Peter van Agtmael/Magnum, for The New York Times

MAKING A SCENE From left, two executive producers of "Treme," Nina K. Noble and David Simon, with two stand-ins, Sam Davenport and Raion Hill. More Photos »

By WYATT MASON

Published: March 15, 2010

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY

March 15, 2010

The HBO Auteur

By WYATT MASON

It was a bright, warm, blue-skied December afternoon in Central City, New Orleans, and in this neighborhood of humble shotgun houses and overgrown empty lots, a convoy of white trucks and trailers idled incongruously while unmarked police cars blocked intersections nearby. On any other morning, a police presence would have meant more bad news: in a city that has one of the highest homicide rates in the United States, this neighborhood — roughly a mile from the French Quarter — has a murder rate that, in recent years, has hit quadruple that of the city as a whole. This morning, however, the 20 drivers, as well as 80 other crew members who hefted and humped a boggling array of gear at the tumbledown corner of Second Street and South Liberty, had anything but murder in mind: they were six hours into a day of filming the third episode of “Treme,” David Simon’s new HBO drama — co-created by the seasoned television writer and producer Eric Overmyer — which is set in post-Katrina New Orleans and will make its debut on April 11. The production was only two scenes into the six on the call sheet; at that pace, they were looking at a 15-hour marathon — yet another in the 11-day ultramarathon that shooting an hour of episodic television on location can demand. As the novelist George Pelecanos, a staff writer on “Treme,” told me of the years he spent on set as a writer-producer on “The Wire,” Simon’s breakthrough series: “If you got out with a 12-hour day, that was the luckiest day of the series. Try doing that for seven months straight. Only young people can do it. You don’t see many people in their 50s carrying around lights.”

Though they weren’t carrying around lights, two men of nearly 50 were on set, carrying on a conversation on a sunny street corner. One was David Mills, the writer credited with this episode and also a producer on “Treme.” Big and tall with a boyish face, Mills worked on “ER” and “NYPD Blue” but won his two Emmy Awards for adapting his old friend David Simon’s nonfiction book “The Corner,” written with Edward Burns, into the miniseries of the same name for HBO. “I’m a fan of TV,” Mills told me. “I can even watch an episode of ‘Hawaii Five-0’ and appreciate the way it’s constructed to satisfy you. People used to think, It’s HBO; you get to curse; it’s gotta be better. But I wrote for The Washington Post. Just because there are certain words you can’t use in The Post that, say, you can in The Village Voice, does not mean that the writing in The Village Voice is necessarily better than The Post. The liberty you have with HBO has nothing to do with the quality of storytelling. You have to earn it.”

On the sunny corner with Mills stood Simon, a bald, big-featured, unprepossessing man who looks more like hired muscle going gently to pot than the most critically acclaimed writer-producer working in television today. The two had just been across the street in a corner house that serves as the location for Poke's, a bar central to "Treme." Behind the building's flagrantly drooping corrugated-iron awning, inside the gutted space appointed with a bar and not much else, stood Simon and Mills, watching the director of the episode — the imposing, dreadlocked Ernest Dickerson, a veteran of "The Wire" and cinematographer of such Spike Lee hits as "Do the Right Thing" — as he rehearsed the two actors in the next scene. Though brief, the scene reads powerfully on the page. A young man who left New Orleans immediately before Katrina has just come back for the first time and has gone to the Lower Ninth Ward (the area hardest hit by the levee breaches) to see the home in which his father, now missing, chose to ride out the storm. The young man goes to Poke's to find an old friend of his father's, an independent contractor, explicitly to ask for advice about what can be done with the family home but implicitly in the hope that the man might have some word on his father's fate. In the script, it's clear that much more than a house is at stake: a pause falls in the middle of the scene, the gravity of the conversation allowed to settle in and then abate slightly, the men turning with some effort to other, easier topics. In rehearsal, despite a number of different blockings and Dickerson's quiet talks with the actors about the scene, the moment wasn't coming to life. With the scene minutes away from being shot, Mills and Simon needed to find a fix.

"Wasn't there a sentence in there somewhere that we don't have now," Simon asked Mills outside, "where he says — and this is a terrible sentence, but — 'I went over to the house, and I was hoping there would be a message there or something'? I feel there's an emotional bump between him talking about his father, which is real substantive stuff, to a moment of what sounds like, by comparison, almost petty practicality about, What I'm going to do with Dad's house? It goes from one to the other and there's no. . . ."

