

LESSONS FROM KATRINA

An Oral History Performance Saga

OHMAR SPRING 2008 CONFERENCE

Saturday, March 14, 2008

9:00 am - 10:30 am

**Room B - Columbia Teacher's College
Grace Dodge Hall - Room 281**

Presenters: Peter Harrigan, Harriet Lynn, Char Nelson

INTRODUCTION: Harriet Introduces

Good morning. Welcome to "Lessons from Katrina" presentation; which is based on the Association in Theatre in Higher Education Conference (ATHE) in New Orleans in Summer 2007 - *ReActions* onsite theatrical event. I am Harriet Lynn, of Heritage Theatre Consortium in Baltimore, MD, and wish to introduce you to my associates, Peter Harrigan, of Saint Michael's College in Colchester, VT and Char Nelson of Brigham Young University, in Provo, UT.

Today, we will take you through the making of a high intensity and "high-risk" theatrical event blending a stylized theatre work using ritual, speech, and movement with video images and audio generated from the powerful 'Katrina' stories told by seniors adults who experienced this catastrophe and were generous enough to come pre-invited on-site to be interviewed at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) 2007 Conference site in New Orleans last summer.

Our panel will explain the process, development, impact and culmination of this theatrical event, *ReActions*, and, particularly, Team D's involvement with the integration of the oral history interviews that played a unique part of this live performance collaboration. The intense personal stories and memorable "lessons from Katrina" were able to reach a diverse audience due to the ATHE *ReActions* theatre project and now through OHMAR's conference reaches others beyond the confines of the ATHE conference. After our presentation we will have time for audience questions and answers.

Let me introduce you to our first presenter: Peter Harrigan, our ReAction's Team D Leader.

BIO: Peter Harrigan is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, on the West Coast of New England. Primarily a director, he enjoys staging comedies - from the classics ("Tartuffe", "The Importance of Being Earnest", among others) to the contemporary and whimsical ("Museum", "The Mystery of Irma Vep", and "Picasso at the Lapin Agile"). But his most heart-felt work has been in presenting plays that engage the audience *and* the production team in divisive issues that our communities face, such as "Execution of Justice", "Mad Forest", "Master Harold and the Boys...", "Spinning into Butter", "The Guys", "How I Learned to Drive", "And Then They Came for Me: Remembering the World of Anne Frank", "The Boys Next Door" and "The Laramie Project", all of which he has directed and/or produced at the College, or at Saint Michael's Playhouse, a professional Equity summer theatre in residence there. Since he teaches in a small program, Peter teaches Theatre History and Costume Design as well, and has designed and executed costumes for dozens of

productions. He is also the author of the acting text “Introduction to Performance”, co-written with Sarah Barker.

Peter has recently enjoyed the opportunity to again become involved in the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), where he recently served as part of three presentations, and continues as Secretary for their Theatre and Social Change focus group. In addition, he has been serving as a “high-end volunteer” in Regional Theatre (two productions at Actors Theatre of Louisville), Off-Broadway (Lynn Nottage’s “Fabulation” at Playwrights Horizons), and Broadway (as a Visiting Professor at the legendary Broadway costume house Barbara Matera Limited).

PETER’S PRESENTATION: Preparation and Background of ReActions Project
(20 min.)

Char gives Harriet Lynn’s bio intro:

CHAR: Harriet Lynn will next provide background commentary with a Power Point Presentation of the elders from North Gulfport and Biloxi, MS who were generous enough to come to New Orleans to be interviewed as part of Team D’s ReActions’ event.

Harriet Lynn is a graduate of The Boston Conservatory with a B.F.A. as a Dance Major/Drama Minor. She holds a M.S. degree in Administration from University of Maryland University College. As a professional producer, director, choreographer, actor, dancer, playwright, arts administrator and educator she has applied her multi-talents and skills throughout an active and diverse career ranging from Broadway National Companies, regional theatres, television, radio, film and one-woman productions, including, *Ella Shields: The Woman Behind the Man*.

In 1994 Harriet Lynn founded Heritage Theatre Artists’ Consortium. HTAC’s mission is to provide a total theatre resource for museums, historical societies, theatres, educational institutions and organizations including the Walters Art Museum, Jewish Museum of Maryland, Greater Baltimore History Alliance, Goucher College, Johns Hopkins University and many others.

Harriet Lynn conceived and directed *Life Stories/Life Lessons*, an oral history performance featuring African-American senior adults also featured at OHMAR’s 30th Anniversary Conference in 2006 at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture. *East Side-West Side Life Stories* is a recent oral history theatre production she produced and directed also featuring senior adults and is on tour now at museums, cultural and community organizations sponsored by the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks. She is also at present creating an oral history program, *Pioneers - A Celebration!* with elders ranging in ages 80’s - 100+ all original residents of Edenwald in Towson, MD.

