A True History of the Johnstown Flood

By Rebecca Gilman
Directed by Robert Falls

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Introduction to the Study Guide

BY WILLA J. TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A True History of the Johnstown Flood, Rebecca Gilman’s wonderful new play, looks at an event that destroyed a Pennsylvania city in 1889, but the parallels to New Orleans and the devastation unleashed by Hurricane Katrina five years ago are frightening.

I spent a lot of my childhood visiting relatives in Louisiana and the Gulf Region. I rooted for the Saints long before they were ever good enough for a Super Bowl. And I learned the secret of black roux and gumbo in my Aunt CC’s kitchen. When Katrina hit, I quit my job and went to New Orleans to help rebuild the city. What I saw was horrific. The destruction to the city I loved was tragic – two-story houses collapsed like accordions; personal possessions strewn on empty lots, the last vestiges of what had been someone’s home; the ubiquitous red X’s on dilapidated structures, indications that buildings had been searched and whether bodies had been found. But more than the physical decimation and the stench of decay and death was the brutal realization that in 2005 – as in 1889 in Johnstown - class and race were still determining factors in who was expendable, what was considered valuable and what could be tossed aside and forgotten. In Johnstown and in New Orleans, it was the hubris of those with resources who ignored the dangers to those without that contributed to the devastation and destruction of life and culture.

Now there is Haiti.

And Chile.

And Turkey.

It’s been more than a century since the Johnstown flood washed away a town and exposed the economic divide between wealthy industrialists and the immigrants who worked in their factories. In August, it will be five years since Katrina blew down the levees and exposed the ugliness of class and racial disparity to a much wider audience.

There are some lessons we seem unable to learn.
Drowning in Money:
The Johnstown Flood of 1889
BY NEENA ARNDT

Victor Heiser, the 16-year-old son of a Johnstown, Pennsylvania, merchant, traversed the knee-deep water between his house and barn. It was just after 4 p.m. on May 31, 1889, and his father had instructed him to untie the horses so they wouldn’t drown if the water rose higher. When Victor started back toward the house, he caught sight of his parents in a second-story window, frantically motioning for him to turn back. Victor scrambled to the barn’s roof in time to see a mountain of water and debris crush his family home. Certain that he wouldn’t survive, Victor glanced at his silver pocket watch to see how long it would take to go from this world to the next.

In 1889, Johnstown was a growing industrial city with a population of approximately 30,000, up from 15,000 a decade earlier. Workers—many of them recent immigrants from Eastern Europe—arrived in droves to toil at the town’s steel and barbed wire factories. Five-story office buildings had sprung up on Main Street in recent years, and the city had a night school, an opera house and a library. Its shops sold the latest technology and goods. By all accounts, Johnstown was keeping pace as industry revolutionized America’s landscape and workforce. Nestled at the confluence of two rivers in the narrow Conemaugh Valley, however, Johnstown had been prone to flooding since its founding early in the 19th century.

The exclusive South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club stood high above Johnstown in the Allegheny Mountains. Just 80 miles from Pittsburgh, the pristine mountain resort provided a welcome respite from city life for its 60 wealthy members, including industrialists Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick. The resort maintained a private reservoir known as Lake Conemaugh, which contained 20 million tons of water corralled by the South Fork Dam and thousands of fish trucked in for the pleasure of the resort’s casual anglers. The resort installed fish screens in the dam’s spillway to keep the fish in the reservoir, but the screens were frequently jammed with debris, and the water level rose several feet. In Johnstown, 14 miles downstream, many residents feared that the backed-up spillways would compromise the integrity of the entire dam. But while questions about the dam’s efficacy arose throughout the 1880s, the dam held strong season after season. In fact, threats of the dam’s failure materialized so often and seemingly with so little justification, that for Johnstown’s residents the possibility of the dam’s bursting became a joke.
Victor Heiser’s parents had given him the silver pocket watch on his birthday two years earlier. George and Mathilde Heiser were generous but strict; while other children played outside after school, Victor conjugated French or German verbs with his tutor. The Heisers, who had struggled financially for years, poured their money into Victor’s education in the hopes that his life would be easier than theirs. Young Victor prized the watch and dreamed of becoming a watchmaker in Johnstown.

On May 30, a torrential rainstorm roared into Johnstown. Creeks swelled, lakes rose and rail lines washed out. By the morning of May 31, a few feet of water gushed through town, but the minor flooding did not concern the residents. They dutifully moved their valuables to upper
floors, preparing to wait out the high waters. Very few headed for high ground, though the foothills were only a stone’s throw from their front doors. Meanwhile, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club’s officials observed the swollen reservoir and sent a team of workers to unclog the spillway, while a second team worked to create an additional spillway. Twice that morning, the officials sent telegrams down to Johnstown, warning that the dam could give way. But they had cried “wolf” so many times that their messages went unheeded. The dam broke at approximately 3 p.m., releasing 20 million tons of water that flattened the tiny town of South Fork within minutes, transforming its two dozen houses into a churning mass of debris. The debris jammed against the Conemaugh Viaduct railroad bridge, forming a temporary dam that held back the bulk of the water for a full seven minutes. When the viaduct gave way, the flood rolled toward the unsuspecting town below, tearing through the steel and barbed wire factories and collecting what would prove to be some of its most lethal debris.

The flood slammed into Johnstown a little after 4 p.m., traveling at an estimated speed of 40 miles per hour and reaching a height of 60 feet. Houses, trees and livestock—minutes earlier, the benign fixtures of Johnstown’s quiet streets—whirled and reared in the floodwaters. At the Stone Bridge, an imposing structure that carried the Pennsylvania Railroad across the Conemaugh River, the debris once again jammed, and this time, the bridge held. The floodwater was diverted in various directions as the growing pile of wreckage blocked its path. In a matter of minutes, the idyllic reservoir maintained for the summer pleasure of Pittsburgh’s wealthiest industrial magnates had decimated Johnstown.

The current swept away the barn, leaving Victor Heiser fighting furiously to stay atop the roof. He careened through the wreckage at a nightmarish pace, gaping helplessly as friends and neighbors swirled in and out of sight, their situations as dire as his own. The fruit dealer Mr. Mussante and his wife and two children sped by on what Victor guessed was their barn floor. To Victor’s astonishment, the Mussantes were packing items into a Saratoga trunk. A piece of wreckage crashed over their heads, and they were gone. Victor’s plump neighbor Mrs. Fenn was drenched with the contents of the tar barrel that now served as her precarious raft. The doctor’s assistant, naked on a rooftop, clasped his shivering hands heavenward as he prayed for deliverance. Victor caught only glimpses of his unfortunate companions as he jumped and rolled, dodging the wreckage as it surged and slammed from every direction. Victor’s “raft” finally sailed out to comparatively open water. At long last, as Victor passed a house still on its foundations, he was able to jump onto its roof and join a group of similarly soaked and shaken townspeople. His watch was still ticking, and he checked the time again. Fewer than 10 minutes had elapsed since he had witnessed the destruction of his home.

The survivors stayed put, afraid to navigate the water that surrounded the house. As darkness fell, they heard other houses succumb to the floodwater’s pressure, their walls and roofs slipping into the quagmire as their foundations gave way. Victor and the others prayed their damaged dwelling would last the night.

Hours after the debris lodged at the Stone Bridge, 80 people remained trapped in the ruins. As the waters receded, gas and hot coals transformed the wreckage into a funeral pyre; citizens who had narrowly escaped drowning now burned to death. In all, 2,209 people died in the flood, including 396 children. At the time, the Johnstown Flood was the largest loss of civilian life the United States had ever seen. (The death toll would later
be surpassed by the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 and by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Ironically, on Sept. 11 Johnstown narrowly escaped disaster when United Flight 93 flew over it shortly before slamming into a field 20 miles away.

The flood relief efforts began as news of the devastation reached Pittsburgh, then Philadelphia, New York and the rest of the world. Rail lines had been washed away, but laborers worked day and night to restore them. Before long, trainloads of food, clothing and tents made their way to survivors. Among the most prominent relief workers was Clara Barton, then 67 years old, who aided survivors for five full months. The flood was the first disaster to which her organization, the American Red Cross, responded.

When the sun rose on June 1, 1889, Victor Heiser was still huddled with his fellow survivors. The house had stood through the night, and now in the light of day, the group could see that the water had receded some. With their eyes on the hills a half-mile away, they scaled mounds of wreckage and waded through filthy pools. Once on high ground Victor set out to find his parents despite the slim odds of their survival. For two weeks, he scoured the wreckage and frequented the makeshift morgues set up around town. He found his mother’s body at last and laid her to rest in the family plot. Atop a pile of wreckage he also found a large chest that had stood in his parents’ house; inside and still intact were his father’s Civil War uniform, a collection of silver, his mother’s Bible and a single penny. His father, whose anxious hand motions had directed Victor to the top of the barn and saved his life, was never found.

So hungry were Americans for news of the flood that newspapers around the country strained their presses to put out extra editions. Stories of the disaster—often true, sometimes exaggerated, at times patently false—traveled almost as quickly as the floodwaters.