"There's no transition," Mills said, looking down at his script, shaking his head.

"Maybe," Simon riffed, "his father wrote in spray paint: 'I'm at so-and-so's house. Call me.' Maybe there's a. . . ."

"And he needs to say that literally?" Mills said.

"No, that would be a terrible line." Simon paused, regrouping. " 'I came back when they opened up the Lower Nine, hoping to find out what's up with Dad.' I agree that exposition here is more of a problem than a solution. But is there something that basically says: 'I came home trying to answer this riddle. I came back hoping Dad might've left word.' "

"Hold on," Mills said, writing, repeating the words softly aloud and then saying to Simon, "The thing I'm still resisting is him literally saying something about his dad there." Mills wrote a little more, paused, read aloud: " 'Came back now that they lettin' people in the Lower Nine to check.

The house is messed up bad.' "

"That's it, that's it," Simon said, enthusiastic. "'Cause this can *imply* the father. . . ."

Mills nodded. "It's better than what it is now." Mills headed off to give Dickerson and the actors the changes.

I asked Simon how often they resort to 11th-hour rewrites.

"It's not an uncommon thing," he said. "The script is just the script. I can't walk around and show you" — Simon held up his script — "this was a good show we were going to make. You should read all the scripts, because it would have been great." Simon added later: "If the material itself proves to be ordinary and ineffectual at conveying what we want to convey, I don't care how you shoot it. I don't want to watch it, and I don't want to be a part of it. Either we have something to say or we don't."

THE STORY LINES IN "Treme" begin three months after Katrina, and they follow a diverse group of characters as they rebuild their lives in a city torn apart, a city in which tens of thousands of houses are abandoned, in which only 50 percent of the population remains, in which neighborhoods are still without power. The main characters in "Treme" aren't the overburdened cops, spiraling addicts, ruthless dealers, struggling dockworkers, corrupt politicians or compromised journalists of "The Wire." In their place, for the most part, are musicians, as the show's title sneakily suggests: "Treme" (pronounced trih-MAY) is the New Orleans neighborhood where jazz was born. And even though it adjoins the French Quarter, few tourists visit Treme, where generations of the city's musicians have lived.

As much as crime of every kind was central to "The Wire," music is the focus of "Treme." New Orleans-born and Juilliard-trained Wendell Pierce (William "Bunk" Moreland in "The Wire") plays a trombone player looking for any gig he can get; Steve Zahn plays a feckless singer-songwriter with an allergy to paying work. As in "The Wire," many nonactors, in this case professional musicians, have been cast in "Treme" in leading roles: the violinist Lucia Micarelli plays a street musician; a charismatic local trumpeter, Kermit Ruffins, plays himself; and dozens of other musicians — from Dr. John to Elvis Costello — appear in smaller parts. The cast is different from "The Wire," however, because a number of more famous actors are part of "Treme." John Goodman plays an English professor-novelist enraged by federal and municipal post-Katrina intransigence; the Academy Award-nominee Melissa Leo is a civil rights attorney with a soft spot for starving artists; and Clarke Peters, the distinguished stage and screen actor memorable in "The Wire" as the miniature-furniture-making detective Lester Freamon, plays an independent contractor and a Mardi Gras Indian chief.

Given the role in which Simon himself has lately been cast by critics and viewers, expectations for "Treme" couldn't be higher. By the time "The Wire" reached the end of its run, commentators went

from posing the coy question, “Is ‘The Wire’ the best show on television?” to making the bold statement, “ ‘The Wire’ is the best show on television”— boldness that soon seemed spineless once seemingly everyone defaulted to calling it simply, “The best show in television history.” In the two years since “The Wire” concluded, a pitched battle of ongoing praise has upped the comparative ante. If likening Simon repeatedly to Dickens and Dreiser, Balzac and Tolstoy and Shakespeare hasn’t proved adequately exalting, Bill Moyers lately freshened things up by calling Simon “our Edward Gibbon,” while the literary critic Walter Benn Michaels went so far as to suggest that the beauty and difficulty of watching “The Wire” in English — the multifarious 21st-century English of Baltimore detectives and drug dealers — compares with that of reading Dante in 14th-century Italian. It should go without saying that Duke; the University of California, Berkeley; and, next term, Harvard, are offering courses on the series, seminars focused not merely on the sophistication of its storytelling but also on its sociological and political perspicacity.

