

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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This Race Was All About Race in Surprising Forms, Film Shows

By LAUREN LOWENTHAL

Five years ago, on August 29, 2005, America watched in horror and frustration as New Orleans drowned. Images of suffering and loss remain in our collective psyches today, but many of the sensational events that took place during the rebuilding process were not adequately sensationalist to dominate the media. Filmmaker Katherine Cecil's new documentary, *Race*, however, follows the key players and expert commentators in the race for mayor of New Orleans only seven months after Katrina. Screening today at 6 p.m. at the Katharine Cornell Theatre in Vineyard Haven, it captures the racial contradictions, high-stakes animosity, and Louisiana-style politics with near-impossible objectivity.



Post-Katrina, candidates face off for mayor of New Orleans.

The title is clearly meant as a double-entendre.

When Katrina hit, Ray Nagin was mayor. An African American, he had been uninvolved in civic affairs when prominent, white, businessmen plucked him from his PR job at Cox Communications to run as their candidate. Rather than allying themselves with one of the more qualified African American candidates, they had backed the man who promised he'd run the city like a business. Of course he had never run a business of any significant scale, but what's the worst that could happen?

Hurricane Katrina happened, tearing people from their homes, their families, their friends and their jobs, and destroying entire communities that had lived together for generations. Many of those without transportation or resources were given one-way tickets out of town. They, along with thousands of New

Orleanians exiled across the country, were desperate to return home, but with no home to return to.

Mayor Nagin appeared frozen in denial and self-interest, utterly without any plan for rebuilding the city and bringing its people home.

So, determined to get things moving, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, a group of powerful business leaders, put together a plan for their vision of a new New Orleans, one that seemed decidedly “whiter” than before — and initially Mayor Nagin endorsed it. The battle was on, and race was the battlefield.

The Green Space Plan would have prohibited building permits in the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly and New Orleans East, all of which were predominantly African American neighborhoods. Many wise voices objected to rebuilding in swampland; however the racial agenda of the Green Space Plan was hard to avoid, as predominantly white, more affluent Lakeview, which also had been devastated by Katrina, was to be given building permits to rebuild. The plan envisioned a safer city, with fewer poor people. Fewer black people. By eliminating these majority black neighborhoods, a white voting majority could be re-established.

Sadly, the Green Space Plan to re-engineer the racial composition of the city, and the emotionally charged issue of the so-called right to return to New Orleans reduced a high-stakes election that should have addressed matters of substance into an Us versus Them power struggle, based entirely on race.

Ms. Cecil’s film takes viewers through the runoff campaign between Mayor Nagin and Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu. Mr. Landrieu is the son of white, former mayor Moon Landrieu, famous for being the first to allow blacks to work in City Hall, for which he is still reviled by some voters. So, here’s the race: a white liberal from a family famous for their civil rights activism and a black conservative incumbent who has endorsed the plan that would prevent majority black neighborhoods from being rebuilt. You might imagine that with all the problems facing New Orleans at that time, the issues would take precedence over a numbers game of racial majorities. You would be wrong. Of course, the people desperate for the right to return just wanted to go home. With so many registered New Orleanian voters, primarily black, displaced across the country, the right to vote in the election was battled in courtrooms and in the street.

And then the moment came that changed everything; Mayor Nagin got game. Invoking the title of Parliament Funkadelic’s 1975 album, he declared that New Orleans “will always be Chocolate City.” Boom! That infamous outburst struck a chord with black voters who would never have voted for Nagin in the past. National news networks showed up to cover the mayoral campaign, and, as Hunter S. Thompson might say, things got weirder and uglier.

Ms. Cecil packs all this and much more into her energetic, 58-minute film, a film that enjoys the great distinction of annoying huge numbers of people of every race and political persuasion. Her excruciating effort to be fair to all sides allows viewers to draw their own conclusions. There is no suggestion of irony or righteous indignation; the characters speak for themselves, and so does the film.

Ms. Cecil grew up in Dorset, in beautiful southwest England, in a family that loves politics, travel and the arts. After studying in France, she spent a very educational year working behind the bar at the Chelsea Arts Club, went to art school and then got a degree in English literature, during which she fell in love with American writing. Two musically inclined uncles took her in hand, educated her in the music of New Orleans, and allowed her to sing in their jazz band for a couple years. After working for the political editor of a British news magazine she crossed the Atlantic to do a master's degree at Tulane University. That was nine years ago, and New Orleans is still her home.

Politics, music and literature were a natural progression to documentary films. Ms. Cecil had worked on several local documentaries, and had almost completed a master's degree in communications at the University of New Orleans when Katrina hit. Then this white foreigner, a committed student of African American history, music and politics, drove out of town, down deserted Magazine Street as the city filled with water following the failure of the federal levees.

But Ms. Cecil came back to the city that is her home, and her mission. Walking through the French Quarter or Faubourg Marigny, she seems to know almost everyone of every race and permutation with waves and hugs from musicians, artists, filmmakers, social leaders, business people and political activists from every corner of the spectrum. Aside from a few telltale signs of Britishness — a deep obsession with her dogs, hand-rolled cigarettes as an economy and a self-effacing hesitation to promote herself — Cecil has gone native to the bone. If you want the most thorough advice on local music, or a translation of the myriad political controversies and feuds, she's the one to ask.

Making a film is an expensive, punishing labor of love, and *Race* was no exception. "Being of independent mind and without serious funding, it became extremely important for me to capture my own footage and not depend on large, intrusive crews for which I didn't have the budget anyway," Ms. Cecil explained. "After working on several hurricane related programs, and for *Now* on PBS in New York, I returned home to my house and dogs in New Orleans, and — without much of a plan — found myself shooting the most extraordinary event unfolding here at the time, a highly racialized election post-disaster in which most of the New Orleans population remained displaced."

Ms. Cecil's attempt at impartiality succeeded so well that it has earned the fury and admiration of blacks and whites from across the political, economic and

cultural spectrum. Ms. Cecil responds, “The cities that are thriving in the New South embrace and discuss their complex racial history without fear. Until New Orleans gets comfortable talking – and listening – about the sources of mutual racial distrust, it will not get past it. I think the term postracial is dangerous because it implies we’ve gotten past race, when we haven’t.”

I spent the better part of the past year living and working in New Orleans, and falling in love with the music, the people, the architecture, the culture and their unique ways of day-to-day life. As an outsider, I was open to every point of view from a city of highly opinionated people. A near universal aspect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder permeating the collective psyche, revealing itself in odd, unpredictable ways. Many highly intelligent, insightful people become angry and emotional when the subject of Katrina is raised, using their personal experience as the standard by which they judge. So it is no surprise that such a controversial film should come from an “outsider,” one who is now working on a project about education, which is one of the most dire, convoluted problems in Orleans Parish.

Although everyone in *Race* seemed genuine and well-meaning in their way, watching the film felt more like a well-paced journey through perplexed, head-shaking disbelief, with moments of tragedy, deep humanity and dark humor. Despite the many challenges being overcome, New Orleans remains one of the most beautiful, culturally celebrated and historically authentic cities in the world. What a wasted opportunity that the 2005 race for mayor was all about race.

Race screens today at 6 p.m. at Katharine Cornell Theatre in Vineyard Haven. Ms. Cecil will attend.