Play Synopsis

The devastating Johnstown Flood of 1889 serves as the backdrop for this provocative world premiere by Rebecca Gilman. The Baxter Theatre troupe—comprised of siblings James, Richard and Fanny—has been summoned to perform at an exclusive resort next to a beautiful man-made lake in the Pennsylvania mountains. Although the troupe’s repertoire consists of the romantic trifles typical of the era, James envisions a different kind of play, exposing the true struggles of common people. When a violent rainstorm compromises the lake’s shoddily constructed dam, the resulting disaster lays bare the tragic inequities of the rigid class system—and paves the way for a seismic change in both theater and society.
New Orleans and Johnstown: Preventable Disasters

BY BRAD BRUBAKER

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
— George Santayana, writer and philosopher

It has been almost five years since Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, causing 1,800 deaths according to the New Orleans Times-Picayune. Although the hurricane hit Mississippi the hardest, New Orleans and neighboring St. Bernard Parish were flooded when their protective levees meant to hold back water broke. What is most striking about Rebecca Gilman’s A True History of the Johnstown Flood is the alarming number of similarities between the Johnstown Flood and the flood in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

What mistakes were repeated in New Orleans more than a century after Johnstown flooded? Gilman’s play gives an excellent background on the Johnstown Flood, as does the previous article in the study guide. National Geographic created this timeline of the 2005 flooding in New Orleans:

- Aug. 25: Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in Florida.
- Aug. 26: The hurricane gains momentum in the Gulf of Mexico. Meteorologists predict the hurricane will hit land again, causing severe damage to the Gulf Coast. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declares a state of emergency.
- Aug. 27: Dismissing pressure to call for a mandatory evacuation, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin calls for a voluntary evacuation.
- Aug. 28: At 11 a.m. Nagin issues the first mandatory evacuation in New Orleans’ history. While many in the city stay put anticipating the storm will blow over, many who are unable to leave the city go to shelters, most notably the Superdome. Meanwhile, those attempting to evacuate are stuck in traffic for hours. The National Weather Service predicts the storm surge will breach the levees.
- Aug. 29: Katrina hits land in the early morning. Although the hurricane does not hit New Orleans directly, the first levee in the city is breached.
- Aug. 30: Multiple levees fail, leaving 80 percent of New Orleans underwater while 100 percent of neighboring St. Bernard Parish is submerged. Estimates of the number of residents still in the city are as high as 100,000. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the federal agency that heads disaster response, requires first responders to go through it before providing aid.
- Aug. 31: The first groups of people are evacuated from the Superdome, which serves as a shelter for 20,000 people. Because of reported widespread looting, rescue teams are ordered to refocus their efforts to policing. Water levels stop rising.
- Sept. 1: Many shelters report a shortage or total lack of water and food.
• Sept. 2: Congress approves a $10.5 million plan for disaster relief. Many African-American leaders say the delayed response is because the affected neighborhoods are predominantly black and poor.

• Sept. 4: The last of the people at the Superdome are evacuated, although some survivors remain at other shelters.

• Sept. 6: Army Corps of Engineers begins pumping water out of the flooded city. Estimates report fewer than 10,000 people remaining in the city.

The most important similarity to note about the floods in Johnstown and New Orleans is that even though the increase in water was the result of severe storms, the flooding was the result of human error and negligence. In New Orleans, the failure of the levees and flood walls has been attributed to the Army Corp of Engineers, the organization that has headed anti-flood planning in the U.S. since the 1920s. Errors in design were not the only problem. The original plans for flood protection in New Orleans, drawn up in 1965 after Hurricane Betsy, gave a timeline of completion within 13 years. Forty years later, the construction was still far from finished. In Johnstown, the dam did not receive its needed upkeep by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.

Other similarities can be found in the events leading up to the floods. In both cities, flood warnings were commonplace. Because the aforementioned negligence was unknown to citizens and to some authority figures, no one took the severe warnings for these disasters seriously until it was too late. Even if the warnings had come earlier, evacuation for many residents was simply not an option because of the costs associated with it.

The aftermath of the floods also tells the sad story of history repeating itself. Government aid to the disasters was delayed, resulting in more lost lives. Staging areas were short on food, water and supplies for days on end. Just over two weeks after the flood in New Orleans, FEMA Director Michael Brown resigned because of these critical failures. (Later, it was learned he had no past experience in emergency response.) Media coverage dwelled on drastically exaggerated looting activity targeting minority groups as the perpetrators. And although the American Red Cross became a powerful force in disaster response, some insurance companies such as Allstate refused to pay flood insurance claims to victims in New Orleans. In both cases, a lack of resolution remains because no one was ever held accountable for these preventable disasters.

Former business district in New Orleans’ neighbor, St. Bernard Parish, damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Photo courtesy of Brad Brubaker.
I’ll never forget that day. The day that I looked up at my television screen, and flashing back at me was not my regular evening sitcom but headlines.

Headlines describing natural disaster, suffering and tragedy: “Thousands left dead in disastrous force of nature;” “Catastrophe strikes, citizens continue in search of loved ones.”

It was the night the worst earthquake in 200 years struck Haiti. And even though the date on the calendar read Jan. 12, 2010, in my heart, it was really 4 ½ years earlier, the day Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans.

Is it really happening again? I asked myself. Could another force of this magnitude actually hammer the western coasts before we are even finished picking up the rubble in Louisiana?

The answer proved to be yes. Days went on, and so amassed the headlines that recounted stories of Haitians who lost family members, were trapped under buildings and somehow survived for days without food. As these reports piled up in my subconscious, the eerie similarities between the earthquake and Hurricane Katrina began to penetrate my mind.

There was the obvious: both were catastrophic natural disasters and both were covered almost nonstop by network news crews.

But the parallels between the two tragedies go much deeper than that, starting with the effect on victims. Survivors in Haiti and New Orleans faced hunger, injury and homelessness after disaster struck. Many did not know where their families were, and some people of New Orleans still have missing brothers, sisters, and children. Their homes were destroyed. The cities they once knew to be filled with beautiful churches and tall buildings were now nothing but a collection of splintering wood and piles of debris.

Even more heartbreaking, though, was that some were not able not able to witness the aftermath. The death tolls from the earthquake and Hurricane Katrina were astounding, although the earthquake’s was more than 100 times larger. Many Haitians did not receive a proper burial; instead their bodies will lie crushed under toppled buildings. Victims of Hurricane Katrina will forever rest unidentified in mass graves, placed there to control disease and stench. Many people in New Orleans were found dead in their homes long after they had drowned.

Touched by the tragedies, Americans have poured into these communities to help with aid and recovery. However, coordinating the assistance was chaotic in both areas. Some relief money sent to New Orleans has yet to be spent and seems to have been lost within the bureaucratic Louisiana government. Disorder was abounding for most Haiti relief workers. Food and water were not reaching the people, causing fights among Haitians, just as riots broke out in New Orleans over the deficiency of emergency care.

As more reports from Haiti flooded the airwaves in the days following the earthquake, its many similarities with New Orleans continued to affect me. But, there was one parallel in particular that really stood out.

The destruction from each disaster was much more severe because of the poverty in those communities. The earthquake and Hurricane Katrina occurred in poor areas, and although the poverty in Haiti is much worse than in New Orleans, the citizens' lack of wealth multiplied the devastation. Structures in the cities were poorly funded, and because of that, were not built to withstand such forces as an earthquake or a hurricane-caused levee break. Victims had little money saved up to buy food, clothes or lodging after theirs was lost or destroyed. Many may never return home simply because they cannot afford to clear their properties of the wreckage and rebuild their houses.

But perhaps the most important similarity between the two disasters is that their survivors are not giving up. They recognize their challenges of rebuilding, recovery and optimism—and face them with resolve. Even though the news might only show the damage and despair of Haiti and New Orleans, just know its citizens are strong, no matter what the headlines might say.
How Can I Help?
BY BRAD BRUBAKER

When the earthquake leveled Haiti in January, both charities and individuals instantly responded. On Feb. 22, the American Red Cross reported that $284 million had already been generously donated toward relief efforts in Haiti. Yet when feeling philanthropic it is important to be knowledgeable about where your money really goes. For this information, Charity Navigator is a good resource, offering profiles on thousands of national charities and a rating system that analyzes how donations are used, as well as the sustainability of each organization.

The site gives these useful tips to consider when responding to the situation in Haiti:

- Do not give to the Haitian government.
- Give to an established charity that has experience working in Haiti because it already possesses knowledge of the infrastructure.
- Consider the nature of the charity’s work. Some are providing medical assistance, shelter, food and/or water. Others will be more focused on either short or long-term rebuilding efforts.
- Do not send supplies. No one is set up to receive goods, and established charities already have many things you might send.
- Do not respond to unsolicited phone calls or emails.

Here is Charity Navigator’s top 10 list of charities helping with relief in Haiti. Each has experience working in Haiti and/or on massive disasters:

- American Red Cross – Sending tarps, hygiene items and cooking sets for about 5,000 families and helping the injured who may need blood.
- Americasres – Sending medical aid.
- CARE – Deploying emergency teams. Will be distributing food.
- Convoy of Hope – Distributing food, water and supplies.
- Direct Relief International – Delivering medicines/medical supplies.
- Doctors Without Borders – Currently treating people. Will be operating an inflatable hospital.
- Food for the Poor – Accepting cash donations, canned food, fish, condensed/evaporated/powdered milk and water.
- Partners in Health – Organizing medical personnel volunteers and gathering supplies.
- Save the Children – Providing food, water, shelter and child-friendly spaces.
- Water Missions International – Providing safe water.

At present, there are very few opportunities for hands-on volunteering in Haiti. That could change in the coming months.

However, just as interest shifted to Haiti, so will interest shift away from Haiti, even while the country’s citizens still require aid. The Gulf Coast is a perfect example of this arc of giving: donations came pouring in when Hurricane Katrina tore apart the Gulf Coast, but aid has since dwindled in those regions despite continuing need. Many programs have moved on or lost funding in the years since Katrina. Here is a list of organizations still seeking volunteers, whether individuals or school groups, to help with rebuilding the Gulf Coast:

- Katrina Corps – katrinacorps.org
- Habitat for Humanity – www.habitat-nola.org
- The Phoenix of New Orleans – www.pnola.org
- Volunteers of America, Greater New Orleans – www.voagno.org

Rebuilding an entire community cannot happen without money and volunteers. If you decide to do either, though, conduct research to make sure your donation and hours are being put to good use.

Imagine if all that was left of history was the information in textbooks—impersonal data such as “Twenty million tons of water killed over 2,000 people during the Johnstown Flood” or “Eighty percent of New Orleans was underwater in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” These facts are important, but they lack much of what can be gained from personal storytelling and art. These forms treat human life as more than a statistic and provide context for events before, during and after they occur.