NONE OF THIS external praise, however suggestive of the merits of “The Wire” it surely is, would have been possible were it not for the unusual internal support the show received from HBO. Its ratings were always in the modest-to-poor range, low enough that it would have barely broken the Top 200 on broadcast television and by all conceivable measures would have been canceled before its first season was finished, but at the center of the show’s fervent core audience were many of HBO’s top people. Chris Albrecht, the longtime chairman of HBO who stepped down in 2007, and Carolyn Strauss, president of HBO Entertainment at the time who now runs her own production company, greenlighted “The Wire.” (Simon calls them “my patrons at the network.”) Although HBO functions under a subscription model and is less ratings-sensitive than networks dependent on advertisers, HBO does depend on revenue from foreign sales to 150 countries. As one HBO executive told me, “Shows that feature African-Americans don’t sell foreign.” After Simon’s second season of “The Wire,” which shifted the show’s focus from the drug trade to the Baltimore docks, the cast grew whiter because there are more white dockworkers in Baltimore than white drug dealers. Modestly but not negligibly, ratings for that season rose. Albrecht hoped that the show might be catching on. Simon disabused Albrecht of the idea: the third season of the show, he promised, would shift back to the streets to close out the story line of a drug crew featured in the first season. Simon says Albrecht just laughed, telling Simon: “You know, every now and then you could at least secretly admit to yourself that it’s TV. I know we say: ‘It’s not TV. It’s HBO.’ But sometimes, it’s got to be TV.”

Even so, Simon’s strategy for keeping his show going wasn’t to make such admissions. The show’s endurance ultimately had a very uncomplicated bottom line: Albrecht and Strauss wanted to see the end of the story Simon was telling, in large measure because, according to Albrecht, he was uncommonly persuasive. “He writes amazing letters when he’s trying to get you to come around to his point of view,” Albrecht told me. “Sometimes very angry, sometimes very cajoling, always brilliantly written and conceived.” When a big one arrived, Albrecht and Strauss knew to brace themselves. “I remember one time when Carolyn came downstairs with one of David’s letters in

hand. She asked, 'Did you open it yet?' " Albrecht said, laughing. "I said, 'Nope.' " By the time Albrecht and Strauss left HBO, Simon had been given a chance to complete "The Wire." Under the pair's tenure but owing to Simon's industry, the culture at HBO had come to see itself in Simon, this when "The Sopranos" was pulling in about five times as many viewers.

Over the years, in scores of interviews, Simon has consistently made the point that "The Wire" was a show with an editorial agenda, a polemic about "the America that got left behind." As such, a potential viewer could be forgiven for leaping to some reflexive conclusions about why Simon might have chosen New Orleans as the setting for "Treme." Like Baltimore, New Orleans is an urban center with enormous economic disparity, violent crime, municipal corruption, infrastructural decay and racial polarization. Combine those increasingly routine urban shortfalls with the aftermath of a hurricane that revealed every kind of engineering failure, and the city would seem to give Simon an even more haunted urban theater where he can play out the theme upon which he has regularly soapboxed: "the decline of the American empire."

" 'Treme' is not 'The Wire,' " the show's co-creator, Eric Overmyer, who joined "The Wire" in Season 4, told me last December. "Those who are expecting 'The Wire' or wanting 'The Wire' may be frustrated." It's a disclaimer repeated nearly verbatim by so many members of the "Treme" production staff that it could sound like a talking point — until you actually watch the show. Whereas through its five seasons "The Wire" built a vivid portrait of urban America as seen through the prism of its institutions and professions — the police department, the drug trade, the dockworkers, the local government, the schools, the press — "Treme," though no less focused on the workings and failings of 21st-century American urban existence, tells its story not through a city's institutions but through its individuals. It isn't that "The Wire" lacked for distinctive characters: Omar, the homicidal ethicist; Bubbles, the embattled addict; D'Angelo Barksdale, the doomed-by-decency street dealer — there were scores of them. But because so many of the show's story lines dramatized the futility of any of these characters' attempts to break through social and economic ceilings, the image of contemporary urban America that the show offered was one in which character wasn't fate so much as a fait accompli: in the land of the free market, Simon was arguing, free will wasn't going to get you very far. In "Treme," Simon seems to be arguing for the very opposite idea: the triumph of the individual will despite all impediments, a show about people, artists for the most part, whose daily lives depend upon the free exercise of their wills to create — out of nothing, out of moments — something beautiful.

