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TSU’s Thomas Meloncon Writes New Play “The Man Who Saved New Orleans"

Texas Southern University Instructor Thomas Meloncon has been traveling to Lutcher, La., a town just outside of New Orleans that is the home of his wife's family. On forays into the city, he developed a kinship with the people and culture of this most colorful of American cities.

"I love New Orleans and how it ticks," Meloncon said. "When Katrina happened, I was compelled to put my signature on what happened."

Meloncon's ideas about the city and Hurricane Katrina coalesced into the 2009 play "The Man Who Saved New Orleans," which follows the struggle and recovery of one family forced to relocate to Houston. The drama is making its Chicago debut at eta Theatre under the direction of Artisia V. Green.

The story revolves around feisty Arthur Prejean (Foster Williams), an 85-year-old blind man who, along with his family, finds himself uprooted by the storm. His 17-year-old grandson, Johnny Boy (Randle Michael), is struggling with the loss and heading for a breakdown. And his younger sister Hattie (Chloe Johnson) is suffering from a form of aphasia brought on by the trauma.

The spark for the play began for Meloncon, a professor of theater at Texas Southern University, when he and his wife picked up members of her family at Houston's Astrodome after they were forced from their homes.

"The night we picked them up I saw up close the desperation of thousands of people," Meloncon said.

Meloncon, who has written many plays, including "The Diary of a Black Man," didn't want to concentrate solely on the effects of the hurricane. He also wanted to approach the culture and history of New Orleans and give a better understanding of the people whose families have lived there for generations.

"When I heard the people referred to as 'refugees,' I wanted to sit down and write," Meloncon said. "That word took away their sense of history and pride. It wasn't just a matter of leaving a home but also leaving a long-held legacy and memories behind."

Texas Southern University was founded in 1926 and became a state institution in 1947. Texas Southern possesses an impressive array of undergraduate and graduate programs, a diverse faculty, more than 80 student organizations, and an alumni network comprised of educators, entrepreneurs, public servants, lawyers, pilots, artists, and more, many of whom are
change agents on the local, national and international stage. Nestled upon a sprawling 150-acre campus, Texas Southern has served as a cornerstone for developing the greatest potential in leaders from various socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. Texas Southern is located in the heart of the city, giving its students and faculty easy access to the Museum District, neighboring educational institutions, the Texas Medical Center, downtown Houston, two major airports and all of the city’s major freeways. More than 9,487 students, along with nearly 1,500 faculty and staff comprise the University’s community making it one of the nation’s largest Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s). For more information, visit www.tsu.edu.