

ALAIN  
SAINT-SAËNS

**ORDEAL  
AT THE SUPERDOME**

**ESCAPING KATRINA'S  
WRATH**

A Four Act Play

University Press  
Of the South

2021

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Alain Saint-Saëns.

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**In Memory of  
Chauncy 'Chop' Terrell Smith, Sr.,**

genial car salesman  
and loving father of two,  
murdered at gun point  
for no reason  
on a basket ball court  
in Treme, New Orleans,  
in August 2007.  
He was my friend,  
I miss him.

**To Karen and Tom McCall,**  
who welcomed Anne,  
my children Jefferson and Berenice,  
my father-in-law, John,  
and me  
with open arms in Dallas, Texas,  
for three months  
after we evacuated New Orleans.  
We shall always be grateful.

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‘Katrina washed away a lot of veils and took a lot of face masks off. Your politics cannot be bigger than your humanity. And in this case, we didn't need politics. We needed humanity.’

**Oliver M. Thomas, Jr.**  
**Former President of the New Orleans City Council**

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‘Any time you put 25,000 people under one roof [the Superdome], with no running water, no electricity and no information, stories get told. I think it was urban myth.’

**Lt. David Benelli**  
**Head of the New Orleans Sex Crimes Unit**

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‘We were going to go inside the Superdome. I approached two members of the National Guard and they said to stay outside because they knew it was hell in there.’

**Mike Brocken**  
**Briton, Radio Merseyside Presenter,**

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005

\*\*\*\*\*

‘Which politician emerged from the mess of Katrina as the biggest bonehead involved? No, it's not Michael Brown, George W. Bush, or even the bumbling Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco. The clear winner is New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, who made every conceivable mistake during the crisis ... A near-perfect record for incompetence.’

**John Leo,**  
*Nation and World*, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005

\*\*\*\*\*

‘George Bush doesn't care about black people.’

**Kanye West,**  
*A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, New York, NY,  
 September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The week before Katrina, I was on a business trip in the center of Paraguay, Latin America. I had access to a computer only on Tuesday, and I could see that a tropical storm named Katrina was seemingly heading toward Corpus Christi, Texas. 'Nothing to worry about. New Orleans is safe,' I thought at that time. I was a little surprised on Saturday not to get my flight ticket back to NOLA but to Miami only, although I did not pay too much attention to it. When calling my younger daughter Berenice on Sunday morning to ask who would come and pick me up at Baton Rouge, since I could not get a direct flight to New Orleans, I was horrified to hear her saying: 'Dad, the Big One is coming, and it is going to hit New Orleans HARD tomorrow morning.' By the tone of her voice I knew immediately that it was VERY serious. My family had evacuated already to Greenville, Mississippi; I flew to Jackson and rented a car there to drive up North to Greenville.

We spent the night of Sunday August 28, 2005 and the morning of Monday August 29, glued to the TV in the motel we were staying at with other evacuees. I vividly remember understanding, when the levees broke at 9:00AM on Monday morning and flooded the whole city, that we would be out of New Orleans for a very, very long time. Tom and Karen, cousins of my wife in Dallas, Texas, opened their house to us on Tuesday August 30 for as long as it would be necessary – May God bless them and the good and generous people of Texas always! -, and we spent the week after Katrina in front of the TV screen, crying in despair, disgust, and horror when seeing how poor, elderly, careless people who had been left behind at the Superdome or at the Dutch Morial Convention Center; and the fools who had tried to ride out the monster hurricane, were effectively abandoned by the local, state, and federal authorities. Having spent the fifteen years before Katrina in New Orleans, I considered myself almost 'a native,' and I deeply felt the pain of my friends of New Orleans East, Treme, Gentilly, and the Lower Ninth Ward; they lost everything in half a day, and for some of them, a family member and a dog.

Indignation and shame baffled us when we heard that New Orleans Police officers were among the looters of the city. We went speechless when news about the allegedly racist incident of Gretna surfaced: American people, of black skin, had been cursed at and shot at, by other American people of whiter complexion; walkers coming from New Orleans had been forbidden to move out of the flooded city by the Gretna Police Department at gun point.