SIMON'S DESIRE TO do a show in New Orleans predates "The Wire." In the mid-'90s, he began writing regularly on NBC's "Homicide," Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana's long-running adaptation of Simon's own nonfiction account of the year he spent embedded in a Baltimore homicide-detectives unit, Simon met Overmyer, a more senior writer-producer with the show. Overmyer owned a second home in New Orleans, as he does to this day, and very soon he and Simon, who had been taking regular trips to New Orleans for some time, found they were talking more about their record collections and experiences in New Orleans than about "Homicide." It

wasn't long before they were thinking out loud about how great it would be to shoot a show down there. The problem was that they didn't know what show. "We couldn't figure out how to pitch it," Simon told me last fall. "Both of us imagined the pitch meeting, and we imagined trying to explain New Orleans and being unable to. If I could explain it to you sitting here now, I wouldn't have to do the show. That's the problem: you literally have to drag whatever executive you've got to New Orleans, throw him into a second line"— local parades led by brass bands are followed by a "second line" of dancers who join in spontaneously —"get him drunk, take him here, take him there. It would have to be a lost week: you're not in America anymore — you're in New Orleans! We couldn't imagine being able to do that. In fact, we imagined being escorted off the lot. We laughed about it. We said, 'Pipe dream.' "

Years passed, and Simon went on to "The Wire." During preparation for Season 4, Katrina happened. Simon told me: "Eric was in Baltimore. We were in the writing stage before filming. And I remember in the office looking at the satellite photos on the Internet of his house. And him going: 'I think I'm O.K.; I think I'm dry.' " A few weeks later, Simon was reading the industry trades and saw that three or four New Orleans shows had suddenly appeared in development. There was "K-Ville," which had a brief run in 2007; a project Spike Lee was developing with NBC that didn't come to fruition; a few more. Simon knew they had to act quickly: "I said to Eric, 'We've got to go out right now.' So we flew out to L.A., and Carolyn Strauss bought the idea of us writing something, 'cause there's not that much money in the script, not a huge investment. And I think on some level she was being polite. You know, ' "The Wire" is good, "The Corner" has been good; I can't say no to you.' But I don't think she got it. I think if you talk to her, she'd be like, 'They didn't do a good job explaining it.' I remember this exchange, which is us trying to explain the Mardi Gras Indians, and somewhere in the middle of the pitch she goes, 'When you say "Indians," do you mean *woo-woo-woo*?' And we're like, 'Yes . . . and no,' " Simon laughed. " 'Not Native American but, yeah, *woo-woo-woo-woo*.' "

"David and Eric were valiant in their attempt to explain their show to me," Strauss, now an independent executive producer on "Treme," told me in an e-mail message. "But I couldn't seem to get it at all. Because I have complete creative trust in David, I told them to write it." Simon and Overmyer began discussing possible ideas the following summer, but it wasn't until the next year that writing started. "David did most of the heavy lifting initially," Overmyer says. Simon sent him a draft of a pilot that had a provisional set of characters and was about 80 percent of a whole but missing scenes. "He did this on 'The Wire,' too," Overmyer says. "He said, 'I can't do the domestic scenes; you do the domestic scenes.' I always thought, He's giving me the girlie scenes," Overmyer says, laughing. "On 'The Wire,' he'd say to me, 'You write the scene when McNulty has dinner with his ex-wife.' Always the girlie scenes." Once Overmyer filled in the missing moments, the two began bouncing versions back and forth, revising repeatedly, until, organically, the balance of their contributions to the whole achieved parity. "David and I have a good dialectic," Overmyer says. "He's a journalist, and I'm a playwright by trade, so I think he tends to wanting to make larger

statements about the city than I do, and I tend to resist that a little.”

By spring 2008, two and a half years after the pilot was ordered, they agreed on a draft that they would take to HBO, beginning what tends to be a perilous stage in the development of a series, when the executives charged with paying for production have their say. “On one script,” Overmyer says of an experience developing a show with a different network, “I counted it up: I actually got 72 separate sets of notes — from the production company, the studio, the network — many of them contradictory.” The most memorable note Overmyer ever received was from an executive very high up at a network. “She said, ‘They’re being so unpleasant with each other.’ And I said: ‘Well, that’s drama. That’s conflict.’ And she actually said, ‘Could we have the drama . . . *without* the conflict?’ ”

