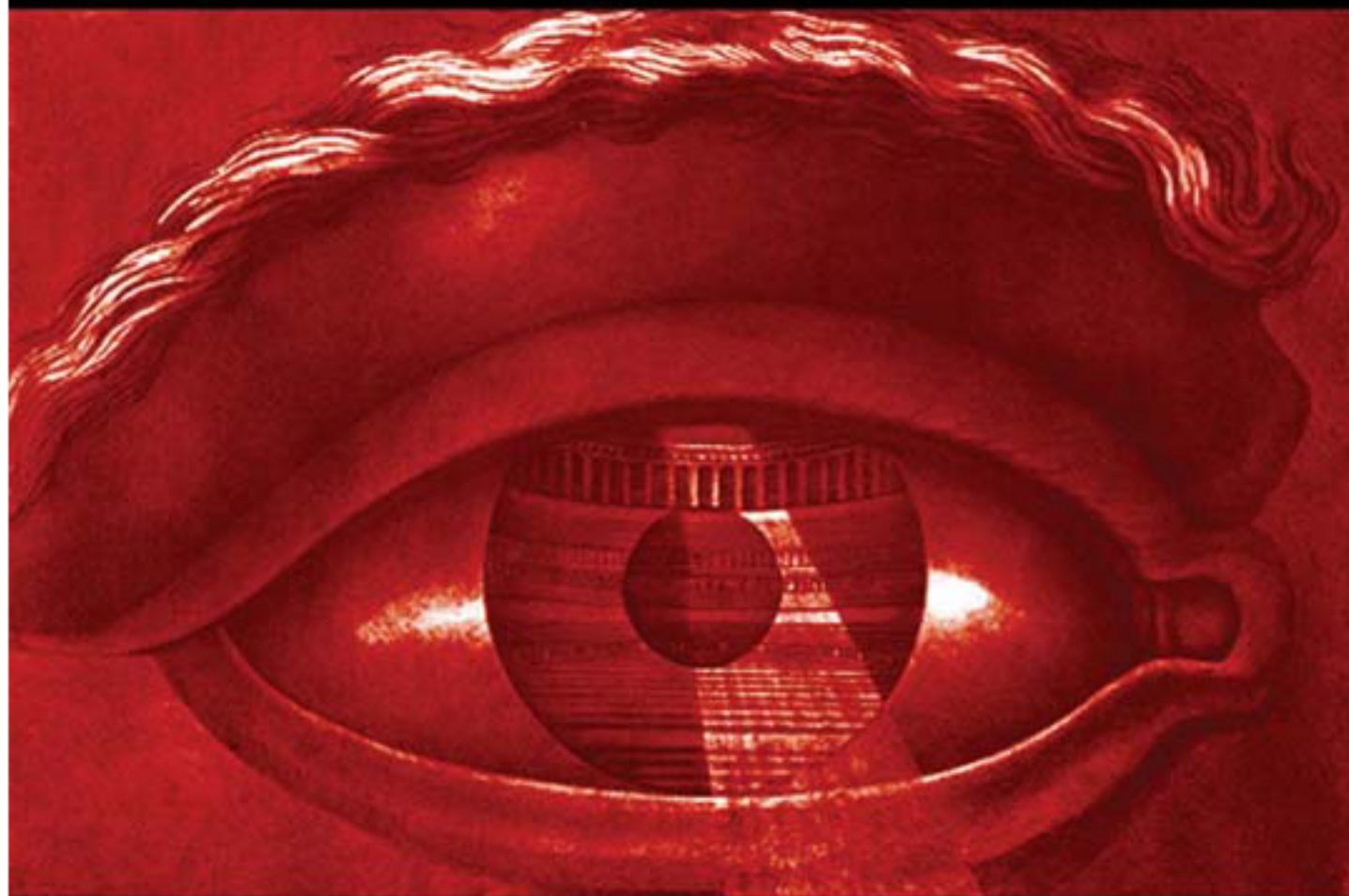


**theatre  
journal**



**PERFORMANCE  
and COGNITION**

nostalgia lost all that an Easy Bake Oven signified in 1969 for a girl in the United States. Rather than engaging with and interrogating the oven as a powerful historical artifact—material and symbolic—that impacted bodies and lives, the playwright chose to fetishize it as a benign monument to “lost innocent childhood.”

