “Hell yeah!” A project had fallen into my lap that would require all of us working on it to wrestle with these questions of vanguard aesthetics, community, and alterity.

Of these fundamental issues, our outsider status became our central concern. We shared Paul’s doubts about our ability to understand our audiences’ experiences and perspectives, and given the traditionally narrow appeal of Beckett’s work everyone was worried about mounting the show in our own interest, walking away, and wearing our time in New Orleans like a badge of good citizenship. “Carpetbagger” became a watchword as Paul, Nato, Anne Pasternak, Christopher McElroen, and I made our first investigatory trips to New Orleans during the spring of 2007. We made little in the way of sweeping presentations; if at that time Paul had a written prospectus for the project, I never saw it. For those first months, we were guided by little more than the same simple, provocative suggestion I had been first presented with, coupled now with one or two rough sketches of

a set design, resonant in possibility but begging to be made specific. It was the challenges, questions, and advice we received from numerous New Orleanians that expanded the project, linking the play that anchored it, and acting as its public face to a web of community projects that would form its body. My reflections always come back to these discussions—to a process of listening that became our primary method, not only for the development of the project but for its realization as well.

New Orleans is the kind of place that prefers its business face-to-face, but in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina an inundation of ineffective national well-wishing had focused the population even more closely on immediate, local, and personal ways of working. We would arrive in town with several weeks’ worth of emails, futile in their institutional format and distant origin, almost universally unanswered. We would have only a few appointments on our itinerary. Invariably, though, a first meeting would yield referrals, and when we weren’t sitting down with a new contact, at least one of us was on the phone, seeing if we could swing by to meet someone the next day—sometimes the next hour. Most days we sat down with local arts administrators, recovery workers, theater directors, community center staff, professors, museum directors, artists, lawyers, and activists from 8 AM to 9 PM. We met whenever and wherever to introduce Paul, Creative Time, and the Classical Theatre of Harlem. As quickly as possible, we would ask: “How do we do this right?” Then, we would silence ourselves and turn the conversation over.

One of the first responses we received—“you gotta spend the time and you gotta spend the dime”—became our mantra. This sentiment—which underpinned every class, workshop, and potluck, as well as the Shadow Fund—was repeated emphatically at almost every meeting, and transformed Paul’s vision of an open-air *Godot* into the much more complex, three-part project that this publication commemorates. It was also through these conversations that a blueprint for the show itself emerged. We were told to perform in two neighborhoods. Situating the work only in the Lower Ninth Ward, a site of devastation repeatedly exploited for its eerily photogenic and deceptively pastoral landscape, would not speak to a local audience that understood that Katrina’s tragedy extended to the countless blocks of silent, gutted homes that stretched throughout the city’s other neighborhoods. Equally, the show had to be great—the city had seen enough good intentions fall flat, and if the production was going to matter it had to deliver a world-class experience. Finally, it needed to be local, from the crew we hired to the spirit of the presentation—no black-tie ushers, but a brass band to lead the audience to their seats; no staid pre-show receptions, but good, local food.

There was an ethical imperative to base our strategy in listening, but it was reinforced by very practical considerations. Creative Time had a thirty-three-year track record in New York City, and we had cultivated both a strong reputation and an extensive network of public and private interests dedicated to our work. This was not the case in New Orleans. In event production, there are generally two obvious solutions to this kind of problem. The first is partnerships, but we decided early on that in this one regard, we perhaps benefited from our outsider status, that being freed from institutional partners and city agencies, we would not inherit the profound segregation of audiences and legacies of distrust that characterize New Orleans. The second standard answer is money: Hire enough unions, local production companies, and law enforcement and suddenly, there is a strong incentive for a municipality to work intently with you in adapting the streets to your purposes. We had very little time to raise funds, however, and though by the end the project's budget would grow to a scale almost unprecedented in Creative Time's history, money was continually tight and our every production choice was determined first and foremost by finding the most affordable solution for the job. Regardless of financial constraints, we were concerned that the impact of such top-down methods would be as divisive and contrary to the project's ethics as local partnership. We had no local anchorage and very little money. All we had was time—and we used it.