Active in the car business as Salesperson of the Year, then Finance Manager and Special Finance Manager for years before Katrina in several dealerships of New Orleans, aside from my editorial responsibility, I had many times the opportunity to meet men and women who have supplied the inspiration for 'Barbara Carter,' the main character of *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina's Wrath*. In pre-Katrina New Orleans, to have or not to have a car was – and still is today – a life saving issue. It allows you to evacuate before it is too late. If you cannot evacuate, then you are starting playing Russian roulette with your life, unless you have access to a last resort shelter. The Superdome became THE refuge for some 25,000 people. Calling for a much too late mandatory evacuation, then Mayor of New Orleans Ray Nagin put at a mortal risk many financially challenged families like Barbara Carter's, who were condemned to stay at the welcoming but unprepared NFL Superdome, hoping that the structure would be strong enough to resist the furor and wrath of Hurricane Katrina. They could not even imagine that the providential shelter could become a hell on earth.

Although all the characters of the play are fictional, the historical and sociological contexts of the five days from Sunday August 28, 2005 to Thursday September 1, 2005 are not; they have been respected and documented as much as possible. Many New Orleanians will identify themselves with Barbara Carter's family and her ordeal through Katrina and its immediate aftermath. Deaths because of heat exhaustion and stress; rapes of women in the bathrooms; have been attested and reported by survivors after the Superdome evacuation. Barbara Carter, modern 'Mother Courage,' exemplifies the fortitude, the greatness, and the



weakness of lower-class American people, in the still racially divided environment of pre-Katrina New Orleans. She fights with her teeth for her children's life and rights in a very chaotic environment, helped only by her faith in God and a strong belief that, regardless of their gender and the color of their skin, her children can become, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, whatever they dream to become with hard work and fear of God: a Supreme Court Justice or a NFL Wide Receiver.

Like all of us, Barbara Carter is not perfect – she cheats and abuses the system – and she does not pretend not to have failed at times. Her personal history of suffering and abuses – what she tells and what we can guess – makes her even more human and universal. Barbara Carter's life, like many of our lives, was changed forever by Katrina. Who from New Orleans has not thought, cried, yelled, or whispered, as Barbara Carter does after Katrina roared: 'We have been abandoned by everybody. Lord, why did You allow the Devil to hurt Your child? Katrina! Freaking hurricane! What did you do to me?' Barbara Carter, a woman of flesh, a spirited and noble human being, a tormented soul full of ardent faith and forgettable sins, is definitely from New Orleans. During Katrina Barbara Carter and her enduring family by all means ARE New Orleans. This is their story.

### **Alain Saint-Saëns**

Dr. Alain Saint-Saëns is a historian, a poet, a playwright, and a novelist. He has been living in New Orleans for twenty years. He likes to have breakfast at La Madeleine on St.Charles and Carrollton; lunch at Babylon Café on Maple Street; and dinner at Ignatius Restaurant on Magazine Street. He loves the New Orleans Saints.

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Many thanks to Abderrahman Beggar; Robert Berchman; Jack deGroot; Angela Franklin; Lanin Gyurko; Véronique Machelidon; Gerald Monsman; Denise Shaw; Thomas Trzyna; and Jean-Charles Jeffrey Wohkittel, whose constructive criticism made *Ordeal at the Superdome* a much better play.

## CHARACTERS

**Barbara Jackson Carter:** A tall and large African-American woman; 36 years old.

**Oliver Jackson:** Barbara Carter's father-in-law; a frail and skinny African-American man; 70 years old.

**Victor Jefferson:** Barbara Carter's older son; tall and strong; 18 years old.

**Lakeshia Jackson:** Barbara Carter's daughter; a cutie; 16 years old.

**Lambert Fayard:** Barbara Carter's younger son; 10 years old.

Rest Room Gang Members:

**Bobby:** African-American; 25 years old.

**Snoopy:** African-American; 30 years old.

**Jimmy Tran:** Vietnamese; 26 years old.

**Angie:** African-American; 20 years old.

Texas National Guards:

- One Caucasian woman; 23 years old.

- One Caucasian man; 25 years old.

Bus driver: A Caucasian man from Texas; 45 years old.

Gretna Police Officer: A Caucasian man; 38 years old.

## REVIEWS

‘Alain Saint-Saëns’ play, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, offers a timely and historically accurate analysis of the surrounding events of the largest natural disaster in American history. Taking place in the New Orleans Superdome in the days just before and following Katrina, the play examines the life of an intergenerational African-American family who seeks shelter from the hurricane in the “safety” of the Superdome. The traumatic events that ensue for this family are life-changing.

As a native New Orleanian and having two family members displaced by Katrina, I find that Saint-Saëns’ play not only captures the horrific incidents surrounding the hurricane but also debunks stereotypes about those most affected by the hurricane’s aftereffects. Saint-Saëns portrays those New Orleanians as moralistic, family-oriented, and possessing a steely determination to hold on to those values during a time of great adversity. Alain Saint-Saëns’ play, in essence, holds all of us accountable for what happened in the Superdome during the summer of 2005.’