There was, however, a notable exception to this dominant approach. In her three monologues (all inspired by a 1913 antiprostitution pamphlet, Maurice Chideckel’s 1935 book *Female Sex Perversion*, and an interview from the 1996–97 Lesbian Elders Oral History Project), Abi Basch explored how the past and present continue to interact with each other through the body. Of all the playwrights, Basch most disturbed our ideas of “history”—throwing into question the borders between past and present, dead and living. In her “Sister” monologue, the subject formed herself through the object; at times, I was unsure if object or person were more present, though perhaps the historicized object was necessary to arouse life from an otherwise evacuated “self” performing onstage. The past held in the artifact entered into the speaker tactilely (the sister fondling her book), throwing into disarray our ideas of how we know the past (which is somatically, as suggested by Basch) and how we live our present (which is forever permeated by and constructed through the dead). Unlike the other playwrights, Basch didn’t explain her characters or their histories to the audience; rather, we witnessed these characters as they grappled with their own precarious positions in time, fighting a submersion in memories that refused to subside into irrelevance or a safely sepia-toned nostalgia.

Unfortunately, throughout the evening the soliloquies were all spoken by and written for Caucasian actors. Rather than tell the story of Dakota Chief Mountain in the 1914 photograph featuring him and Frances Densmore, playwright Wilner told the story of Densmore, a Harvard-educated musicologist who collected Native American traditional songs. Playwright Christina Ham told the story of the 1920 lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhee from the perspective of a white man who had witnessed the event: praying for forgiveness, the man worries that the incident will be forgotten if not documented. Another worry might be how that very documentation continues to erase Clayton, Jackson, and McGhee. The evening lacked the playwrights’ reflections on their own participation in that practice of documentation. Rather than exploring how theatre might provoke a different way of thinking about history, historiography, and our relationships to both, the majority of these pieces participated in telling us a story told by people who have already spoken ad infinitum. The per-

sonalization of the artifact did not reveal another history; it simply continued a practice of historical and cultural amnesia.

**JEANNE WILLCOXON**  
*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

**ARTISTIC ANCESTRY: AN INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ALTERNATIVE THEATRE.** ArtSpot Productions. Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans. 1–10 December 2006.

New Orleans has long epitomized two extremes: the tourist-oriented bacchanal of Bourbon Street contrasting with the poverty of the Ninth Ward. Post-Katrina, the city has animated even more extreme dichotomies of loss and rebirth, absence and presence. ArtSpot’s Artistic Ancestry Festival, a ten-day-long celebration of alternative theatre from across the city and around the world, could not have better embodied the conflicting emotions of the city, capturing the sense of duality that is now ever-present. Yet the festival also celebrated the ability to endure and grow, on the part of the theatre groups involved and the city itself. The synergy produced through the collaborative processes of these groups provided an excellent counterpoint to the stasis that seems to define much of the city’s rebuilding process.

The festival celebrated the tenth anniversary of ArtSpot Productions, founded by Kathy Randels in 1995. Based in New Orleans, Randels has created solo and collaborative performances that have played across the country, winning a 2003 Obie Special Citation for her piece *Nita and Zita*. She conceived the idea for the festival during her participation in Dah Teatar’s tenth anniversary celebration. In a personal interview, Randels stated that “it’s important to acknowledge how far you’ve come.” She also wanted to honor the people who helped get her there by inviting them to perform their works.

As a result of a residency that ArtSpot received at New Orleans’s Contemporary Art Center (CAC), preparations for the festival were in place before Katrina struck. Originally scheduled for December 2005, the festival was pushed back to December 2006 after Katrina. The move actually benefited the festival, as ArtSpot secured additional funding from outside sources that wanted to facilitate the city’s cultural revival.