“Stretched it” might be a better phrasing—to the limit. Barely a month before opening night, our permits still unfiled, we sat down with city representatives for only the second time. Months earlier, in brief introductory meetings with the offices of the councilmembers whose districts included our intended sites, we had articulated our intentions and won some interest, but at the time, the details of our methods and our needs were not yet established. Since then, there had been a sense that we would have no more than one more opportunity with these officials, so occupied by the emergencies in their city, and we had to get it right. It was only in late September that the project was finally fully grounded in specifics: Paul was teaching at the University of New Orleans and at Xavier University of Louisiana; master classes and lectures by the CTH and Paul had been arranged at nearly a dozen local schools, theaters, and community groups; funding was in place for the Shadow Fund; and we had hosts lined up for potlucks in communities across the city. The tone of our meetings was very positive, and when, in early October, a rapid string of introductions culminated in a meeting with the Office of Arts and Entertainment, every question about our motivations and methods that a cautious municipality could raise had been tested in conversation with the larger city. It was textbook grassroots organizing, and though it can be difficult when dealing with government authorities, to know whether you have inspired your

partner or simply demonstrated a political incentive for collaborating, the city responded by introducing me to the Mayor's Office of Film and Video and the tireless Jennifer Day. What had until then been inquiries from an unknown applicant to different bureaucracies became in-person introductions, citywide coordination meetings, and quick answers from one department to another. A piecemeal and faceless process was suddenly centralized, human, and enthusiastic. This was the first miracle that I, still not on the ground full-time in New Orleans, saw manifested by the long, slow process of this project.

It was not the last. I have many production war stories about the small victories a commitment to listening and building trust on the ground won for us, from a free haircut to the groundswell of Episcopal Church relief volunteers who stepped in to cook and serve gumbo when staffing shortages threatened the second weekend's food. The support networks we built saved the opening itself. The day before the premiere the risers, engineered incorrectly, prevented anyone seated behind the first row from seeing the action. After long phone negotiations, an early-morning reinstallation was arranged, under the company's condition that I match their crew—who had another gig that day—with ten of our own workers. At 8 AM, an angry foreman found our production manager Dan Krall and I looking unstaffed and set into us, threatening departure and demanding to see our crew. I looked over my shoulder and there, sauntering through the grass like something out of a Western, was a team of volunteers from the Common Ground Collective, which based its Lower Ninth Ward relief efforts a few blocks away. I have never felt we've-got-your-back tingles like that.

I should clarify that even after that heroic effort, limits in material kept us from fully remedying the issue of sight lines. The risers functioned, though, and oddly the irregular results in many ways matched an overall production aesthetic that—excepting the masterful performances and gorgeous, simple audio—is probably best described as unfinished. We had to stop the crew from skirting the backs of the risers with black fabric, preferring instead the unassuming view of raw wood crossbeams and flight cases stored underneath. I've seen Little League fields with more impressive lighting than we had: three Genie lifts with a stick of truss and about eight theatrical instruments lashed to them at the top. Dan threw together a “sound shield” of scrap plywood for the generator we kept purring down the street. With these raw aesthetics topped off by a row of squat, tan, portable toilets lining the route of the second line, the spectacle as a whole looked more like a construction site than a theater. In this regard, the production was very much of New Orleans—rather than dropping opulent red drapes into a vacant lot, we had bought or rented the event's components

from the same vendors that were busy serving the emergent remaking of the city by private contractors.

Even our perimeter security upheld this predilection for the rudimentary. We very quickly learned the annoying yet heartening lesson that you can drop barriers at nearby intersections and staff the entry points, but really no measure can keep a neighborhood—even one taken for abandoned—from being itself. In the Lower Ninth, kids on bikes rode right onto center stage in the middle of rehearsal and the performances were punctuated by the occasional pair of headlights gliding along in the background just below the levee—one time turning straight at the audience before the silhouette of one of our security officers waved them off. In Gentilly, a group of illegal Mexican workers were living up the block in a gutted house that, during the day, they were paid to renovate. At night, they drank beers in the driveway and told dirty jokes. I spent a lot of my time during each performance asking them in broken Spanish to keep their voices down and making peace offerings of Miller Light. Other neighbors would walk behind the risers, continuing conversations in hushed tones on their way to the convenience store down at Elysian Fields Avenue. These persistent signs of life were the backdrop for each night's performance.

In Gentilly, the redevelopment of the neighborhood was in fact so robust and sudden that it forced us into the most suspect arrangement of the entire project. When Paul, Chris, and I first came across the house on Warrington Drive while canvassing the vast housing tracts of Gentilly by car one night, I do not think any of us would have guessed that an imminent real estate explosion in the area would prove to be our key issue in the neighborhood. At the time, we were lucky to find even a single returnee camped in a FEMA trailer next to their gutted house every four blocks. When we came back in daylight the streets were still silent and empty. I scrawled down the phone number on the "For Sale by Owner" sign and headed for the airport.

My calls were not returned, and I spent subsequent visits rooting in vain through moldering records at City Hall trying to find additional contact information or investigating how to get city permits for the temporary use of abandoned private property. In the four months that I was engaged in this off-and-on homework, however, the neighborhood had begun to change. The proximity of the blocks above Robert E. Lee Boulevard, to the campus of UNO and its reliable student population had made these homes valuable commodities to the army of flippers and contractors which had been moving into the city's devastated real estate market. In hindsight, it seems no surprise that one day in late September, Paul drove by the site and found a crew doing work on "our" building.

