Performed on a November night in 2007 in the nearly abandoned wasteland of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Waiting for Godot was both hauntingly beautiful and eerily disarming. Bleachers had been set up at the edge of what had been a vital neighborhood, the sounds of fohgnors coming from the direction of the levee that was breached in August 2005. “Waiting” is a key word in post-Katrina New Orleans, where residents may feel an affinity with Beckett’s vagabond protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, who engage in vaudeville-style antics—swapping hats and singing—and even contemplate suicide, anything “to hold the terrible silence at bay.” Like the beleaguered residents of New Orleans, the pair display anxiety, despair and the stubborn hope that salvation will come.

The New Orleans production of Waiting for Godot was the inspired project of New York-based artist Paul Chan, who visited the city in November 2006 to lecture at Tulane University. His initial motivation for choosing this play and this site was raw anger. Two days after Katrina hit, a catastrophic flood inundated the Lower Ninth Ward, a poor but tightly knit community of families, many of which had made the neighborhood their home for generations. Former residents of the devastated zone continue to wait for government aid, for their families and friends to return, and to see if the city will let them rebuild.

Standing in the barren street, stunned by the silence of what had been a vital neighborhood, Chan experienced what he described in a recent conversation with this author as a “hallucination” about Godot. On his return to New York, he contacted Creative Time, a nonprofit organization that sponsors innovative public art projects and had approached him in the past about developing a proposal. Anne Pasternak, the organization’s director, had visited New Orleans after Katrina with an eye to participating in the recovery in some way. Chan’s idea presented the perfect opportunity.

Creative Time went on to produce Godot with New York’s Classic Theatre of Harlem, with CTH co-founder Christopher McElroen directing and Chan making his debut as artistic director. Major funding was provided by the Warhol and Annenberg foundations. The play starred CTH regulars Wendell Pierce (a New Orleans native), J. Kyle Manzay and T. Ryder Smith, plus three New Orleans residents, Mark McLaughlin, Michael Pepp and Tony Felix.

Nine months were devoted to laying the groundwork and bringing together disparate communities within the city. Chan, representatives of Creative Time, students and other volunteers attended neighborhood planning meetings and church dinners, where they listened to residents voice their concerns, needs and insights. “The idea,” Chan explains, “was to make Godot a site-specific work rather than a historical one.” He adds, “I wanted to understand the terrain rather than impose the terrain on people.”

Deepening his involvement with the city, Chan taught two seminars during the fall 2007 semester, one at Xavier University, a Catholic and historically black institution, and one at the state-funded University of New Orleans. These classes were open to the public. Moreover, some of the production’s rehearsals took place at the Porch, a nonprofit cultural center in the Seventh Ward, another stricken neighborhood, spearheaded by artist Willie Birch and aimed at engaging the city’s young people in contemporary art and local heritage.

Acknowledging that the post-Katrina suffering had not been confined to one ravaged area of the city, Chan and his collaborators decided to stage Godot in a second area, Gentilly, a modest middle-class neighborhood that has begun to rebound. As Chan explains in a statement on the Creative Time Web site, “The sense and nonsense of waiting engulfs other neighborhoods as well, where people still live in trailers almost two years after the storm, hoping for some type of relief to come from city, state, and federal authorities.” The Gentilly performances took place before a gutted two-story house. One could see faces in the
"The idea was to make Godot a site-specific work rather than a historical one," said Paul Chan. "I wanted to understand the terrain rather than impose the terrain on people."

window of the occupied house next door, and hear the reassuring sounds of cars and the strains of rock music in the background, all of which contributed a human presence to the play compared to the desolation of the Lower Ninth Ward.

Four performances had been planned, two in each location, though a fifth, in the Lower Ninth Ward, was inserted into the schedule after would-be audience members mobbed the play, and hundreds had to be turned away. That much popular interest was no small accomplishment in New Orleans, a depopulated city that even in good times has a limited number of theatergoers. It surely helped that admission was free, hot gumbo was served and a jazz band escorted guests to their seats, but the enthusiastic response exceeded even the most optimistic expectations.

Opening to mixed reviews in 1953, Waiting for Godot seems to have become the quintessential play for extreme situations. The script’s verbal exchanges are perplexing, often surreal in nature, and they appear to resonate with those who have endured traumatic circumstances. It’s been reported that Beckett considered the most significant performance to have been one presented in a German prison. When Susan Sontag directed Waiting for Godot in war-torn Sarajevo in 1993, firearms could be heard in the distance. In New Orleans, by contrast, where the mortal danger has passed, one witty reviewer dubbed the local presentation “Waiting for the Dough.”

To be sure, funding does remain on everyone’s mind. One of the ways Creative Time launched its efforts in New Orleans was to start a fund to support neighborhood organizations that would be distinct from the direct financing of the Beckett production. This fund has given $50,000 in small gifts of $1,000–5,000, as well as in-kind donations, to recipients that include the Porch and the House of Dance and Feathers, a backyard museum dedicated to the history of the Mardi Gras Indians. The museum, founded by Ronald Lewis in the carport of his Lower Ninth Ward house, is being rebuilt from the tiny portion of the collection that survived the flood.

Post-performance fundraising efforts include the sale of an editioned photograph by Chan that features a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, Robert Lynn Green, Sr., holding a sign bearing the first lines in the script of Godot: “A COUNTRY ROAD / A TREE / EVENING.” Such signs had been placed around the city in a campaign to alert people to the November performances. Proceeds from the print sale will help defray the remaining expenses of the Godot project.

In April, to coincide with the opening of Chan’s exhibition at the New Museum in New York, Creative Time will release Waiting: A NOLA READER, a book of new and reprinted essays about Godot with contributions by New Orleans artists. With such projects ongoing, it’s tempting to see Creative Time’s collaboration with Chan as a response to this exhortation by Vladimir:

Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?

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