Simon remembers many network notes when writing for “Homicide.” “The notes felt like they were not serving the best possible story,” Simon explained. “Jimmy Yoshimura — Eric worked as supervising producer with him, and I was a junior producer under them — Yosh used to do this notes meeting, call me in and say, ‘Come on, let’s do the antler dance.’ And I said, ‘What’s the antler dance?’ And I swear to God, he would put his phone on the floor, on speakerphone, so you’d hear the voice of the network exec. And with his voice, Jim would approximate a reasonable, ‘Well, that’s a very good note, but if we do that. . . .’ But his body language would begin with his hands up above his head as if he were wearing antlers, like some sort of drum circle, and he would dance around the phone, gesturing obscenely to it, do a little more dancing, but all the while he would be saying, ‘Oh, no, that’s a really good note, we’ll have to consider that. Let me talk to Tom [Fontana], because I think we’re going to do something in another episode.’ Meanwhile, he’d pull down his zipper and stick his thumb through it, and if the guy kept persisting on a note and he couldn’t talk him out of it, Yosh would get down on the floor, close to the speakerphone and. . . .”

Yoshimura claims that there are limits to Simon’s recall. “No, no, no, that was David!” Simon offered the following rebuttal via e-mail: “I will own the origin of this particular gesture if that is Jim’s memory, but in the event that he is trying now these many years later to whitewash his authorship of the sacred ritual of the network-note antler dance, I can only quote ‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance’ and John Wayne’s remark to Jimmy Stewart: ‘Think back, pilgrim.’ ”

AT THE CORPORATE headquarters of HBO in Manhattan, on an October morning last year, I met two of the executives who greenlighted production of “Treme”: Michael Lombardo, president of programming, and Richard Plepler, a co-president of the network to whom Lombardo reports.

“In David’s case,” Lombardo said, “he and Eric wrote a script, a very detailed synopsis of where they were taking the show. But it wasn’t only a treatise: he made you read it while listening to a *soundtrack*. And David would ask you: ‘Did you listen to the music while you were reading this? Because if you didn’t, before we start. . . ?’ And you’d go, ‘*Uhhhh*. . . .’ ”

“The way David presented it,” Plepler explained further, “was with a musical accompaniment and detailed instructions of what to listen to while you were reading it. It’s an unusual request of an

auteur to an executive."

So, Simon had notes for them. Any from them to him?

"I think we tend to be a fairly hands-off company creatively," Lombardo said.

"Once we get the shared vision understood, that's the case," Plepler said. "David has a vision, and once we understand it, you embrace that vision. We're not there to suggest that a character act in a different way or that we wish it had a different ending."

So, no notes?

Plepler paused. "If Mike or Sue Naegle" — president in charge of HBO series and specials — "had a note for somebody who was trying to get a pilot sold, the natural response of that person would be: 'You know, that's a good note. Let me take that back. That's a good insight. Thank you for that.' "

Lombardo added, "People want pilots made!"

Plepler continued: "And they're saying to themselves, 'All right, they clearly want a little more of this and a little less of that, and I'll give it to them.' David is not playing that game."

"He wrote me an e-mail years ago," Lombardo remembered, "in which he accused me of something, I didn't know what it meant. I had to go to the dictionary. He accused me of *flummery*."

"I don't know that word!" Plepler said.

"I clearly did not. . . ."

"What is *flummery*?" Plepler asked him. Lombardo did an I-have-no-idea shake of the head. Plepler looked at me. "Do you know what 'flummery' is?"

Empty speech, I said.

"Huh," Plepler said. "Very good."

What flummery, I asked Lombardo, had he been guilty of?

"It was part of an unhappy e-mail to me but, you know what, I don't even remember. Here's the thing: Before David knows you. . . . "

"That's right," Plepler said.

". . . he assumes that you're not going to understand what he has to say."

SIMON WORKS ON every script by every writer of every show he produces. On "Treme," he and Overmyer share the process equally, sending scripts back and forth, revising and polishing and

revising again (Mills, too, is rewriting scripts by other staff writers). This process is common to episodic television, time constraints making it such that no single writer could generate a season. What is less common is how little credit Simon takes for the rewriting he does.