Here are some images I recall as a volunteer in New Orleans six months after the flood:

_In the ninth ward, places where homes once stood have front steps that lead to nothing. Some houses are crashed like cars in the middle of the street. One trailer home is split over the top of an overturned truck. In another neighborhood, homeowners explain that water went higher than the roofs of the one-story homes. Gutting the houses, volunteers remove every item in the homes into the front yard, finding precious few items intact. The most prized possessions of homeowners are always photographs. Also piled in the front yard are the muddy-soaked carpets, the moldy walls and the grass-stained ceilings. All that remains in the homes are the skeleton-like frames. Structurally, some homes volunteers gutted are not salvageable even after so much hard work. Everyone agrees, at the current rate, it will be at least a decade, possibly two, before New Orleans is rebuilt._

As for the Johnstown flood in 1889, no one remains to tell the story. We can research the history and what was written when it happened, authored by those affected. Through artistic exploration, we can imagine what the events might have been like as they were happening. This is what _A True History of the Johnstown Flood_ accomplishes—breathing life into history as well as giving setting and context for the facts.

Although the subject of this play is a historical event from the 19th century, Rebecca Gilman wrote it in response to the flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Among other things, the script explores how the circumstances that caused the New Orleans flood have many similarities to those of another American disaster. By doing so, the play makes it clear that neither flood was an isolated event.

Responding to tragedy with art is an important part of our history. That’s why so much art was created in response to the devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina. Each piece has its own unique perspective and purpose. Author and screenwriter Dave Eggers wrote _Zeitoun_, which is based on the real story of a Muslim family’s culturally specific experiences with racism during the aftermath of the flood. McSweeney’s, the publishing company Eggers founded, also released _Voices from the Storm_, a collection of personal stories from flood victims in New Orleans. Musicians across all genres wrote responses focusing on different elements of the tragedy. These artists include rappers Jay-Z, Mos Def and Lil Wayne; rock musicians Audioslave and Linkin Park; and others like Ben Harper, Jimmy Buffett and Harry Connick, Jr.
Another important role art plays in the wake of tragedy is a means to healing. The act of bringing a community together, unifying them in shared public experience, gives an alternative to a victim’s private internal struggle. A common example is a benefit concert like the post-Sept. 11 Concert for New York City. After the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, which ended 33 lives on the college campus, an organization called HERE (Honoring Experiences, Reflections and Expressions) was founded. Its purpose—to create public opportunities for dialogue and artistic response—was culminated with several events: a photography display of post-tragedy community togetherness, an ice cream social on campus that provided art supplies and the showing of Martin Doblemeier’s The Power of Forgiveness, a film about communities healing after being struck by violence.

Other projects that use art as a means for healing are more specific in whom they are trying to reach. After the flooding, the New Orleans Kid Camera Project was founded to address the emotional and psychological impact of young people returning to their damaged neighborhoods. The goal of the organization is growth and recovery in young people via giving them different mediums of expression, including photography.

Art sometimes takes the role of social tool to get people to take action. In A True History of the Johnstown Flood, the character James writes a play in response to the flood in hopes of getting the citizens to act out rather than be helpless victims. Over the last 150 years there have been different experiments in this theatrical method.

Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre used techniques to pull audiences away from an emotional response—he rejected the theory of pursuing emotional catharsis—in order to generate critical response that would inspire social action. This was just one type of the leftist agitprop theatre (agitation-propaganda theatre) occurring in the 1920s and ‘30s. At the same time in America, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal created the Federal Theatre Project, which supported theatre artists during the Great Depression. However, after just four years, the project ended because of political pressure; many of the plays produced, including Marc Blitzstein’s legendary musical The Cradle Will Rock, had leftist tones. In the 1960s, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed acted out real community issues, asking the audience to jump in to create the needed change and explore the results together.

In 1998, The Tectonic Theatre Project, lead by Moisés Kaufman, interviewed townspeople in Laramie, Wyoming, after the murder of a homosexual student named Matthew Shepard. Their interviews were then made into a play, The Laramie Project, which was presented in multiple cities (and eventually in Laramie) as a means of combatting homophobia. In 2004, British playwright David Hare responded to the controversial war in Iraq by writing Stuff Happens, a play that has George W. Bush, Tony Blair and other real people as the characters. The play, which analyzes how the war came into being, is composed of real-life quotes mixed in with fictionalized dialogue of meetings that took place but are not items of public record.

In recent years, there has been no shortage of topical film and television. One part of the Sept. 11 story was explored in the Paul Greengrass film United 93. No one knows the details of what happened on the plane, but the film depicts how the passengers rose up together and heroically sacrificed themselves to stop the terrorist hijacking. Gus Van Zant, director of Milk, made a fictionalized account of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. The film, which literally follows the characters of both shooters and victims, is titled Elephant, implying the events that inspired the film are “the elephant in the room no one is talking about,” or an issue that needs addressing but fails to be discussed.

Art and personal storytelling are vital parts of our history and are invaluable when responding to disastrous events. Can you think of other examples of art made in response to a world event?
A Conversation with Cheryl Corley

In an interview with Yasmine Simone Williams, one of the Goodman’s Education and Community Engagement Department interns, NPR’s Cheryl Corley discusses her experience covering a disaster in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Yasmine Simone Williams: How does one prepare to cover a disaster?

Cheryl Corley: First you make sure you have extras of everything—extra batteries, extra flashcards which we use to record audio, extra microphones, microphone cords, a flashlight. You try to think of things that you won’t be able to get quickly or buy for a few days or weeks. So you have to be pretty self-contained. Fortunately, I was part of the second wave of NPR reporters going into New Orleans so I was able to get the advice of the reporters who were already on the ground there. I took light weight rain gear and boots for flooded areas even though NPR had extra boots available too. I wasn’t worried about food or lodging because NPR had taken care of those details. It was good to be with a company that had experience covering disasters.

YSW: Does one have to detach themselves from the horrors of disaster in order to articulately cover the story? How does one avoid letting emotions take over and prevent them from accurately covering the story?

CC: When I got to New Orleans it was a ghost town. So I didn’t experience some of the really distressing scenes where people were trapped in flooded neighborhoods or dying. The people on hand when I arrived were emergency personnel and some hotel workers. Sometimes, it was eerie, though, traveling through the town. Often you were alone in the car. The city was on lockdown, many streets signs were gone, and the only lights on the street came from the headlights of the car. New Orleans was simply deserted for weeks. The horror in this instance was the vast devastation. There were crushed houses, homes that had been trashed by the wind or water, and trees all over the place. As a reporter, you know that some people have simply lost everything. It’s amazing to see and in some instances you do become detached because you have to report the story and not be overwhelmed by the devastation.

As a journalist, my job is to gather information, to verify what I can and to investigate. I’m not at a disaster to pass judgement even if I have opinions about what I see. I go in as an information gatherer and a disseminator of what people need to know.

YSW: How does one avoid writing a piece built entirely on their personal politics?

CC: There’s a strict line between commentary—which is based on your politics and point of view—and reporting. As a reporter, I’m at a disaster to describe what’s happening and talk to people who are involved in the disaster in some way. I’m not there to tell people how I feel about a situation. I’m there so people can decide how they feel about what’s happened during and after a disaster.
YSW: What responsibility do you have to victims and the community?

CC: You have the same responsibility as you would with any story. You must be accurate. You must search to find out the why behind what happened. In disasters, I try to treat people who are victims with empathy. It is a difficult time for them. For some it’s hard to talk about what’s happened while it’s not for others. My responsibility is to recognize where they are and to respect what they are willing to give. If I have information that might be helpful to them, I share it. Stories that are on the air can often have a powerful effect prompting people outside of the disaster to help in some way—whether its donating money, going to clean out flooded homes in New Orleans, or changing a policy or getting officials to take action.

As a reporter, you have to recognize what they’re going through and let other people know what they’re going through so there can be a response from government, public policy, and others who can help. Hopefully the reports impact the way government responds to evacuations, deal with the elderly and people who can’t get out. That change comes from the stories the media is telling.

YSW: How does photojournalism work in regard to disaster? Does it differ from broadcast?

CC: A photojournalist might have a much different answer but I don’t believe there’s much difference. We’re both after the same thing—telling a story. A photojournalist does it visually. I do it aurally with the sound of people’s voices, their stories and with sound from the event or location. So they go hand in hand.

YSW: Do the victims sometimes resist speaking to you?

CC: No. I didn’t come across that much. People really wanted their stories to be told. In many ways, they consider the media an aid to them.
In the aftermath of disaster lies tragedy, devastating tallies of innocent beings who have lost their lives to catastrophe. Numbers and bitter descriptions flood the media, but the question remains: Are these details accurate or merely exaggerated estimations?

Class and race discrepancies in disaster reporting have plagued the media for decades. When Hurricane Katrina swept across the southern Gulf region, ideas swept into the minds of reporters. Yahoo! News began one of the most heated media discrepancies of the time: the “Two-Photo Controversy.” Creating an uproar regarding biased media coverage, Yahoo! News published two post-Hurricane photographs depicting residents treading chest-deep waters, one portraying a black man, the second showing a white family. The captions of these similar photographs varied wildly. The first image of the young black man boasted the caption “walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store,” while the similar shot of the white couple showed them wading “through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.” These captions caused many to “question whether black people were being treated fairly in media coverage of post-hurricane events” (Media Awareness Network). Although the photographer of the first image argued that he had, in fact, witnessed the black man looting the store, several arguments regarding the use of the word “looting” vs. “finding” still arose.

True or False: Skewed Media Depictions of Disasters

BY GOLI RAHIMI

Most recently, the world felt the impact of the violent earthquake in Haiti. Newspapers, television and radio stations all weighed in on the horrors this nation now faces. Few reporters spent time discussing why Haiti was susceptible to such ruin at the time of the tragedy. Why did so many buildings, schools and homes collapse? Why did so many poor civilians perish beneath the rubble? The media failed to mention the nation’s history and hardships, as well as oppression by its government and political leaders. Haiti—and only Haiti—received pity from the outside world.

Such truths were omitted in almost all reporting of the earthquake. According to Kim Ives of Haiti Progres, “there is no such thing as neutral, fair journalism. Balanced journalism is impossible.” “I am still not sure what happened,” a New York Times reporter admitted during a discussion of media coverage of Haiti.