We were introduced to the owner—a Houston man who had bought up properties throughout the adjacent blocks and was overseeing their renovation—and offered a fee for him to adjust his work plan, focusing on the interior and refraining from any work on the exterior or in the front yard until after the show closed.

The agreement, however, was not honored. Despite a fifty-percent good-will payment in his pocket, there were a string of suspiciously convenient misunderstandings that flew in the face of our contract and resulted in the stripping of the building's sides and the premature installation of new windows. Worse still, when I landed in late October for my final trip, a six-foot mountain of the building's scrapped innards had been heaped dead center stage and we were expected to pay for removal. Even after it had been carted off, a minefield of rusted nails and bent metal carpeted the ground. During those few precious days before we opened the second weekend's shows, the cast was rehearsing in an active construction site—one of them barefoot. While I will not enumerate the disasters and frustrations of those conditions, suffice it to say that the company's rigorous exploration of the house—both floors and several windows would play prominently in the performance—did lead to at least one emergency room visit. We filled that building with glow tape and work lights, swept it five times over, but there was no way to change the simple reality of our site, which had caught our attention in an atmosphere of deceptively sublime silence some six months earlier.

On opening day I was still using my spare time to crawl around on hands and knees in the yard, ferreting out rusty hardware, when an older man walked off the street to inquire what I was doing. I explained the project and invited him to come that evening. He gave a bemused chuckle and said, "So the newspaper really did get the address correct. You see, I was wondering, because I own this house." The contractor had represented himself to us as the owner, substantiating his position with fraudulent documents. The actual owner had never even heard about our arrangement. We both just shrugged and laughed and let the show go on—New Orleans at that time was sometimes surreal in its nonchalance.

Everyone living in the city did so by grace of their remarkable adaptability, and I would suggest that a parallel attitude of acceptance was the crucial element in our successes. We went in knowing what we wanted to do, but not how, and our ability to stay reactive to the sites and the people there time and again expanded and transformed our approach. As producer, I've found that people look to me for some illumination of the step-by-step process—formulas for the re-creation of a project they admire by rumor. The best advice I can give is to stay focused on maintaining this balance between a stringent commitment to vision and a radical malleability of technique. The

work of cultural production will always throw you curveballs, but working outside of an institution, and in the active space of communities requires immense flexibility in terms of methods if one is to realize a goal.

I would also advise anyone interested in translating our methods to other scenarios to consider carefully how dependent this project was on the unique and tragic opportunities of a post-Katrina New Orleans. It was a time when the slim portion of the population that remained seemed almost universally politicized and staunchly dedicated to the revitalization of the city. Economic and cultural resources were scarce and circumstances extraordinary to the point that *Godot* would not have mustered much interest in better times. Although our intentions were certainly challenged by many of our advisors, I was continually struck by how quickly community members accepted the potential validity of the fundamental idea. I've often wondered how likely it would be for an absurdist play to bring such a breadth of community partners to the table in, say, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Atlanta, or even the “slow-motion Katrinas” of the American Rust Belt.

Finally, I'd like to focus on what I wish we'd done. Chris has said to me that “the great ones are always hard,” and though I agree that work of this nature is inevitably demanding—emotionally, mentally, and physically—we at times added unnecessarily to these challenges. It was not a working environment I would wish on anyone, and I think there are a few simple lessons to be taken away from it. Firstly, as an organization with minimal experience working nationally, or as a performing arts presenter, there were certain models that we should have looked to more carefully at the outset. In particular, I would refer anyone studying Paul's *Godot* to the work of Los Angeles' Cornerstone Theater Company, whose methods so dovetail with what we ultimately undertook that one might assume direct influence. My background, spent mainly in a very scrappy and local corner of the theater world, certainly heightened my investment in the project, but it did little to prepare Creative Time for a production of this scope and nature. We were on a severe learning curve regarding best practices for working with professional touring actors, from negotiating the intricacies of Actors Equity contracts to establishing relationships with their agents. The most illustrative element that we and the CTH should have provided was a company manager to attend to the comfort and coordination of the performers, who dedicated long hours not only to an intensive and accelerated rehearsal regimen but also to an unrelenting schedule of master classes, potluck dinners, and other community work. Without someone in this position, this invaluable role fell to other members of the team who struggled to take time away from their central responsibilities.

The other major factor we were not prepared for was the impact of travel. In terms of simple economics, we underestimated the number of visits the increasingly complex project would require, and did not have enough time to secure sufficient airfare or hotel sponsorship. More importantly, as pre-production accelerated and more trips were quickly planned, we inadvertently segregated our teams between NYC and NOLA, abstracting our perspectives of one another's work. The day-after-day whirlwind of meeting neighbors, casting, rehearsing, and teaching is very different from the quiet, slow, and solitary processes of preparing permits or contracts. From August until late October, the only opportunities for the full team to catch up with one another were through emails and weekly conference calls which sometimes required acts of translation to remind us of one another's circumstances, the vital work we were doing, and the importance of mutual support. Both Creative Time and the CTH had major productions at the end of summer that kept us out of sync with Paul and one another, and although I wouldn't expect either organization to pass up such opportunities, it would have benefited everyone to coordinate more time together in New Orleans to share directly in our methods and accomplishments.