"He would take a script into his room when the deadline was that night," Pelecanos told me, "and he'd go in there and lock the door, and he'd redo the whole script." The novelist Richard Price, who also wrote for "The Wire," told me there's nothing capricious about such thorough revision: "You really need a single sensibility at the top, a writer-producer who's a ruthless rewriter. It's like an assembly line; Episode 3 has perfectly got to follow from Episode 2 and also perfectly set up Episode 4." Typically, however, when show-runners polish scripts, they add their names as co-writers, an act which, according to the Writers Guild of America, cuts the original writer's script fee — around $32,700 for an hour of episodic premium cable — in half, the other half going to the show-runner who typically has a seven-figure deal. Very literally, Simon doesn't take credit. "It's almost like David feels guilty that he's so successful," Price told me. "He's more than decent. He's like an old Democrat, an old lefty." Pelecanos added: "I've seen shows that are on right now where the show-runner has their name on every script. And if any of those episodes are up for an Emmy Award, the show runner's gonna get an Emmy Award. When I was nominated for an Emmy" — one of only two Emmy nominations that "The Wire" received during its five-season run — "had I won, I would have gone up there and accepted that award; but David also wrote part of that script."

One September morning, the writers convened around a table in the "Treme" production offices in the Lower Garden District to make some decisions about one of their key characters. Simon and Overmyer sat paterfamilially at either end of the table. To Simon's immediate left was Chris Yakaitis, a young Baltimorean who worked on "The Wire" as a researcher and is now "Treme's" script coordinator — a sort of editor and proofreader. Nina K. Noble sat at Simon's right hand where, figuratively, she has been sitting for more than a decade: Noble has produced all four of Simon's HBO series. ("My credibility is predicated on working with Nina," Simon says. "Nina makes us come in on budget all the time. Ask HBO how many shows they have that come in on budget.") Stationed at the table's flanks were the members of the writing staff: Mills, Pelecanos and two New Orleans-based writers as variedly accomplished in their fields as they are new to writing television: Lolis Eric Elie, whose family has lived for generations in New Orleans, is a former columnist for The Times-Picayune, author of "Smokestack Lightning," a book on the culture of barbecue, and maker of "Faubourg Treme," a documentary on the neighborhood where he lives; and a New Orleans transplant and longtime resident, Tom Piazza, a writer of nine books, including the post-Katrina nonfiction call-to-arms "Why New Orleans Matters" and the Katrina novel "City of Refuge." With "The Wire," Simon had two decades as a reporter and resident to draw upon, but both he and Overmyer, despite many years of experience with New Orleans, knew they couldn't begin to approximate the intimacy of locals in a city where, as Simon has put it, "even the nuances have nuances."

Also jammed into the cramped, amenity-free conference room that day were two Peabody Award-

winning documentarians, Andrew Kolker and Louis Alvarez, who were making slow circles around the table, gathering footage for possible inclusion in “Getting Back to Abnormal,” a documentary they’re making with Peter Odabashian and Paul Stekler about life in post-Katrina New Orleans, to air later this year on PBS. In the hours of conversation that Kolker and Alvarez shot, Simon can be seen leading a discussion about the back story of a character whom they expected to introduce in the second episode but were now writing into the pilot. The 80-minute cut of the pilot, established four months earlier, would have some scenes reshot and others added when shooting for the series began in November.

As Alvarez’s boom mike bobbed over the table and Kolker padded around filming, the group discussed a character named Creighton Bernette, the novelist and professor to be played by John Goodman but who, at the time of this writers’ meeting, had not been cast. Creighton was as yet a creature who existed only in the realm of ideas.

“I’d love to talk that particular story line through,” Mills said. Previously, Simon and Overmyer decided that Creighton would be teaching at Tulane. Mills asked Piazza when he imagined Creighton, who they decided wouldn’t be a native New Orleanean, came to the city and why.

“Probably in his late 20s,” Piazza said. “He may have just gotten the teaching gig.” Piazza paused. “There’s a dimension of some departments, where at some places, they wish it was Harvard, so he may have ended up there and gotten tenure, and — especially if he was from the Northeast, let’s say, he may have had some kind of. . . .”

“Oh, I got a. . . . This is interesting, keep going.”

“. . . idea of being a real academic star and ends up a biggish fish in what he considers to be a smallish academic pond and found himself in a certain life.”

“What if,” Simon said, “he had a decent showing on a first novel. And the first novel didn’t have anything to do with New Orleans. It was written before he came here or when he was coming here and was writing off of life experiences that were more universal than New Orleans.”

“And might have gotten the gig off it,” Overmyer added.