Ms. Lynn is a also long time member of the International Museum Theatre Alliance, (IMTAL) and this April is a featured performing artist at the Association of Museum Theatre’s annual conference in Denver, CO. She is a OHMAR Board Member-at-Large serving on this year’s 2008 Conference Planning Committee and also in the same capacity for OHMAR’s Spring 2007 Conference, “Voices of the Chesapeake” held at Washington College in Chestertown, MD.

HARRIET’S PRESENTATION (with **Power Point** - 20 min.)

Harriet:

I want to provide some background information to know how *The Lesson from Katrina's* oral history interviews evolved. It began in 2006. The North Gulfport Senior Center in MS was one of the very few senior centers that actually survived Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (which we learned from the natives refer to this horrific event only as Hurricane Katrina). I learned other senior centers were severely crippled or had, literally, floated away due to the violence of the hurricanes and this one center suffered less damage and served the surrounding area as a refuge and a communal place for seniors who remained in their community. In the Fall 2006 I was involved planning a special Maryland State event honoring talented senior adults; the Maryland Senior Idol (based on the popular television show concept) as a cultural arts consultant for the Baltimore City Recreation and Parks - Senior Division. We learned and adopted the North Gulfport Senior Center in N. Gulfport, MS to send monies we raised during this event and also refurbished computer equipment with software (which they had none). This was the second year in a row Maryland seniors showed support and allegiance to seniors in the devastated region who still were suffering from the results of this catastrophe over a year later.

During this event I made contact with Janice Green, then the Director of the N. Gulfport Senior Center and who was appointed Director of Harrison County Human Resources Agency. I was a presenter within the ATHE's Conference's Senior Theatre Focus Group 2006 when *ReActions* was announced. I volunteered to participate to represent the Senior Theatre Focus Group in 2007. It struck me after I made a connection with N. Gulfport that this could be an opportunity to learn from the people of this region. I consulted with ATHE if I could include oral history interviews with the seniors of this region who lived about an hour away from New Orleans. With some ongoing email negotiations between Peter Harrigan as Team D Leader, ATHE administration, Janice Green and her solicitation and organization of the seniors, the Sheraton New Orleans, etc. we were able to set aside a place in the hotel with a "window of time" to actually meet with them at the hotel to interview them. Peter, Char and another young man from the conference volunteered to participate with the seniors with me while other Team members participated in "gathering information" at other places and with people in New Orleans. There was no time to drive to meet them. Every moment in a project such as this was precious and, ironically, even though they left in their van in plenty of time to meet us in New Orleans again they met with problems in getting to the hotel with delays caused by traffic accident. But once, finally, in the room provided by the hotel where the conference was held, Peter was video taping, Char audio taped on her audio recorder and helped to host the event, I was interviewing and recording with my digital tape recorder while taking photos as well.

We decided to use only one question to ask to start the ball rolling since this was not an ordinary situation, and we did want to talk to all who came (approximately eight came ranging in ages 65 - 92) in a brief amount of time. ***The question: "What do you want us to know about you?"*** We did not say anything about Katrina. Once media clearance formalities were completed we began sitting in a circle around a round table together. With that question the "floodgates opened". We wanted you today to hear in their words what was said and we can do so today with this Power Point presentation of photographs and vocal excerpts of the oral history interview session which was later distilled and used within the on-site event the following evening. No one can be more eloquent than these brave survivors who were also victims of this "perfect hurricane storm" of chaos and devastation.

PLAY "VOICES FROM KATRINA" POWER POINT PRESENTATION (manually played) and Harriet provides some limited commentary.

Peter Introduces Char and bio:

Char Nelson is an adjunct BYU faculty member in Playwriting. She also participates regularly in New Play Development with the American College Theatre Festival and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. She currently serves as vice-chair of New Play Development for ACTF, Region VIII, and Coordinator of the Ten-Minute Play Development at ATHE. Nelson received a BFA in Theatre with a minor in English from the University of Utah, an MA from Middlebury College in Vermont, and studied at Lincoln College, Oxford University. Char is an experienced actress, director, a produced and award-winning playwright, and dramaturg. Char has been interested in oral history-based performance since discovering the technique during her studies at Bread Loaf. She created a writing/performance collaboration between private school and secure youth correctional facility students. She later received a grant from the Utah Humanities Council to develop a curriculum called, “Narrative Healing Power: Building a Community Base through Story,” for which she received The Utah Humanities Council Merit Award. Char will continue to use oral history skills in a new project at Brigham Young University, which focuses on community-based theatre, as described by Sonja Kuftinec. Char is married to Bob Nelson, University of Utah Department of Theatre Chair. They are the parents of four.

CHAR’s PRESENTATION of putting the pieces together and our “reenactment” of the Team D event itself (using audio, video, staging (as best we can)).

Post Presentation Questions and Answers.