Shifting production dates also had us booking travel quite late, and though our lodging during rehearsal and production was lovely, it required regular migrations to accommodate convention-goers that had booked up the city's depleted stock of rooms months before. With much of the team living in an unstable patchwork of hotels, apartments, and B&Bs, our ability to take care of ourselves was profoundly compromised—and compounded further by our very choice of working methods. To realize any project of this scale away from home and routine is, of course, taxing, but by taking listening as our essential mechanism and turning our focus to the entire city, we left ourselves very few spaces that could provide respite from the show. We became perpetual observers. Production meetings were conducted over po' boys on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain; appointments with our advisors took place in private homes. Rehearsals, classes, potlucks, and even rides home for the local actors toured us through corners of the city we'd never have seen, otherwise. Every moment, every meal, every drink out after a long day doubled as an introduction, and, having identified our outsider status as a central liability, it was hard to allow oneself any moments of (relatively) innocent tourism. Some might optimistically hope that a principled commitment to this demanding process—a “bonding in the trenches”—would smooth over conflicts to which these circumstances might give rise, but quite predictably our inability to step away from the project weighed heavily on the team, exacerbating the unavoidable tensions of mounting a play and making our own emotional management an unintended casualty.

As much as I would do certain things differently, the fact of these innocent procedural oversights does not color my memory of the project. I believe that all the collaborators look back to our participation with a deep pride in the risks we took and a profound thankfulness for the beauty, emotion, camaraderie, and even wonder we experienced. It is perhaps strange, then, that the central participants have been hesitant to speak about the project in congratulatory terms. For me, this stems from a distrust of “deep listening” and other laudatory terminology that has been put to sometimes troublingly aspirational (or even disingenuous) use in describing social art practices. Every time my telling touches on “listening,” I cannot help but wonder how much it smacks of *noblesse oblige*. More specific to the narrative I’ve laid out above, the fact that our community groundwork was, in effect, “monetized” in free local labor and city assistance raises necessary questions of exploitation, despite all our efforts to avoid just that. These issues destabilize any claims we might make to perfectly responsible execution, and are deserving of fuller consideration, but I think our reticence is rooted not so much in these inevitable questions of ethics and method as in a perspective that recognizes the impossibility of measuring the project’s significance in the face of an ongoing tragedy. As much as my recollections speak to the determined recovery of New Orleans, it has by no means been triumphant, inclusive, or even complete. Returning in January 2009 for the first time since closing the production, it was heartbreaking to see how few homes had been rebuilt in the blocks around the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes. The encroachments of brush were still there, hiding the neighborhood’s wounds and camouflaging the tragic interventions of the city in what, impossibly, was once home to 14,000 people.

In some ways, I have preferred the rumor of the project—amazing, gone—to a potentially unproductive unpacking or glorification of the details. I am driven to contribute my experiences, however, by the touching and surprising acts of those who came to see *Godot*. I am still astounded to think that people tailgated a Beckett play, some coming six hours early with lawn chairs and coolers to make sure they got in, or that, when tickets ran out and people who had waited (maybe for hours) were turned away, they enthusiastically thanked the ticketing table staff. I was humbled to feel in the crowds’ arrival an unstated generosity towards the project, a sense that they had come not so much to see it as to make it work. The willingness to wait, to sit in the dirt or stand at the periphery when the risers were full, to cramp together to let one more person in, to abide the cold or the bad sight lines—all these discomforts and compromises were contributions, simple gestures through which we all completed the symbol of *Godot*. I am humbled again by the prospect that the beautiful opening speeches—consecrations almost, delivered by

brave survivors who had lost homes, churches, and loved ones in the neighborhoods we performed in—were intended in the same way. It is important for me to acknowledge, however, before I read flattery too broadly into the actions of others, that it was still *Godot* and, not unlike other stagings of this infamously static work (“the play where nothing happens—twice”), every night there were people who left at intermission. The beautiful personal acts that I describe were perhaps not universal, but they speak to a powerful effect, if not of the content of the play, then inarguably of the context we built around it. Most hauntingly, I remember the cries of “thank you” from the crowd those first nights, as the cast, in an unforgettable curtain call, walked side by side into the darkness, receding into the night. I witnessed people moved and inspired by this intricate, genuine project. They suggest the possibility of many more with experiences just as meaningful and perhaps of lingering potency, even now.