“Then he comes here. And the second book is New Orleans-based, well received, but doesn’t do as well in the world in the way that. . . .” Simon interrupted himself: “There’s two things about New Orleans that are sort of counter to each other: it does create, at points, art that becomes universal, that actually leaves New Orleans. But then there’s something else: you can get lost in the ornate esoterica of this very unusual place and you can — and maybe we’re doing it here” — everyone laughed — “and maybe we’ll be commenting more on this after the debacle of this season.” Simon laughed. “What if it’s the novel of the transplant who gets everything right and yet. . . .”

The riffs continued, the conversation touching on the curious psychology of writers, the nature of

moral and dramatic character, the matter of manhood and marriage, of what it means to try to make art and what it means to encounter disaster and the chance to survive it and what such a survival might cost.

“THIS GUY HAS the whole history of New Orleans music in his head,” Simon told me between takes at a recording studio called the Living Room. The guy in question was Dr. John, the legendary New Orleans musician and bandleader. Dr. John, who also goes by Mac Rebennack, was sitting at a grand piano in gray ponytail and dark shades, surrounded by musicians, including his touring band — horns, bass, drums and guitar — each playing little snippets of this and that while the “Treme” crew prepared to shoot a brief conversation between Dr. John and the band and then a live performance of the standard “My Indian Red,” a song of quasi-liturgical significance in the rich traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians. The scene was meant to take place in New York, a “rehearsal” for a Jazz at Lincoln Center Katrina benefit concert. Dr. John ran through his lines. One exchange stood out.

“Hey, Mac, you gonna call the Indians like you do on the album?” said a horn player, Ken Williams.

“Well, it might cause some serious confusementalism amongst the Lincoln Center set,” Dr. John replied.

“Confusementalism,” it turned out, was Dr. John’s coinage. “We were trying to write in Dr. John’s unique voice, which is something of a fool’s errand,” Simon said. “I wrote the word ‘confusement’ in the script. Mac looked at the script and said, ‘Y’all are trying to do Dr. John.’ And then he said, ‘I can do it your way; it is television so it can’t be accurate’— he said ‘ac-rit.’ And I said, ‘What the hell.’ ” Simon laughed. “ ‘Let it be accurate this one time.’ ”

The crew made quick work of shooting Dr. John’s dialogue with the band, as if urgently trying to get to the real matter at hand: performance. Six takes of “My Indian Red” followed in short succession. Before Ernest Dickerson had even shouted, “Cut!” on one take, one of the crew got carried away and couldn’t keep from clapping, a big film-set no-no. The offender? Simon, who was Christmas-morning giddy.

“If we can’t sell this,” he said, “we can’t sell nothin’.”

IT WAS 5:30 P.M., and the sun had just set, and a grave blue twilight was settling in the streets that surround the loading dock of the “Treme” production offices. Clarke Peters was trying to get something right.

“I want to figure out how to make all of these feathers shake,” he said.

Standing in the center of a large concrete void, bathed in fluorescent light, Peters, white-gloved hands balled into fists, held them before him as if bracing against what force you could not have said. You could see his fists shaking, though, which in turn were shaking his arms, but you could

not see his arms or his chest or his legs. All of them, the whole of him with the exception of his white fists and the red toes of a pair of otherwise unseen boots, were obscured by an astonishing collision of feathers, a huge suit of canary yellow feathers, accented in red feathers and red patches inset with glittering silver and gold beads, arms hung with plumes, the rear tailed with a great puff of orange and crimson from which a few dark peacock feathers trailed. From the center of it all, Peters's dark brown face minutely peered.

"So," Peters said, "that doesn't work." Peters did a shake move that was indeed not working so well. "But this. . . ." and then he did another that did.

That accomplished, Peters began to sing. His voice was deep, full of music, the singing a kind of chanting that never ceased to be song:

BARkin' out thunnnnnDER!

ROARrin' out lightNING!

KICKin' over tombSTONES!

WAKIN' up the DEAD!

If you've seen "The Corner," in which Peters — who was once a touring singer and has played Sky Masterson in "Guys and Dolls" — was the ailing, soft-spoken corner drug addict Fat Curt, you are already aware that Peters is a man with a gift for conveying a kind of dignity that can't be feigned. That dignity is the ideal at the heart of the thing that Peters is not so much performing as channeling in this concrete basin: the Mardi Gras Indian.