The Haitian government has been corrupt for years and thus must be held accountable for its part in the tragedy. The corruption in this dictator-led country ultimately triggered its demise as government officials stole funds that were meant to enhance building production, electricity and other necessities. The result? A country of innocent people ill-prepared for one of their nation’s most tragic disasters.

In 1889, the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, experienced one of the deadliest floods in American history. The collapse of the South Fork Dam swept away houses, farm animals, telephone lines and people. The disaster was a goldmine of reporting for the media; two big scandals found their way into major newspapers. First came the error of reporting lootings as “minority savagery.” These were questionable claims by reporters that many of Johnstown’s ethnic minorities were overturning houses and ransacking rooms. The media directed much of the slander at Johnstown’s Hungarian population. The New York Herald even headlined an issue of their newspaper: “Drunken Hungarians, Dancing, Singing, Cursing and Fighting Amid the Ruins.” Public scrutiny then turned to another class entirely: the wealthy millionaires. Members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, whose pond had overflowed into the town, became the objects of much defamation coming from the media. The Chicago Herald even went as far as to depict these men as Roman aristocrats, seeking pleasure while the poor died like beasts in the Colosseum.

Unfortunately, the truth can often be bypassed in the name of journalism. What sells is not always what happened, and such biased reporting can be deeply rooted in racism. It must be remembered, however, that the truth is out there and it is up to the reader, the viewer, the listener and the friend to discern for him- or herself what truly happened before, during and after the disaster.
Celebrities have overwhelmed our attention. We all know what they’re doing, who they’re dating and what scandal they’ve been part of. Families that used to sit around the television and watch the news would rather flock to the TV set to watch these notables take part in wild and rowdy acts on VH1. Though we hate to admit it, these icons of popular media have become the most influential people of the day. In the wake of a tragedy, celebrities are among the first to react. As public personalities, they do a lot to both repair the damage inflicted on victims and raise awareness about an issue.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina changed the lives of thousands of citizens on the Gulf Coast. Many celebrities were out making an effort. Brad Pitt started the Make it Right Foundation, which built many homes in the New Orleans area. Pop star Hilary Duff donated $250,000. The late Michael Jackson wrote a song titled, “From the Bottom of My Heart.” Oprah Winfrey, George Clooney, Nicolas Cage and Sean “Diddy” Combs all donated $1 million to the Katrina relief effort.

This trend of celebrities helping to rectify situations is not a new phenomenon. In 1984, a relief effort for the famine in Ethiopia was organized by a group of American artists called USA for Africa. This group organized a campaign called Hands Across America, where 7 million people donated money to participate in linking hands with an enormous chain of others for 15 minutes. Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie also wrote a song, “We are the World,” which was recorded by the members of USA for Africa. Hands Across America and the single released by the USA for Africa artists helped to raise about $100 million for Ethiopia.

Now that the Haitian people are going through a crisis, many things are being done to ensure the safety and survival of the remaining citizens of Haiti. Many notable people are donating money to the relief effort. Benefit concerts and telethons have been organized, such as the Hope for Haiti Now telethon, which raised $61 million. In addition to that, Lionel Richie arranged a 25th anniversary edition of “We Are the World” featuring many contemporary artists who all want to help with the Haiti relief effort.

Celebrities are best known for their music, their movies and, regrettably, their scandals. However, when a tragedy occurs, these influential public figures take on an important role when they do what they can to aid those in need and enlighten the world.
The Beginnings of the American Red Cross
BY YASMINE SIMONE WILLIAMS AND ELIZABETH NEUKIRCH

The American Association of the Red Cross is a nonprofit, charitable organization that receives its funding from public donations. Founded by Clarissa Harlow Barton in 1881, it functions as the nation’s premier emergency response organization.

However, the American Red Cross is not the first of its kind—Barton was moved to create the organization after learning of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during her travels in Europe following the Civil War. The ICRC was founded after the publishing of a book by Swiss citizen Henry Dunant titled *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), in which he recounted tales of a battle during the War of Italian Unification and, more specifically, of the thousands of wounded he came across during his travels who were lying unattended, struggling to survive. Among the many questions Dunant posed to his readers was the issue of humanitarian aid and relief societies to care for the wounded in times of war—none of which existed at that time.

Dunant’s book was so well-received that the chairman of a local Swiss charity, the Geneva Public Welfare Society, decided to present the author’s proposals to a special committee. This committee, initially called the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded, met officially as the ICRC on Feb. 17, 1863, working from that date forward to ensure that medical relief volunteers would be neutral figures in times of war, protected from fighting.

Unlike the ICRC, after its founding the American Red Cross immediately began to aid victims of fires, floods and hurricanes. It took on a large role during the 1889 Johnstown flood when its volunteers set up large shelters to temporarily house those dislocated by the disaster. In 2005 the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina put the American Red Cross’ resources to the test yet again. Three weeks following the hurricane, the organization reported that it had housed more than 36,000 Hurricane Katrina evacuees in 232 shelters and served nearly 12 million hot meals to survivors.

The American Red Cross provides relief for victims of both domestic and natural disasters. Records made public on the American Red Cross’s Web site show that about 100 specialists and volunteers are currently helping with the relief efforts in Haiti. Reports show that the American Red Cross has spent or committed nearly $78 million to provide food, water and shelter for earthquake survivors.

Each year victims of some 70,000 disasters turn to the more than half a million volunteers and 35,000 employees of the Red Cross. Through more than 700 locally supported chapters, more than 15 million people gain the skills they need to prepare for and respond to emergencies in their homes, communities and world.
The city of Chicago may be not be in a hurricane zone, but it has not been immune from its share of disasters—and not just the Steve Bartman infraction against the Chicago Cubs in 2003. The first three disasters described below are featured in exhibits at the Chicago History Museum.

**The Great Chicago Fire**

Fires in 1800s often had more serious consequences than they do today. Back then, there were no firewalls to contain flames and prevent their spreading. To make matters worse, buildings were made of wood, as were Chicago’s raised streets. The raised sidewalks trapped dry autumn leaves. Homeowners also had two traits that made their homes more hazardous: many used highly flammable kerosene lanterns for lighting and stored hay for their livestock. When these factors were added to the dry conditions and strong winds of a fateful October day in 1871, it is no wonder how a small fire on Chicago’s Southwest side could spread so rapidly. The fire lasted 36 hours from Oct. 8-10, burning hot enough to melt iron—2800 degrees Fahrenheit. Miraculously, only 300 people died, but nearly one-third of Chicago’s population of 300,000 lost their homes.

Although nothing was ever proven, blame for the fire often fallen on Catherine O’Leary’s cow, which was long believed to have kicked over a kerosene lamp that started the fire. Mrs. O’Leary was finally absolved of guilt in 1997. The cause of the fire remains a mystery.

**Iroquois Theatre Fire**

Similar to both Johnstown and New Orleans, human negligence was to blame for the Iroquois Theatre Fire of Dec. 30, 1903. The building on Randolph Street (where the Oriental Theatre now stands, a block southeast of the Goodman) had received high praises from theater...
critics for its design and was advertised by the owners as fireproof. Fire safety authorities noted that this statement was far from the truth. Additionally, the theater had structural issues that would make it difficult to exit speedily if a fire occurred. When these problems were brought to the building owners’ attention, they dismissed them.

An estimated 2,000 audience members were present for the performance Dec. 30, filling every seat and overcrowding the available standing room. When the fire started, hysteria and confusion left some audience members unable to find a way out, while those who located an exit were in danger of being trampled or asphyxiated. As a result of the fire, a total of 602 people died—more than any other fatalities from a fire in a single building in U.S. history. The story ends with another dark similarity to Johnstown and New Orleans: no one was ever convicted because of the many loopholes in ordinances for buildings and safety.

The Iroquois Theatre tragedy resulted in nationwide fire safety changes, including the requirement that all fire exit doors must open outward. After the fire, theaters were limited in how many seats they could have between aisles. They were also required to install a fire curtain that would drop in the event of a fire, separating the audience from the stage.

**SS Eastland Disaster**

On July 24, 1915, manufacturing and technological innovations company Western Electric invited the families of Chicago employees to its annual company picnic in Indiana. The families, many of whom were lower class Czech immigrants, boarded tour ships at the south bank of the Chicago River between LaSalle and Clark—just one block northwest of the Goodman. A total of 2,500 passengers boarded the SS Eastland first. While still at the dock, it capsized, throwing people on the upper deck into the river’s current. Water and furniture crushed those in the lower decks. Strangers dove into the water to assist and save passengers. Other rescuers hurled crates into the river as floatation devices. Still, the disaster left 844 dead—more than any other Chicago disaster.

Like both the Johnstown and New Orleans floods, this disaster was preventable. The Eastland’s owners already knew that issues in the ship’s design made it dangerously top-heavy. When the Seamen’s Act was passed earlier that July—three years after the Titanic sank—the new safety regulations affected the Eastland, not least of which was the addition of lifeboats that put even more weight at the top of the ship. To make matters worse, the owners increased the capacity limit by nearly 400 passengers. These factors make it hardly surprising that the ship capsized later that month.

**E2 Club Tragedy**

In 2003, 21 people suffocated or were trampled and another 58 were injured at the E2 nightclub in Chicago’s South Loop neighborhood. As reported by BBC news, the club’s estimated 500 patrons charged toward the only exit stairwell in a panic after a security guard used pepper spray on brawling patrons. The effects of the spray caused choking among a much larger cross section of the club’s attendees.

Investigations that followed the tragedy quickly revealed that the club owners had previously been ordered by the city to cease using the upstairs level of the nightclub. After lengthy legal proceedings, the owners were sentenced to two years in prison this past November. They were found guilty of criminal contempt for continuing operations of the building’s upstairs despite many safety violations, including an insufficient number of exits.