**Dr. Denise Shaw**, Professor of English Literature,  
University of South Carolina

‘Alain Saint-Saëns’ new play, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, merges the shock value of Amiri Baraka’s protest plays with the nuanced analysis of Bertolt Brecht. Like these playwrights, he focuses on starkly framed conflicts in order to lead the audience into a growing understanding of a web of moral and political truths. Saint-Saëns’ work can also be compared to recent South African dramas because of the remarkable way in which he addresses the issues of atonement, community forgiveness, and family reconciliation. Saint-Saëns declines to fall into predictable formulae of revenge and purgation. Viewers and readers are instead haunted by the complex ways in which his characters choose to resolve the traumas of assault, rape and discrimination. *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s*

*Wrath* draws on a firm grasp of several New Orleans dialects, including gang talk and the mellifluous, elevated dialogue of African Americans rooted in evangelical Christianity.’

**Dr. Thomas Trzyna**, Professor of English Literature,  
Seattle Pacific University

‘Alain Saint-Saëns certainly brings his scenes to life – disturbingly and, oddly, reassuringly. *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath* is not for the faint of heart. If all harrowing drama depends on dialogue and circumstance, then this play fills the bill. Given the ability of the writer to invoke the sounds, smells, and sensations at the crisis and in the aftermath of New Orleans’s greatest catastrophe, all that is missing is for the audience to be sitting literally in a fetid, flooded auditorium. This compelling play will quickly and decisively establish the author as a presence in the rising generation of playwrights. Certainly it will be a long time before we have another memorable figure like Barbara Carter, ‘a spirited and noble human being, a tormented soul full of ardent faith and forgettable sins.’

**Dr. Gerald Monsman**, Professor of English Literature,  
University of Arizona

‘As the Haitian catastrophe reminds us, once nature unleashes its savage power against mankind, humanity and order are in jeopardy. With down-to-earth characters and simple but sensitive prose, Alain Saint-Saëns gives a voice to the most powerless victims of Katrina, those who could not evacuate before the hurricane hit. With hopes crushed and left at the mercy of thugs and petty gangsters, a lower-class African American family finds itself trapped in the jungle of the New Orleans Superdome. Through their ordeal and their struggle to survive Saint-Saëns points a critical finger to the law enforcement system, the local authorities, and the national government, revealing how they turned a blind eye on the most simple needs of helpless men and women and failed to protect basic human dignity. The Carter family’s courage, loving solidarity, and moral stamina movingly demonstrate the persistence of the human spirit

in the face of moral corruption, racism, and adversity.’

**Dr. Véronique Machelidon**, Professor of Modern Languages and Literatures, Meredith College

‘One of the basic purposes of Latin American author Carlos Fuentes’ art is to keep the past alive and meaningful, so that we never forget that past and its crucial import on both present and future. Similar in purpose, the masterful drama by the renowned historian, poet, and humanist Alain Saint-Saëns, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, is a powerful, compelling four-act drama of one of the greatest natural disasters in United States history, Hurricane Katrina.

Saint-Saëns, who writes from the perspective of one who has lived in and loved the proud, fabled city of New Orleans and its marvellous people, writes boldly and movingly of the impact of Katrina and its aftermath on the lives of the members of an Afro-American family in flood-ravaged New Orleans, and creates characters who are all unforgettably etched. The determination to succeed by the victim, LaKeshia, the courage and selflessness of the leading character, the formidable mother Barbara Carter, the heroic life and tragic death of the grandfather, all demonstrate the Victory of the Afro-American family not only over the devastating forces of nature, but the monstrous forces of criminality that go unchecked in the Superdome, intended as a place of refuge but that degenerates into a hellworld.

*Ordeal at the Superdome, Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, eloquently affirms through its biblical structure of Flood and Devastation followed by Apocalypse and Redemption, the desperate need for compassion, brotherhood and solidarity after catastrophic destruction, whether it be in New Orleans or Haiti or the Indian Ocean tsunami. Saint-Saëns’ remarkable play constitutes a poignant, eloquent plea for social justice, racial tolerance, communal action, and family unity.