In contemporary New Orleans life, Mardi Gras Indians appear a few times a year, most notably at Mardi Gras in an elaborate feathered suit that, typically, they have spent the year designing and sewing, different every year, although no one seems to know exactly why. Some say that when the French controlled the slave trade and yellow fever and famine struck their settlements, the slaves fled inland and were given refuge by Native Americans. In that story, as a function of their gratitude, the slaves paid homage through song, dance and dress, the native and the West African traditions conjoining, a marriage that would help give birth to the music of New Orleans.

Peters's Big Chief is beautiful in every earthly way: lovely and completely unnecessary and for its lack of necessity somehow all the more essential. Shortly after Peters finished confirming that his feathers quivered to his satisfaction, Donald Harrison Jr. swooped into the fluorescent space and greeted Peters warmly. The son of the late, great Big Chief Donald Harrison Sr., a legendary Mardi Gras chief, Harrison Jr. has carried on the tradition and become a chief himself. Peters and the production are consulting him to ensure that their portrayal of a chief is true to the truth of the thing — whatever word you can abide that means some equivalent of "mystical." That otherworldliness was apparent as Peters — who by that time was shedding the 58 pounds of

feathers in big pieces (headdress, arm-plumes, the great orange and crimsoned rear end) — began dancing and singing antiphonally with Harrison, who had donned the great feathered rear and himself begun to dance and spin and chant with Peters, Peters's voice low and sweet, Harrison's higher and milder, the two singing at each other as blue twilight became black night.

"THERE'S A THING about being capable of a great moment," Simon told me on a break from shooting. "This city is capable of moments unlike any moments you'll ever experience in life. To see an Indian come down the street in full regalia on St. Joseph's Night on an unlit street of messed-up shotgun houses and one burned-out car, and he's the most beautiful thing on the planet, and everything around him is falling down. It's a glorious instant of human endeavor. It's *duende* from the Spanish, chills on the back of your neck, and then the next minute it's gone. Lots of American places used to make things. Detroit used to make cars. Baltimore used to make steel and ships. New Orleans still makes something. It makes moments. I don't mean that to sound flippant, and I don't mean it to sound more or less than what it is, but they're artists with a moment, they can take a moment and make it into something so transcendent that you're not quite sure that it happened or that you were a part of it."

It is odd to watch transcendence happen. Late in a long week of shooting, on a Friday in December, production was at an upscale house. A small scene. A character was listening to George Bush's post-Katrina "Jackson Square" speech: "The passionate soul of a great city will return," etc. The scene amounts to a long, slow, tight close-up on the character's face as he registers, with a mix of fury and enormous sadness, the insufficiency of what is being said. You could see his face on monitors in the next room, a large kitchen with nice woodwork and an island. Off to one side was the live feed from the camera in the small, adjoining room. Ernest Dickerson sat in his director's chair and watched takes on the screen, calling, "Cut!" asking for another, calling, "Action!" again and again, 60 seconds of Bush's speech echoing in the large house, playing over and again: "To every person who has served and sacrificed in this emergency, I offer the gratitude of our country. And tonight I also offer this pledge of the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes. We will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives."

I can't say how many takes it took, but at a certain point during one of them, I looked away from the monitors and around the kitchen. It was full of people, its perimeter rung with standing bodies. Steve Zahn and Melissa Leo, David Simon and his assistant, the owner of the house and his pregnant fiancée, the first assistant director and the script supervisor, two stand-ins, a grip. Bush spoke, his voice loud, sure, echoing through the house. I looked at the faces around the kitchen and, to a one, all were staring down at the floor, all perfectly silent, perfectly still, utterly alone. Had anyone entered the kitchen at that moment, someone who hadn't known what was happening, the only conclusion anyone could have drawn was that something tremendous had just been lost.

Dickerson shouted, "Cut!"

Everyone looked up. And then went back to work.

Wyatt Mason teaches nonfiction in the Bennington Writing Seminars and is a contributing editor at Harper's. He wrote for the magazine about the poet Frederick Seidel.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 21, 2010

An article on Page 26 this weekend about the filming of the HBO drama "Treme" reverses the roles of Andrew Kolker and Louis Alvarez, who are making a documentary titled "Getting Back to Abnormal," about life in post-Katrina New Orleans. Mr. Kolker is the cameraman and Mr. Alvarez handles the sound recording. The article also refers incorrectly to the creation of an unrelated documentary, "Faubourg Tremé." Dawn Logsdon is the director and an editor; Lolis Eric Elie is not the lone "maker" of the documentary. (He is Ms. Logsdon's co-director as well as the writer and a producer.)