Chicago residents can be grateful that no local disaster has taken more than 1,000 lives. And, although each had its loss of life, the lessons learned from these events have helped prevent future tragedies.
The 60-foot, debris-choked wall of water that poured through Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1889 was a natural disaster of historic proportions that prompted the community to rebuild a great city. Natural disasters inspire relief efforts, an outpouring of aid and all manner of support. However, the good detected in the aftermath does not conceal the daunting realities of economic disparity often at the heart of the problem. The Johnstown Flood, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti and other natural disasters have shed light on issues related to persistent poverty in our world. Victims find themselves on opposite sides of the rift: the working class folks of Johnstown against the wealthy entrepreneurs, the low-income residents of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans opposite the rich families in the Garden District and French Quarter, and the citizens of one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere against a history of oppression and corruption. We begin to ask why these natural disasters disproportionately affect the vulnerable, the unprotected and the neglected.

The Johnstown Flood was the result of human negligence. The dam in this Pennsylvanian town was bought by the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club, whose patrons frequently were individuals who had made a fortune in the steel business in Pittsburgh. After purchasing the dam and surrounding lake, the club lowered the dam in order to pave a road to what would be a popular vacation spot. This greatly weakened the dam's infrastructure. Warning signs of its structural faults were not heeded. Instead, workers pouring rock and shale into the breaches made matters worse. To prevent water from seeping through the repairs, they threw hay and brush on the fill as they raised the wall. After a heavy rain in 1889, the inevitable ensued: the dam broke. Rushing water and tons of debris flooded into the town and killed more than 2,000 people downstream in Johnstown. The town's natives continue to condemn the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club. They assert the people of Johnstown were victims of the upper class' self-indulgence in creating vacation homes and a private club on the banks of Lake Conemaugh at the expense of the citizens' safety and, in the end, their lives.

When a Category 5 hurricane, a tropical cyclone with winds exceeding 155 mph, attacked the Gulf Coast, destroying levees and causing miles of flooding in New Orleans, efforts to control the disaster were implemented. However, the poor of New Orleans lived in constant danger of the levees breaking. Engineering studies of New Orleans' levee system had shown for years that it could not withstand a direct hit from a major hurricane. When flooding from a massive rainstorm in May 1995 killed six people, Congress authorized the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project (SELA). Over the next ten years, the Army Corps of Engineers, tasked with carrying out SELA, spent $430 million on
shoring up levees and building pumping stations. But at least $250 million in crucial projects remained. Local officials now say that had Washington heeded their warnings about the dire need for hurricane protection, including building up levees and repairing barrier islands, the damage might not have been nearly as bad as it turned out to be.

Nowhere in New Orleans was the damage greater than it was in the Lower Ninth Ward. The physical damage caused by flood waters pouring into the neighborhood from at least three sources brought attention to the ethnically and economically disproportionate destruction of lives in and around post-Katrina New Orleans. Before the hurricane, the median household income in the Lower Ninth Ward was $27,133, compared to the U.S. national average of $41,944 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Twenty-seven percent of households did not own an automobile, making it impossible for them to evacuate prior to the flood.

In the aftermath of the flood, poor people continued to suffer the most. The Lower Ninth Ward had suffered greater damage than the above-sea-level French Quarter, which was relatively unscathed, and was far less able to access government than members of the middle class. For example, the government gave money to victims with bank accounts very early, but people without bank accounts had no access to that financial assistance. Many residents of the Lower Ninth Ward were not homeowners and thus experienced difficulty when trying to get trailers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The landlords of those residents were absent and did not address the requirements needed to get aid for their tenants.

After devastating tremors of death shook Haiti killing more than 200,000 people, individuals from across the world stepped in to help. This outpouring of help does not, however, excuse the fact that poor countries represent only 11 percent of the population exposed to natural disasters, yet they account for more than 53 percent of the deaths. Research shows that better planning could avert much of the death and destruction.

Nineteenth-century rural Americans and new immigrants, for instance, crowded into urban areas with little infrastructure, massive crime and unsanitary conditions. Many governments in the developing world allow urban areas to grow in regions prone to earthquakes. Natural disasters inevitably become social disasters triggered by a particular natural force.

Every year the world witnesses the forces of nature running amok. An earthquake, flood, or hurricane of unusual force devastates a community, capturing global attention. Although no one in the path of a natural disaster can expect to escape its wrath and wealth is certainly no talisman, these catastrophes especially affect the poor. About half of those who have been killed by natural disasters from 1994–2003 were inhabitants of underdeveloped countries, with less than 10 percent coming from more affluent countries. The Johnstown Flood and Hurricane Katrina prove that even in developed countries, disasters have a knack of finding the poor and vulnerable.

**Pullman Porters**

In 1867 George Pullman, Chicago industrialist and founder of the Pullman Palace Car Company, introduced the first “hotel on wheels,” the President. The President was a railroad passenger car that accommodated all its passengers in beds with an attached kitchen and dining car. George Pullman immediately began recruiting black men as porters on his new, luxurious rail cars. The President and subsequent Pullman sleeping cars offered first-rate service provided by recently-freed former house slaves who simultaneously served as porters, waiters, chambermaids, entertainers and valets to wealthy, white passengers. Pullman became the biggest single employer of African Americans in post-Civil War America.

For more than a century Pullman porters suffered arduous workloads and daily racism. Porters were dependent on tips for much of their income. That, in turn, made them dependent on the whims of white passengers, who disdainfully referred to all porters as “George,” the first name of company founder George Pullman.

However, the position offered better pay and security than did most jobs open to African Americans at the time, in addition to a chance for travel. Unbeknownst to most of their white passengers, porters were respected as stalwarts of the economy and emissaries of news and culture. They played a critical role in creating a black middle class in this country, bringing elements of white culture to black communities, helping spread jazz and the blues from cities to rural communities, and bringing news, organizing skills and seditious ideas about freedom from the urban North to the segregated South.

Under the stewardship of A. Philip Randolph in 1925, the porters formed the first black labor union, called the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. They became patriarchs of black labor unions and trailblazers in the struggle for African-American dignity and self-sufficiency. They also are credited for the birth of the Civil Rights Movement.
Communism and Karl Marx
BY CAT CROWDER

This article was originally written for the study guide for Rock ‘n’ Roll during the Goodman’s 2008-2009 Season.

In A True History of the Johnstown Flood, James wants to write new plays, plays about the struggle of the working class. He is writing in reaction to the ideas that were spreading around Europe at that time, which centered around a new political model called communism. In communism, power is heavily concentrated in a centralized government and personal political freedoms are kept to a minimum. In the interest of national solidarity, people in such states are afforded fewer rights and liberties than are those in Democratic states.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is a political ideologist known as the founder of communism. He co-authored The Communist Manifesto with Friedrich Engels in 1848, but perhaps his doctrine of historical materialism is more intellectually influential. Historical materialism is the notion that all facets of human history—economics, power dynamics, wars, the rise and fall of religions and political ideologies—can be best understood by first studying a society’s means of production. This study requires knowledge of the power dynamics among social classes in a given society. For Marx, understanding how groups of people relate to one another clarified the interplay of larger economic and political systems. The Communist Manifesto famously begins, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Marx fervently believed the historical trajectory of a nation could be predicted through knowledge of class relations.

In addition to his theories of historical materialism, Marx believed that communism is the inevitable final stage in the development of human society. To Marx, there are two key traits of any society: the means of production and the mode of production. The means of production refers to the mechanics of how goods are produced, including such developments as the introduction of machinery to make farming more efficient. The mode of production refers to societal structures surrounding the means of production. In feudal systems, the mode of production is that serfs farm while overlords live off of their work. Marx believed that just as feudalism had given way to capitalism, so too would capitalism fall to a Communist revolution led by the proletariat (the working class). In a perfect Communist system, all property is held in common and the notion of private property is abolished. This ideal of communal living was not original to Marx and Engels; Thomas More had described such a system in 1516 in Utopia. What was original to The Communist Manifesto was the emphasis placed on the new industrialized society’s proletariat and the prominence of its members as leaders of the revolution.

In practice, the transition from capitalism to communism proved more complicated than Marx had described in his writings. Marx never fully articulated the necessary governmental steps to transition between these two systems, nor had he suggested a timeline for how quickly change could be expected. He thought heavily industrialized countries like France and England would see proletarian revolutions first, and did not anticipate that Russia would lead the charge. Russia, which liberated its serfs in 1861 and clung to remnants of the feudal system centuries longer than most of Europe, seemed hardly ready for Marx’s great revolution. Indeed, as the October Revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed confirmed, Russia’s transition to communism would not be smooth and inevitable. The number of Communist states peaked in the mid-20th century and has since declined, hastened by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Communist states still exist today in the Democratic People’s Republic of China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam.

*FANNY: I wish he’d brought back a hat. Instead of this...philosopher. RICHARD: Karl Marx.*

—from A True History of the Johnstown Flood
Understanding Serfdom
BY BRAD BRUBAKER

Rebecca Gilman’s *A True History of the Johnstown Flood* features two characters who are immigrants from Lithuania. They come from a tradition of serfdom, a life similar to the male Lithuanian’s work at the steel mill. He describes his current working situation in broken English: “You work. You rent house, from pay, to them ... They own house.” This practice, along with indentured servitude and sharecropping, was not uncommon during the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). Business owners would sometimes construct housing near the factories to rent to workers. As in serfdom, workers would labor for the landowners in order to pay rent. What distinguished serfdom the most from American slavery is that serfs were not owned by lords (landowners), nor could they be sold. Although bound to no man, serfs were legally tied to the land upon which they worked. Therefore, if a landowner sold the property, the serfs stayed with the land, not the lord.

Although situations like these seem unethical, the strictness of old-world serfdom varied depending on which tier of the class system the peasant occupied. In serfdom, those in the lowest category were slaves, possessing the least rights and no land to call their own. Cottagers, who were not considered slaves, possessed no land but received housing in exchange for their work in the fields. Villeins, the next level of serf, could own their own parcel of land on the lord’s property, but legally were not allowed to leave nor sell their property. (The fact that some serfs could own land is the other major distinction of serfdom from slavery.) The highest tier of serfs, freeemen, were actually free and could move about as they pleased. However, these rent-paying tenant farmers still needed jobs working the land to support themselves.

