

New Orleans Saints And Sinners



Behind The Scenes of HBO's "Treme"



April 5, 2010

By JOE RHODES

The scene, if it were taking place anywhere else in America, would seem contrived: a down-and-out trombone player in a hospital waiting room, frustrated that no one will tend to his busted lip, starts singing a song to himself, conjuring up alternative lyrics to "St. James Infirmary" and t, eventually, half the people in the room start to play along, thumping their crutches, bobbing their bandaged heads, tapping out rhythms on purple plastic chairs. In most places, this would never happen. In New Orleans, it definitely could.

"If I die, I want ya'll to bury me, with my mouthpiece and my trombone," Wendell Pierce, who played Detective Bunk Moreland on "The Wire," is singing, remarkably full-throated for a cold Monday morning. "I have roamed this whole world over, but New Orleans is still my home."

Those lyrics and that scene, a moment of tedium transformed into something wonderfully strange, tell you a lot about "Treme" the new HBO series about post-Katrina New Orleans, from executive producer David Simon, the creative force behind "The Wire" and "Generation Kill." "Treme," like "The Wire," tells the slowly unfolding stories of people in an overlooked part of urban America, a city that even before the storm, was often dismissed as cultural oddity, a cauldron of decadence and corruption and pleasures of the flesh in the heart of the Bible-belt South.

But, unlike most films and tv shows set in New Orleans, “Treme” isn’t about Bourbon Street or voodoo queens. It’s not really a show about Hurricane Katrina either. It’s about the people and the culture that survived.

“Unfortunately, we are in a very unique place, an American city destroyed in my lifetime,” says Pierce, a native New Orleanian whose childhood neighborhood, Ponchartrain Park, suffered greatly in the storm. In “Treme,” named for the New Orleans neighborhood where jazz was invented, one of the oldest African-American communities in America, Pierce plays Antoine Batiste, a brass band musician trying to rebuild his life as the city rebuilds itself.

“Unless you’ve gone through it, a lot of people don’t understand that the psychological impact of just getting back to that place you call home is the difference between life and death for some people,” Pierce says. “And I think that’s the most important part of the human spirit that you see in this show: People’s need to restore that which makes you whole.”

Simon, a frequent visitor to New Orleans, had been contemplating a series about the city for years, but it wasn’t until the post-Katrina images of New Orleans in 2005 -- the thousands of people stranded in their homes, screaming for help from the Superdome, a whole city drowning and left to fend

for itself – that he had the narrative hook to pull it together and get HBO on board.

Along with playwright and former “Wire” writer Eric Overmyer, who’s owned a home in New Orleans for more than 20 years, Simon pieced together the stories and characters that would reflect a place he’d come to adore. In addition to Pierce’s brass band player, there would be a Mardi Gras Indian (played by The Wire’s Clark Peters), a chef struggling to keep her restaurant afloat (Kim Dickens), a bar owner (Khandi Alexander), a deejay (Steve Zahn), a civil rights attorney (Melissa Leo) and her college professor husband (John Goodman) . As he did with “The Wire”, Simon has also peppered the cast with non-actors, New Orleanians – including musicians Kermit Ruffins and Trombone Shorty – essentially playing versions of themselves.

“It’s a story about culture and that’s something we didn’t deal with in “The Wire,” Simon says, acknowledging that, stylistically, “Treme” shares some traits with his most critically-acclaimed creation, an emphasis on novelistic storytelling, an obsession with authenticity, a willingness to tell stories without easy endings.

“To see culture for what it’s actually worth in American life is something we really wanted to address,” he says. “New Orleans is responsible for some of the most

fundamentally American culture we've ever created. I'm not sure it's America without New Orleans. But I don't think America knows that."

So "Treme" is Simon's attempt to show why New Orleans matters, what we would be losing if we let it slip away. Not that he makes it easy to absorb. "Treme" is dense with local references and linguistic eccentricities, characters talking about "masking" at Mardi Gras and eating Hubig's pies. If you don't know what a "second line" or a "sazerac" is, he's not going to spell it out for you. He assumes if you're willing to stay with the show, then you'll figure it out for yourself.

"All of the shows that I've done – "The Wire," "The Corner" "Generation Kill" – are travelogues of a kind. There are lines of dialogue in all those shows that are understandable only to the people living the event," he says, "But that's the way people experience real life. If you're the newcomer, you don't know everything right away.

"If you understand enough of the context, and we always make sure you can, then you will learn something. That's part of the process of watching these shows. It's sort of the grownup way to do it. But, of course, television has not been a particularly grown up medium for most of its life."

"I never think about whether a show can be marketed," he says, asked if "Treme" might be too New

Orleans-specific to attract a wider audience. "It sounds crazy and at some point they're gonna kick me out of television, because you're supposed to think about these things. But I just don't care."

What he – and the "Treme" cast members – do care about is how the show will play in New Orleans, a city whose residents have been disdainful of most "Hollywood" attempts at portraying them. Say "K-ville" and they will bust out laughing.

"I've never done a gig where I felt so responsible to a community," says Steve Zahn, who admits he'd never even heard of Professor Longhair before arriving in New Orleans, but has since become fascinated and protective of the city and all its quirks. "Everybody here is so proud of their traditions. I mean, it's crazy. The music here, people clap on a certain beat. You go to a second line parade, 300 people walking and drinking and then everybody jumps at the same time and says the same thing and I'm like, What is that? I wanna get all of that. I want to absorb as much as possible."

"New Orleans, in its own weird way, is a factory town," Simon says, trying to explain why he believes the city and its cultures have endured

"What they make here is moments. They makes these incredible moments that you will not see anywhere else and they do it on a routine basis. They do it with every

weekend parade, every time somebody picks up a horn in a club and starts playing something new or servers you a tour de force of shrimp and grits. The workers are incredibly underpaid and they live with a startling degree of frustration, yet the factory is as vibrant as ever.

“Five years after the storm and no one is conceding any aspect of this culture to time. They’re just refusing, parade by parade, Jazzfest by Jazzfest, Mardi Gras by Mardi Gras.”

©2010 joebo productions.