The drama is a stirring portrayal of one family’s determined, indeed unrelenting struggle against seemingly insurmountable affliction, and ends on a note of glorious celebration. The presence of Martin Luther King, Jr., his nobility, courage, and idealism, haunts this powerful play of suffering and

triumph, of violence, brutality, and forgiveness, of an impoverished and repeatedly afflicted but stalwart and indomitable family, who, despite everything – poverty, assault, separation, the death of its patriarch – not only survives but triumphs over adversity. We look forward to a New Orleans premiere of this drama of anguish and renewed hope, of death and Resurrection.’

**Dr. Lanin Gyurko**, Professor of Cinema Studies,  
University of Arizona

‘Alain Saint-Saëns’ new four act play, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, is a play about the enormous storm and its permanent dwarfing of a Major City of complex systems into the minute by minute detailing of lives of ordinary people at its mercy. At first cinematic in its sequences, much like pictures of the advancing storm itself, by the time the scene of arrival at the Superdome reaches the scene of arrival at Gretna, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, reads more like a one-act play of four major determining scenes. This dramatic device is so successful due to the strength of Alain Saint-Saëns’ unifying main character, Barbara Carter. Mother, citizen, moral theologian, disciplinarian, and American, Barbara Carter holds the familial and community group she leads through the action of the storm together. A second strength in Alain Saint-Saëns’ play is its faithful use of New Orleans dialect, a language the storm tries, but fails, to change. The depth of the author’s research in this area is reflected by a nationwide sense or undercurrent of its people’s speaking a sublanguage, deep seeded in its motivations, as it faces a national tragedy that people of all languages must face when caught in similar circumstances.

**Dr. Jean-Charles Jeffrey Wohkittel**,  
Poet and Playwright

‘Dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, Alain Saint-Saëns’ play, *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina’s Wrath*, is a sincere and powerful portrait of the human condition. It is an autopsy of the mechanisms of social control and their impact on the psychology of the oppressed. It is also about the

meaninglessness of these same mechanisms confronted with the cosmic rage of a major hurricane. As evidenced by the author's preface, moral order is the first victim of natural disaster, with policemen looting and hungry people shot at.

This erupting violence escapes even the power of discourse, and the play is aimed at expressing this general confusion, while celebrating the absurdity that it generated. *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina's Wrath* portrays Katrina as the apocalypse that precludes a rebirth; as a New Orleans politician said, Hurricane Katrina 'washed away a lot of veils and took a lot of face masks off.' The reader is invited to discover an emerging world, while connecting with the Other from a new perspective. Alain Saint-Saëns, with this extremely well-written play, delivers a thought-provoking masterpiece.'

**Dr. Abderrahman Beggar**, Professor of Comparative Literature, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada

In *Ordeal at the Superdome. Escaping Katrina's Wrath*, Alain Saint-Saëns describes how elderly, poor, black inhabitants of New Orleans enter the Superdome initially with optimistic views. The reality soon proves to be different. Thousands of human beings, tightly packed together in the centre of a hurricane, are to become scared, sick, agitated, hungry, dirty, thirsty, tired, horny, drunk, stoned ... Indescribable imagery has been put on paper by Alain Saint-Saëns, who spent a lifetime in New Orleans, and right now has accepted his responsibility to tell the story of the ones who could not escape hell on earth.

Bizarre occurrences quickly become a natural 'way of survival' when the crowds lose decency under challenging circumstances. New Orleans Superdome during Katrina was a quick revisit to Auschwitz, and Alain Saint Saëns wrote it down in the well-known realistic style that we have come to expect from him. The scenery described brings back to mind the words spoken by Professor Ian Kershaw when he concluded his BBC television series on the Polish camp: 'We have to realize of what people are capable.'

**Dr. Jack de Groot**, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia



Alain Saint-Saëns, his daughter Berenice,  
and the French Ambassador Jean-David Levitte, in New Orleans.



Alain Saint-Saëns in front of his Broadway Street's house,  
Uptown New Orleans, 2003.



**ACT I**

**THE SHELTER**



### Picnic at the Superdome

*Sunday afternoon, August 28, 2005, within the Superdome.*

LaKeshia:

- Mom, this place looks perfect. We're high enough not to be flooded and not too close to the roof, in case there would be some wind damage at the top of the Superdome. We're not far from the restrooms either. It will be very convenient for us ladies.

Víctor:

- We've a nice view on the field! Incredible! And it's free! We're gonna have a great time!

Barbara Carter:

- Indeed this has been a magnificent Sunday so far. Shuttle drivers were very friendly and helpful at the pick up spots. The ride to the Superdome was cooler than I had imagined. They gave us some bottles of water at the entrance. We should be OK.