Occasionally a person would come into serfdom by intimidation or force, but most serfs were members of this class because someone in their family history voluntarily chose this life when unable to support their family. (Once a person became a serf, their family and offspring were also bound to the land.) It was possible, however, for serfs to buy their freedom by selling the surplus of crops from their own property. In some cases, landowners actually freed serfs from their contract with the land.

Believe it or not, serfdom was not considered a bad option for the poor. The mentality of the working class was different at that time because there were no labor unions. Voluntarily choosing serfdom, which offered steady employment, shelter and protection from outlaws and famine, seemed preferable to a life without work or, even worse, a life of slavery. Karl Marx would even argue in *Das Kapital* that the end of serfdom had negative effects because it separated “the producer from the means of production,” allowing lords the freedom to hire as they pleased. The Capitalist system made it possible for the wealthy landowners to buy out or simply overpower the newly-freed serfs, eventually leading to a proletariat without property. Others would counter that communism was simply serfdom with the government serving as landowners, owning the labor of its citizens while taxing them.

When serfdom died out in Western Europe after the Renaissance, one of the principle reasons cited was money usage (as opposed to bartering or other forms of exchange). Money allowed laborers to be hired only when they were needed and did not require employers to house or otherwise support employees. Another reason serfdom ended was that, during the Industrial Revolution, industry moved from the country into the cities while offering high wages. As the Lithuanian man in *A True History of the Johnstown Flood* makes clear, a worker’s struggles in the Industrial Revolution are comparable to those experienced with serfdom. In Eastern Europe and beyond, where cities were more spread out, serfdom continued. It was finally abolished in Russia in 1861.
Workers Strike Back!

BY BRAD BRUBAKER

Would you go to work if you were worried you could lose a limb or, even worse, your life? In the Industrial Revolution, dangerous machinery wasn’t the only problem. Wages were low and employees were treated like they were replaceable. Workers wanted better conditions in which to work, but the only way for their voices to be heard was strength in numbers. And so unions began to gain power and become widespread. In time unions championed the worker by using collective bargaining or strikes, if necessary, to negotiate workplace safety, wages, work rules, benefits and other issues.

The origin of trade unions disputably dates as far back as the Middle Ages. At that time, European merchants and crafters formed associations known as guilds, in which members learned the skills of a particular trade from apprentice to master. In the U.S., workers began organizing into unions as early as the 1790s. These unions—consisting of urban workers of such specific trades as carpentry, shoemaking and printing—were usually formed to strike for a single purpose (i.e. seeking better wages) and soon after ended their association. In the 1820s, trade unions of specific crafts began combining to form larger groups of workers from different trades. These unions worked for more than just workers’ rights: They stood for political initiatives like free public education and an end to debt-related imprisonment. All of this was happening even before strikes were considered legal acts instead of criminal conspiracies. But only a small portion of the U.S. population engaged in union activity.

Before the Civil War, trade unionism was not yet prevalent because workers and employers worked more closely with minimized class conflict. It wasn’t until the Industrial Revolution and the rise of factory work that big business exploded rapidly, requiring legions of workers, both skilled and unskilled. In this structure, many business owners were far removed from the work being done by their employees, a separation that resulted in horrible working conditions. In the 1890s, after years of struggle, many unions achieved the recognized standard of an eight-hour workday. Throughout the 20th century, several other successes were attributed to the rise of trade unionism, including the creation of the Department of Labor, minimum wage legislation, paid vacation and sick days, and company-financed insurance and health plans.

Despite their ideals, labor unions had their faults, not least of which was the racism that was commonplace up until the Civil Rights Movement. Some unions would not allow full membership for blacks, which in effect made higher-paying jobs out of reach. This is why the history of the Pullman Porters (detailed in a sidebar on page 23) is so remarkable: Jobs on Pullman Sleeper Cars were among the only high paying jobs available to blacks.

Labor unions continue to be a powerful force today, despite the obvious issue of big business outsourcing labor to other countries where wages are lower. The largest and most powerful union in America, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), formed when the American Federation of Labor, founded in 1886, merged with the Congress of Industrial Organization in 1955. The AFL-CIO reported in 2008 that more than 16 million Americans belong to unions. We can thank the efforts of early union workers during the Industrial Revolution for giving power to the voice of the working class.
The characters in *A True History of the Johnstown Flood* shift between realistic situations and performances on the 19th-century stage. The audience is drawn first to the real-life dangers the characters face, then to the staged conventions of the melodramas they were paid to perform. In this way, Gilman presents us with a wonderful juxtaposition between the melodrama of performance and the melodrama of real life.

Director Robert Falls faces a tough artistic assignment: to accurately present the contrast between modern acting and its traditional roots in 19th-century melodrama without succumbing to popular misconceptions of melodrama. Elaborating on the common structure of a play within a play, this production is a melodrama within a play—or perhaps a play within a melodrama. Either way, melodrama is a complicated and even troublesome term. In popular culture it tends to represent monochromatic themes and moralistic stories. More directly, it tends to imply stagy overacting. But the truth about melodrama is much more complex.

Contemporary impressions of 19th-century acting usually conjure up images of exaggerated movements, two-dimensional caricatures, stilted interpretations and generally corny performances that are meant to be booed or hissed or simply ridiculed for being unsophisticated and quaint. Such impressions are not without some merit, as many performances of the late 19th century were probably exaggerated, stereotyped and stilted caricatures by modern standards. How our theatrical ancestors actually looked and sounded on stage is impossible to decipher before the invention of film and sound recording. But most theater historians acknowledge that what we would have seen in a professional theater before 1900 would be tough for most modern audiences to stomach for more than a few minutes. Even some 19th-century audiences found American acting to be less than satisfactory at times.

In early post-Revolutionary War America, the most popular works were adaptations of Shakespeare (rewritten to conform to contemporary standards of taste and aesthetic) and romantic melodramas from Europe. The majority of the great performers were British, using an acting style that appealed largely to the educated elite. Its urban and urbane appeal struck upper-class audiences as proper and correct, but it also left American audiences as proper and correct, but it also left American theater with an inferiority complex, a sense that British theater was the right and only way to do theater—a cultural remnant that can still be felt today.

Then in the early 19th century, with the rise of sentimental melodrama and the booming of the industrial age, proponents of a distinctly and innately American aesthetic began to argue for “native forms” of literature and performance. Critics like Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman articulated the case for promoting American characters in American stories with American actors. They disdained the effete standards of European art and hailed the natural and honest qualities of the American spirit. With the age of President Jackson and its appeal to more middle-class, if not egalitarian, principles, this spirit finally saw its fruition on the commercial stage.

Distinctly American “types,” which had been evident as supporting characters in earlier works, were now taking
center stage. Audiences reveled in recognizable cultural stereotypes such as the “Jonathan” character—a rural rube with a laconic drawl and an ample amount of horse sense who never failed to get the best of his city betters; or Mose the Bowery B’hoy—an urban street tough with a heart of gold. But along with these benign types came more distinctly oppressive forms including the Noble Savage—a subtly patronizing view of the vanquished by the victors that justified American aggression against native peoples by offering a character that willingly sacrifices himself (and his culture) for the good of the inevitability of westward expansion—or the Jumpin’ Jim Crow caricature that would dominate racial stereotypes well into the 20th century.

American acting was transformed along with the characters. By the 1830s, American stars, naturally attracted to “native” types and perhaps naturally more adept at performing them as well, were now competing head to head with major British stars. Perhaps the most famous of these homegrown stars was Edwin Forrest, a self-taught master of the popular stage who dominated American theater for nearly three decades. His long rivalry with the classically trained English tragedian William Macready led to the infamous Astor Place Riot in 1849, in which Forrest supporters stormed a Macready performance at New York’s Astor Place Opera House, resulting in the state militia killing nearly two dozen protestors. Almost none of the popular performers of the time were particularly successful in England, where tastes were not inclined toward American standards.

During the second half of the 19th century, the popular plays were American moralistic melodramas that reflected the values of the ever-increasing middle-class audience. Among the best-known plays of the era, Uncle Tom’s Cabin became the most produced play on the American stage and remained a standard well into the 20th century.

In the 1860s, American acting shifted to suit the new forms of dramas when performers began to study the new French form of acting created by François Delsarte. The “Delsarte Method” was a studied, meticulously detailed approach to applying the new “scientific thinking” to acting. Through careful observation of everyday behavior, Delsarte devised a system that attempted to teach acting through detailed re-creations of the mechanics of human movement and emotion. As taught and executed on the French stage, Delsarte’s system worked as a means to illustrate the more naturalistic/realistic dramas that were becoming the rage. But the system, as brought over to New York by American students in the late 1860s, lost much in translation. The American version emphasized the superficial over substance; what began as mere guidelines for motivated movement in Paris became strict rules of exaggerated gesture and hammy intentions in New York. While some actors were adept at blending the French version with the American, most were not, and American acting suffered from its poor imitation of a non-American style.

What prompted the American Delsarte method to flourish at the end of the 19th century was the steady increase in audiences. As theater continued to expand in popularity, playhouses expanded as well. Bigger structures were needed to handle both the larger audiences and the new technological innovations necessary to produce the popular spectacular melodramas. Curiously, the exaggerated American version of Delsarte was well suited to the giant stages and auditoriums that emerged by the end of the century. In the biggest commercial houses on Broadway, a larger-than-life acting style worked. And more curiously still, it was an acting style that was even better suited to the latest entertainment technology of silent film. Most Hollywood stars of the early 20th century could trace their theatrical heritage directly back to the Delsarte system.