ArtSpot’s work, past and present, provided a focus for the Artistic Ancestry Festival. Three specially



J Hammons, Kathy Randels (background), and Anne-Liese Juge Fox in ArtSpot Productions' *The Maid of Orleans*. Photo: Libby Nevinger.

created ArtSpot pieces were performed in the festival, accompanying work by ArtSpot collaborators. The festival opened with ArtSpot's *Chekhov's Wild Ride*. The piece combined the story of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* with the history of "the Method" and the run-in of its Group Theatre disciples with anticommunist political paranoia in the form of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Chekhov's play provided the backdrop: performers played characters in the play as well as historical figures—everyone from Chekhov himself to Stanislavsky as well as Group Theatre members Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Cheryl Crawford, and Clifford Odets, Federal Theatre Project Director Hallie Flanagan, and actor Paul Robeson. Through monologues, scenes from the play, and stylized movement vignettes, the piece created a map of the interrelationships of these historic theatre persons as well as an illustration of how politics can impact art in form and function.

ArtSpot also revived *The Maid of Orleans*, based upon the story of Joan of Arc. The production contained outstanding performances by Randels, J Hammons, and Anne-Liese Juge Fox (as the doomed Joan) while making use of creative scenic elements. Multifunction ladders and ramps stood beside a centerpiece that became a spinning top for the scene where Joan is questioned, balancing precariously as the interrogator tries to trip her up.

The final ArtSpot piece, *Beneath the Strata . . . Disappearing*, was a location piece performed at A Studio in the Woods, which is a little more than seven and a half acres of land on the Mississippi River set aside as an artists' retreat. This performance linked together stories from lives connected to the surrounding land, such as the first female riverboat captain and a Mardi Gras Indian chief (as told by

his widow), as three modern "real estate agent" women found their inner connection to the land and their maternal ancestors. Like the festival itself, *Beneath the Strata* emphasized the importance of knowing one's roots.

The festival also served as a venue for other New Orleans-based performers and groups: Dog and Pony Theatre shared a unique interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*; Jose Torres Tama performed an abbreviated version of his powerful piece *The Cone of Uncertainty*, which deals with the aftermath of Katrina; John O'Neal, founder of Junebug Theatre and the patriarch of New Orleans's alternative theatre movement, presented an excerpt from *Don't Start Me Talking or I Will Tell You Everything I Know*, which he created from the sayings of Junebug Jabbo Jones. Local group Mondo Bizarro (including collaborators from ArtSpot) presented *Catching Him in Pieces*, based on the life and works of poet Everette Maddox, and hip-hop/jazz/spoken-word duo MUGABEE, engaged the audience in what it termed "a restructuring of the thought process through positive reinforcement and plain old good music." This quality work by other members of the New Orleans alternative theatre scene highlighted the depth and breadth of theatrical offerings in a city known mostly for its contributions to jazz.

In addition to the numerous local artists and groups, the festival featured a prominent international presence. The North American Cultural Laboratory (NACL) presented *The Confessions of Punch and Judy*, a take on classic Punch and Judy comedy combined with stylized movement and set around the concept of the duo as a couple trying to have a simple conversation. The piece moved in and out of their attempts to communicate with each other into various forms of physical comedy, from slapstick to more sinister symbolic action as when Judy tied Punch to a chair with packing tape, taped his eyes and mouth shut, and turned him into a ventriloquist's dummy. NACL also presented a working version of a new piece, *The Uncanny Appearance of Sherlock Holmes*, a Holmes-type mystery-cum-rock concert that had the great detective matching wits with a woman.

Serbia's Dah Teater presented two pieces: *Dancing with Darkness*, a performance based upon one of its earlier works (*The Helen Keller Project*), and *The Story of Tea*, a newer work, loosely based on the final scene of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. The performance explored the idea of tea as the solution to all the world's problems: loss of language, human suffering, senseless violence, the ever-changing nature of history. As the performers examined what situations tea can and cannot cure, they stripped away the layers of the stories being told to find

themselves and their inner strength. The work, as usual, operated on many levels, demonstrating the attention to detail that makes Dah's performances such compelling theatre.