A True History of the Johnstown Flood illuminates the contrasts between our modern form of realistic acting and the traditional conventions of Delsarte. By juxtaposing the “real” with the “staged,” Gilman and Falls bridge the disparity between realism and melodrama, between what is real and what is theater, between the melodrama of life and the melodrama of the stage. And in doing so, they manage to show that what worked for the audiences of the 19th century really isn’t so different from what works for us today.
A Family Affair: Famous Acting Families of the 19th Century

BY STEVE SCOTT

Just as the Redgraves and the Fondas have contributed several generations of performers to the film and theater worlds, the American acting profession of the 1800s was dominated by families whose fame and artistry were passed on from father to son—and often beyond. Some, like the fictional Baxter family in *A True History of the Johnstown Flood*, worked together for years; others rarely appeared on the same stage. But to 19th-century audiences, their surnames promised excellence and star power. Among the most legendary:

**The Booths**

Emigrating from London to Baltimore in 1821, Junius Brutus Booth (1796-1852) found fame on the American stage with his fiery interpretations of Hamlet and Lear. Three of his sons chose theater careers: Junius, Jr. (1821-1883), an actor and prominent theater manager; John Wilkes (1838-1865), a much-idolized leading man; and the greatest of the family, Edwin (1833-1893), who began his career by touring western mining camps with his father during the gold rush era. The brothers appeared together only once, in an 1864 production of *Julius Caesar*; later that year, Edwin drew raves for his emotionally understated title role in *Hamlet*, which would run for an unprecedented 100 performances. The public outcry against John Wilkes’ 1865 assassination of President Lincoln forced Edwin to leave the stage briefly; within a year, however, he triumphantly reprised his role in *Hamlet*, and was thereafter regarded as the leading actor of his generation. In the late 1800s another Booth added to the clan’s luster: Sydney Barton Booth (1877-1937), who was a modest success onstage and in early films.

**The Drews and The Barrymores**

For generational staying power, few theatrical dynasties can match the Drews and the Barrymores. This glamorous family had a decidedly unglamorous beginning: John Drew (1827-1862), born Drewland, came from an impoverished Irish family that immigrated to Boston, where the young Drew transformed himself into a master of sophisticated stage comedy. In 1848 he married actress Louisa Lane; their three children—Louisa, Georgiana and John, Jr.—all followed their parents into acting, as did an adopted son, Sidney. Sidney and Georgiana achieved significance: Sidney (1863-1919) as the star of a series of early silent film comedies and Georgie (1856-1893) as a celebrated Broadway ingénue. In 1876, she married her British leading man, Maurice Barrymore (1849-1905); although the marriage was tempestuous, it resulted in three children: Lionel (1878-1954), Ethel (1879-1959) and John (1882-1942), all of whom found immense stardom on stage and in the movies. Although they worked together rarely (notably in the 1932 film *Rasputin and the Empress*), their glamorous careers and outsized lives were the stuff of legend, immortalized by Edna Ferber in her play *The Royal Family*. Unfortunately, the next generation of Barrymores was not so lucky: Ethel’s daughter Ethel Barrymore Colt won some notice in musicals (most significantly in Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies* in 1971), but John’s daughter Diana and son John Drew saw their careers cut short by addictions and erratic behavior. The Barrymore legacy lives on, however, in actress, producer and director Drew Barrymore (John Drew Barrymore’s daughter), the fifth generation of the family tree.

**The Jeffersons**

For more than a century the name Joseph Jefferson was synonymous with acting excellence in American theater. The first Joseph came to America in 1795 and soon established himself as a leading character actor at Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Theater. Joseph II followed in his father’s footsteps, finding equal fame as a scenic designer. But it was the clan’s grandson, Joseph III (1829-1905), who became one of the major stars of his era, first as a member of Laura Keene’s acting company (Jefferson was playing in Keene’s production of *Our American Cousin* on the night that President Lincoln was shot), then as Rip Van Winkle, a role he would tour for nearly 40 years, winning audiences with his warmth and gentle humor. (His son Thomas played Rip in several films in the early 1900s.) Today, Jefferson’s name lives on via the Joseph Jefferson Awards, presented in Chicago each year to honor outstanding theater achievements.
In an interview with the Goodman’s Tanya Palmer, playwright Rebecca Gilman discusses her new play A True History of the Johnstown Flood.

Tanya Palmer: What drew you to the story of the Johnstown Flood and inspired you to write this play?

Rebecca Gilman: The Johnstown Flood was a clear example of natural disasters that are in fact man-made. These man-made “natural” disasters are caused when we mess with nature—which is what caused the Johnstown Flood—and by inequity in the class and power structures, which is unfortunately what is currently happening in Haiti. Those who are poorest and living in unstable conditions are the ones who die. The Johnstown Flood was such an obvious example that I actually had trouble writing the play: the millionaires were sitting up in the mountains while all of their workers were killed by a flood that they created. It’s so on-the-nose that it was difficult to figure out how to dramatize the class struggle.

TP: One of the ways that you found to dramatize the Johnstown Flood was through the use of theater—specifically the shift from melodrama in the nineteenth century to naturalism and social realism in the twentieth century. How did the subjects of theater and the flood come together for you?

RG: In his book The Johnstown Flood, David McCullough wrote that the acting company of the famous 19th-century playwright and theatrical manager Augustin Daly was trapped in Johnstown on the night of the flood. The actors were among the few people who kept their heads during the flood. One image that struck me was that the actors were on a stranded train car when the giant wall of water came down the mountain. The women pinned up their skirts and were ready to jump, and they all survived.

I knew that was my entry point into the material, but I still couldn’t quite figure out how it was pertinent. In Hurricane Katrina, I recognized definite parallels with the Johnstown Flood. Katrina was also a “natural disaster” that was in many ways man-made, and again the poorest of the poor were the ones who died and suffered the most.

All of this was swirling around in my brain, and I was thinking that the Johnstown Flood could be a metaphor for Katrina. But how do you write about something so huge? I approached it by writing about how you write about it. I traced how artists respond to disaster, and asked the question: What is the role of art in these situations?

TP: The character of Walter, the wealthy young steel heir who develops a passion for the theater, transitions from helping to create a disaster to capitalizing on it. Could you tell us more about Walter?

RG: Walter is an opportunist—as are all good capitalists. That’s how Andrew Carnegie got to be Andrew Carnegie.
In free-market capitalism, even a major disaster in which thousands of people die is an opportunity. Milton Friedman would say, “Let’s buy up this land. Now that the shantytowns are gone, we can put up factories.”

TP: The character who seems most at odds with this way of thinking is James, the budding young playwright. How would you articulate what James is trying to do throughout the course of the play?

RG: James is trying to create art that tells the truth as he sees it. When you attempt to do this, you are often met with resistance; if you’re not congratulating your audience on their way of life, then you often drive people away. James also has a romantic or idealized notion of what theater can do, which I think many theater people share. We think, “My play will change the world.” I think James believes that to be true.

His first play fails, but he continues to write, and he gets better throughout the play. His work is in complete contrast to the popular entertainment of the day, which he calls the “opiate of the masses.” When his family’s theater company loses its creative and cultural capital to Walter, James is left with nothing, but he keeps writing. He won’t give up, whether or not his plays ever see the stage. He’s stronger at the end of the play than he is at the beginning.

TP: Could you tell us what inspired you to write the plays-within-the-play?

RG: The preposterousness and anarchy of 19th-century plays really appealed to me. They were cinematic, even before cinema was invented. In one play, for instance, a house burns down within the first five minutes, and then the characters are on a train, and then they’re on a boat! They didn’t hesitate to put horses or locomotives onstage, which I think is so freeing and fun. When writing this play, I thought, “I won’t worry about how we get from one place to another. If they didn’t worry about those things in the 19th century, I won’t worry about it either. I’ll just let my imagination go.” I definitely pulled out all the stops on this one.

TP: In many ways this play is quite a departure from your earlier work. Do you see this as a new direction in your writing?

RG: I normally write contemporary plays with naturalistic, idiomatic dialogue, so for this play I have definitely used a much broader canvas. I knew I was writing this one for the Goodman, and I was hoping Bob Falls could direct it because I was directly inspired by the last three plays he has directed. I wrote this play before Desire Under the Elms, so the productions I had in mind were King Lear, Death of Salesman and Long Day’s Journey Into Night. Those three productions stand out as three of the greatest experiences I’ve ever had in the theater, and I think that Bob is moving in a big, bold, super-theatrical direction.

TP: You have a longstanding relationship with the Goodman and with Robert Falls. How has this relationship been important to your work?

RG: I am so lucky to have this relationship. There’s no promise that the Goodman will produce every play I write, but I know the Goodman will seriously consider my work. I also know that Goodman audiences love to be challenged, so I feel free to write what I want to write and that’s amazing. Bob and I have worked together on two previous plays, and we have the same sensibility. We don’t always agree, but we share the same values, and we have so much common in our personal lives and our backgrounds that we have a common language about how we want to make plays. That’s unparalleled.
The New Play’s Journey

BY TANYA PALMER

Identifying, supporting and shepherding new work to the stage is central to Goodman Theatre’s mission. The Goodman has a long track record of launching the careers of some of the nation’s leading playwrights, such as David Mamet, Rebecca Gilman and Regina Taylor. For every playwright who progresses to fame and fortune, however, there are hundreds whose work never makes it to the stage. Just as scientists can toil for years before they hit upon the discovery that will make their reputation, playwrights—and the theaters that produce them—can spend years dedicated to the development and production of new work before a play emerges that strikes a chord with audiences and critics. This is why support for researching and developing new plays is critical. Without the infrastructure to support new work development, the plays that come to define a place, a time, or even a generation—plays like Glengarry Glen Ross, or Marvin’s Room, or more recently Lynn Nottage’s remarkable Ruined—may never come to fruition.

New work development is labor-intensive, circuitous and constantly changing. The process of developing a play is inevitably shaped by the personalities and talents of not only the playwright but also the collaborators and institution that are supporting them. Each director is different, each actor brings a new perspective to a character and each playwright has his or her own way of processing input. The challenge for the theater is to create a structure for the exploration of new plays that is both sturdy enough to withstand pressures from outside and within the institution (financial, critical, time and space limitations, the competition for resources) while remaining flexible enough to respond to each new play and playwright.

While every play’s process is unique, a few recent examples of different development models at the Goodman are instructive on how the process can work. Rebecca Gilman’s Goodman commission A True History of the Johnstown Flood is a play set in the late 19th century that tackles both a devastating historical flood and a critical transformative period in the American theater. To develop a language and style for tackling this epic play, director Robert Falls conceived a workshop around research and exploration of 19th-century theater styles and forms. We invited theater historians and movement specialists to speak to us about acting styles, we explored the lives and times of both the wealthy and working classes of the period and delved into the events surrounding the devastating flood of the play’s title. This approach not only helped Falls and the designers to develop their approach to the production, but it helped illuminate for Gilman the world and characters that she had invented.

Ruined by Lynn Nottage, which ultimately received the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, came to the Goodman as an idea. Lynn Nottage and director Kate Whoriskey
were compelled to share the stories of women surviving horrendous violence in East Africa and approached the Goodman about commissioning a new work. Their initial idea was to create an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage* set in the Congo. But after traveling to Uganda to interview refugees who had fled the war over the border in the Congo—in particular the women who had been brutally raped by soldiers and militiamen—Nottage found that the play took a direction all its own. Nottage completed the first act a year later, having made a second trip to Africa to continue her research. The Goodman hosted a four-day workshop with Chicago-based actors and Kate Whoriskey at the helm to allow Nottage to hear what she had written and begin to chart a course for the second act. After Nottage had completed a full draft several months later, the Goodman featured *Ruined* in the annual New Stages Series, a public reading festival that allows us to share the work under consideration with our Subscribers and audiences interested in new work. Following New Stages, the play continued to grow and change: Nottage cut a character and transformed the ending. The Goodman committed to produce *Ruined* in the following season, and the play went into rehearsal in a co-production with New York’s Manhattan Theatre Club the following summer. Then the real work began.

With *The Long Red Road*, by Brett C. Leonard, the Goodman’s involvement began at a much later phase in the evolution of the play, which was developed initially through New York’s LAByrinth Theatre Company, a multicultural company devoted to new work that was run until recently by actor/director Philip Seymour Hoffman and actor John Ortiz. The play had received two development workshops with LAByrinth under Hoffman’s direction prior to finding its way to the Goodman via Collaboration Artistic Director Anthony Moseley, who had directed a successful production of Leonard’s play *Guinea Pig Solo* in 2005. Impressed by the emotional honesty and stark beauty of *The Long Red Road*, Goodman Artistic Director Robert Falls programmed the play into New Stages and established a relationship with Leonard, who was new to the Goodman. The reading, directed by Chicago-based director Dexter Bullard, confirmed Falls’ expectations, and *The Long Red Road* was programmed into the following season.

Like *Ruined*, some plays come to us as ideas. Others, like *The Long Red Road*, come to us more fully realized. Either way, plays benefit from the process of working with actors and directors at an early stage to help shape and build the story. *A True History of the Johnstown Flood, Ruined* and *The Long Red Road* took several years to move from the initial concept to opening night. With all three, the conversations between playwright and producing theater, between collaborators, between theater and audience, were crucial to shaping the journey from the playwright’s vision to a living, breathing play that audiences come to see and celebrate on stage.
A Conversation with Walt Spangler

You know Walt Spangler from his arresting set design for last season’s critically acclaimed production of Desire Under the Elms, directed by Robert Falls. Now Spangler and Falls team up again for A True History of the Johnstown Flood. The Goodman’s Lara Ehrlich recently talked with Spangler about his set design for this stunning epic by Rebecca Gilman.

Lara Ehrlich: You worked with Robert Falls and Rebecca Gilman on Blue Surge at the Goodman in 2002. What excites you about Gilman’s work in general and A True History of the Johnstown Flood in particular?

Walt Spangler: Both Blue Surge and Johnstown are about gritty, real people in intense life situations. I love Rebecca’s knack for getting to the raw truth in relationships between people. She inspires you to carefully observe the world and create a visceral environment for the characters. For Johnstown, the environment is at first idyllic and lush like a paradise, and then becomes wet, dangerous and cruel.

LE: You have worked with Robert Falls before, most recently on Desire Under the Elms. Could you talk a little bit about your collaborative process?

WS: The best part about working with Bob is that I can show him anything, so I feel pretty fearless when I start to work up a model for him. If he likes it, I know right away. If he doesn’t, he tells me why, and we move on to a better idea. Bob not only responds to what he sees in the model, but also immediately knows how to use what I give him. I like to be very hands-on with lots of hot glue nearby so we can work fast, because I think the best, most exciting ideas come that way.

LE: A True History of the Johnstown Flood contains some wildly inventive stage directions. Is there one scene that is especially challenging to design?

WS: My favorite scene is one where an entire 19th-century train car is swept up by the flood and dropped down, upended on a muddy bank of sludge and debris.

LE: There is a scene at the end of the play in which the stage is flooded by: a huge ball of water and debris...in it are recognizable objects: a ladder, a cow, a spinning wheel...the wave crests and a sea of water fills the stage. How will you stage this?

WS: Come and see!

LE: Where did you draw your inspiration for the set design?

WS: For inspiration, I collected photos and drawings of actual flood sites, including the aftermath in 1880s Johnstown. I want to reflect the grit of Rebecca’s writing and Bob’s directing in the playing space, so that the audience not only sees the world, but feels it in their gut.

LE: There are multiple plays within this play. Could you talk a little bit about how you are approaching the theatricality of this production?
WS: Rebecca sets up a wonderful device for scenic invention with three plays within the play performed by a 19th-century traveling theater troupe who enacts scenes like burning down a Mexican hacienda. We researched how theater artists staged those scenes in the 1800s, when fires and floods were all the rage for stage shows. They didn’t have television and movies back then, so a lot of effort went into making elaborate stage spectacles with a variety of special effects.


WS: We have followed Rebecca’s stage directions as closely as possible. Whenever I work on a new play where the author has provided specific descriptions of the set, I try to take it in and make it my own, because there is usually some wisdom to be gleaned about the overall story they want to tell from the visual details they describe in the script.

LE: This epic play calls for a set that is monumental in its size and scope. How have you had to get creative to manage this potentially vast design?

WS: We have indeed had to be creative to get all those looks on stage! Luckily this play celebrates theater techniques and imagination from all the way back to the 1800s, so for example, putting an entire 1800s train car onstage can be done theatrically instead of literally. We’re going all out on this show to give the audience a lot to look at in ways that will hopefully surprise and delight them—to me that is a big part of why the audience comes to see live shows.

LE: There is obviously a lot of water in this play, and we are all waiting to see how you plan to enact a flood onstage. Can you give us any hints?

WS: Nope. Can’t give it all away!

LE: What do you hope the audience will take away from seeing this production?

WS: I hope the audience will be moved by the story and wowed by the looks. I hope they will feel the rain and the chill of the flood, and that this visceral experience will draw them into Rebecca’s very personal account of real people in the midst of tragedy—a timely topic in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and now the devastated Haiti.
Reading Your Ticket

As a patron of the theatre, it is important to know how to read your ticket and find your seat. Generally, seats for all performances in the Goodman’s Albert Theatre are assigned seating, so be sure to know how to be able to find your seat. When you come with your school, you will be ushered to a section where you and your fellow students can sit and enjoy the play together.

Below is a seating chart – a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater – and an explanation of how to read your ticket. If you have any problems, ask an usher for help. They’re here for you!
Writing Your Response Letter

After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it’s time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with *A True History of the Johnstown Flood* whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer, the playwright or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your experience at the show and your feedback about his or her work. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we’ll forward it on to that artist!

Important information to include:

- Your name, age and school
- Your mailing address (where a response may be sent)

Including these things will make it easier for our artists to respond!

Send your letters to:

**Education and Community Engagement**

**Goodman Theatre**

**170 North Dearborn Street**

**Chicago, IL 60601**

Here are two great student letters we received in response to *Animal Crackers* this season:

**Dear Cast and Crew,**

I would have to say that every single one of you have done a superb job in this play. All the effort you have put forth into this play has resulted in a memorable experience for all of us. I thought it was clever that the actors, actresses and the orchestra interacted with the audience. From viewing the original film of *Animal Crackers*, I think the cast played in the play and the original cast of *Animal Crackers* very similar! This play might have been the first encounter of the Marx brothers for many teenagers and children and I believe that the crew and cast of *Animal Crackers* proved that early comedy can also be entertaining and memorable!

The director’s vision of the play was a rather conscious one. Exposing the Marx brothers to the vast majority of people who never knew about them and bringing back nostalgic memories to the older audience was a great idea. This play was actually my first play and a first trip to Goodman Theatre. I myself, as a young adult, finally realized that plays are enjoyable and gratifying. The play had all the elements of emotion and slapstick comedy which made it a great one. The technical aspects as well as the props were amazingly set to follow each scene. My favorite scene had to be the scene where Harpo and Rivelli tried to clear up the misunderstanding of “The Flash.” I though the script was very flowing and comfortable. Was there any improv involved? I did not find any negative aspects of this play. I have found the play and the ambiance of Goodman Theatre very positive. I give *Animal Crackers* two thumbs up.

Sincerely,

A CPS student

**Dear Molly Brennan,**

Congratulations on your performance! Although it wasn’t my first visit to Goodman Theatre, I can honestly say that your character was the most memorable.

During most of the play, we saw you performing as the professor. Not only was the professor a funny character, but the professor was also a male part! I’ve never seen a woman play a male’s part, but in *Animal Crackers*, it was the best one. The professor’s attitude toward Mara, Ora, Jessica, Joey, Tony, Jonathan and Stanley was unforgettable since his leg constantly flew up over them. It was nice seeing a woman from Chicago prosper in a character like this because it truly inspired me to be one of Chicago’s best.

Although the Professor’s character didn’t speak a single word, we all knew what he was saying thanks to your great acting abilities. It was also interesting to see all the stunts the Professor pulled. I was also amazed at how fast you were able to change costumes and appear on stage as a completely different person.

Thank you for your time Molly. I hope your acting career goes sky high. I can’t wait to see you in more plays!

Sincerely,

A student from Chicago Discovery Academy