Odin Teatret's *Salt*, directed by Eugenio Barba, emerged as one of the festival's highlights. Performed mainly in Italian, the piece is a monologue with music based upon *It Is Getting Later and Later* by Antonio Tabucchi and centered upon images of a woman traveling to and waiting for her beloved. Actual salt provided a scenic component in the piece and was used as a means to demarcate space and as a character prop. In a final stunning image, the woman walked through a waterfall of salt pouring along the length of the proscenium opening.

The festival integrated Katrina and its aftermath through *Water[wars]* by Wales's Jill Greenhalgh, founder of The Magdalena Project. The previous nine incarnations of *Water[wars]* dealt with the world's coming water shortages. This tenth and last installation focused on the impact of water caused by Katrina and the failed levees. The performance, created over the course of the festival, used local performers and members of the other ensembles to tell stories of the city. Audience members walked around a warehouse space in the CAC that had flooded following the storm (the waterline was visible on the walls). It was filled with pieces of black clothing, either laid out on the floor or suspended from wires. Written in chalk on the walls and floor were statements about what people saw, heard, and felt during the flood. As audience members moved through the space, the performers began a litany that combined music with stories of the flood and expressions of anger about the current state of affairs. This piece was, perhaps, the most moving of the festival, driving home the very personal impact that Katrina and its aftermath had on all New Orleanians. The image of the black pieces of clothing, lying on the floor like outlines of bodies as well as suspended from the ceiling, reinforced the eerie sense of emptiness still present in the city almost two years after the storm.

Imagery is of primal importance in alternative theatre: images create a multilayered text that goes above and beyond the words spoken. *The Story of Tea* contained characters ice-skating with skates on their hands and the burning of a town made of newspaper. Synchronized choreography, excessively slow- or fast-paced dancing, walking, and hand gestures created beautiful and expressive stage pictures in all of the festival's offerings. *The Confessions of Punch and Judy* created a puppet-show environment that was entirely in pink and blue to heighten the difference between the characters. Jeff Becker, who designed the scenery for *The Maid of*

*Orleans*, also designed sets for *Chekhov's Wild Ride* and *Catching Him in Pieces*. In each of the three pieces that featured his work, Becker's sets functioned as dynamic elements with which the actors could interact. In his own words, Becker's sets are "characters" in the pieces; they bring a life of their own to the performance.

While scenography and imagery figured prominently in the productions' impact, thematic concerns of loss also linked many of the performances. *Water[wars]*, of course, derived from the impact of Katrina. The issue of loss, however, was not restricted to post-Katrina interpretations: *Beneath the Strata* (conceived prior to the hurricane) focused on the disappearance of the land and, by extension, the history of the Louisiana coast. Both of Dah Teater's pieces also addressed this theme. *Dancing with Darkness* responded to an earlier piece created by the group and international collaborators (including Kathy Randels) that was, for all purposes, destroyed by the start of the 1999 NATO bombings, which sent all of the performers back to their home countries. Even *The Story of Tea* addressed loss on several levels, while celebrating friendship and collaboration. The stories of those who did not survive the dark times in the "ex-Yugoslavia" (in this case, a group of men pulled off a train and executed because their names sounded Muslim) were framed within a larger context of change. Dah elected not to translate all of *The Story of Tea*. This decision echoed one of the themes of the piece: the death of language in an overwhelmingly English-speaking world. Serbian is one of these dying languages, according to the group, and performances such as these are one of the ways to keep the language alive. While this decision strained my limited translation skills, it heightened the power of the imagery and drove home one of the major messages of the piece in a very personal context.

While aesthetically and thematically provocative, the festival also became a place for teaching and sharing process through daily workshops, demonstrations of the working process, and panel discussions. Festival participants and others from the New Orleans community and surrounding areas came together to discuss and practice the techniques used onstage in the various pieces as well as to share the histories of their work. These events were, in their own way, as important as the performances, for they reinforced the sense of collaboration at the heart of alternative theatre.

The participants and audience left the festival mindful of the work that still needs to be done in New Orleans, but also aware that theatre will be a part of the rebuilding, precisely because of the need for all parties to work together. As Randels noted



in one discussion, "I am always astonished by the power of collaborative work." Artistic Ancestry celebrated that collaboration, emerging as a testament to that power and an expression of the city's creative spirit—one that has not been washed away.

**LEIGH CLEMONS**

*Louisiana State University*

**THE CONE OF UNCERTAINTY: NEW ORLEANS AFTER KATRINA.** Written, directed, and performed by Jose Torres Tama. The Ohio State University, Roy Bowen Theatre, Columbus. 30 September 2006.

Eighteen days after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf states, President Bush addressed the nation from Jackson Square in New Orleans. It was a moment of pure theatre: bathed in bright light while most of the city was still plunged in darkness, the president assured the nation—from what was formerly a slave-trading block—that New Orleans would not be forgotten.

Dramatic irony, indeed.

Over a year has passed since that address and 70 percent of the city remains uninhabitable; the rebuilding contracts have been awarded, with little or no competition, to Halliburton and other large companies with ties to the White House; and, of course, most of the city's suffering and dispossessed are people of color.

*The Cone of Uncertainty: New Orleans after Katrina*, which played for two nights at the Roy Bowen Theatre at The Ohio State University and will continue touring the country indefinitely, is written and performed by the multitalented Ecuadorian performance artist Jose Torres Tama. A resident of New Orleans for twenty-two years—he made his escape from the flooded city in a stolen school bus—Torres Tama is uniquely positioned to bring his considerable talents to a tale the truth of which has been conspicuously absent in the mainstream media.

The show began as soon as one entered the 250-seat black-box theatre. The audience encounters Torres Tama, dressed as a *Geda* (a trickster persona representing the death of New Orleans), seated behind an altar surrounded by three American flags: the current one, the colonial one, and the Confederate one. He is performing cryptic ritualistic gestures. Above Torres Tama a large video screen depicts images from the Katrina disaster with recorded voice-over. The precedent of the evening has been established: a unique juxtaposition of theatricality and hardboiled realism.

The theatricality is evinced in the ritualized, almost dance-like movement. Torres Tama has said that for him performance is more an act of ritual, and he borrows from a variety of indigenous traditions. Accompanied by a South American rain stick (an instrument used by witch doctors), he chants within a playing area demarcated by six lit candles, as if to mark off a sacred space.

The realism is evident in the content itself. Many stories are woven into the piece, including the compelling, "A Brief History of Abuse of Power in Gringolandia." Here Torres Tama, after taking off his death mask and skeleton gloves, situates himself behind a lectern and assumes the character El Pepe Loco Vato, a politicized Chicano poet (Torres Tama received a big laugh when he joked of his being an Ecuadorian doing Chicano) who breaks down the legacy of discrimination against people of color in the United States. We learn of President Andrew Jackson's signing of the Indian Removal Act (here he got another titter when he remarked how politicians back then lacked subtlety; now we get sexy names like "Operation Iraqi Freedom"). We hear of Mexican repatriation during the 1930s and relocation centers for the Japanese in the 1940s; the Mexicans, though American citizens, were removed to create more jobs for Americans of European descent during the Great Depression, and the Japanese were removed, in part, because of the valuable land that they were inhabiting.

All this can get pretty somber. But like the best performance artists, Torres Tama seduces his audience through humor and the ability to portray disparate characters. In fact, the word "seduce" is how Torres Tama describes his technique. In one amusing section, an androgynous character insists that what is needed now is a moment of levity; Torres Tama skillfully suggests this character by lengthening his



Jose Torres Tama in *The Cone of Uncertainty*.  
Photo: Craig Morse.