Lambert:

- Mom, I want to sleep close to you.

Barbara Carter:

- Of course, little Lamb.'

*LaKeshia is opening the camping fridge, improvising a picnic.*

LaKeshia:

- Who would like a sandwich? Grandpa?

Oliver Jackson:

- Ham and cheese, Lakeshia, please.

LaKeshia, *smiling to her Grandpa*:

- I know your taste, Grandpa. I prepared some of them specially for you.

Lambert, *bringing LaKeshia's cell phone to his sister*:

- Sis, you've got an IM from Chop! She has-a-date! She-has-a-date!

LaKeshia, *irritated, taking the cellular phone out of her little brother's hands*:

- Be quiet, Lambert Jackson. I just met him at Toyota of New Orleans four days ago, when I went there with Mom to buy her a car. He was a very nice guy, and there is no more to it.

Barbara Carter:

- He certainly treated us with courtesy, this young black gentleman, and he spent a lot of time with us making sure I would qualify for my beautiful preowned Impala I had chosen with him.

Víctor, *dubious*:

- Are you finally gonna get that car, Mom? You went three nights in a row to the dealership, and we're still walking.

Barbara Carter:

- Well, Vic, it's not that easy. I do qualify with Social Security, child support for the three of you, and my Disability put all together. I am confident. J.R., the Used Car Financed Manager, told me: 'Ms. Barbara, you are very SPECIAL to me.' I felt very honored.

Oliver Jackson:

- Barbara, you're so dumb and naive! 'Special' means that your credit is very challenged. I worked in the car business years ago. This J.R. is probably a Special Finance guy, in charge of difficult cases ... like yours. You have to start paying your bills on time, my dear, if you want to better your credit.

Barbara Carter:

- I do my very best, Grandfather Jackson. Medical bills have been expensive. It's true that I've fallen behind, but I'm trying. My credit is not so bad: Chop, the car Salesman, told me I've 'a strong 485 Credit Score. 'You do qualify, Ms. Barbara,' he said, 'but you need some help.'

Víctor:

- What kind of help, Mom?

Barbara Carter:

- J.R., the Finance Manager, said I need a good co-signer. If I get one, I will be in that car. I kind of trust him, since we happened to go to school together many, many years ago. He was younger, slimmer, a very handsome fellow.

LaKeshia, *laughing*:

- Mom! Did you go out with him?

Barbara Carter, *smiling*:

- I wish I did. He seems to make a very good living now.

Victor, *looking to his Mom with cautious eyes:*

- So, when're we gonna know, Mom?

Barbara Carter:

- Soon, after Hurricane Katrina moves away. Hopefully, it will miss New Orleans, as they always do at the last time, and Wednesday, Thursday at the latest, I will all take you out to McDonald's to celebrate my new car! I suspect that the Lord is definitely on my side to get that Impala. Imagine that. When I was filling up paperwork in J.R.'s office, the owner of Toyota of New Orleans, Troy, came specially to say hello to me. You know that normally I do not have confidence in all these white salesmen who try to rob our people with their heavy commissions and hidden fees here and there. But Troy, did he really walk the extra-mile for me! He looked at the deal that we had reached, sat in front of J.R.'s computer, and told me: 'Ms. Barbara, I want to help you. Life has not been always fair to you, but today is your lucky day. J.R., take \$500 dollars out of the final price, and please, make sure Ms. Barbara Carter gets a free oil change and a full tank of gas before leaving the parking lot.' I was SO touched, I gave him a big hug. This Troy's a good man. He sure is my friend now. May the Lord bless always his family and his dealership!

Victor, *still suspicious:*

- Who's gonna be your co-signer, Mom?

Barbara Carter:

- Well, I made a deal with Grandfather Jackson. He shall not pay his rent in our house for one year, in exchange of co-signing for me. I'm very grateful to him for that. Next time we have to evacuate, we will all drive to Memphis in my Impala, with our dog Zoe too, and stay at Aunt Chloe's house.

Lambert, *almost crying:*

- I was so sad, Mom, that we had to leave Zoe at the house. I hope she will understand what to eat and drink. I put dog food everywhere in the house. I cannot wait to go back home and have her sleep with me on the bed again.

LaKeshia, *kissing her Grandpa on the cheek*:

- Do you have good credit, Grandpa? It's so generous of you to help Mom.

Oliver Jackson:

- I have EXCELLENT credit. 750ish. Never bought anything with a credit card. I pay ALL my bills on time. Never been late.

Barbara Carter, *praising him*:

- You're an example to all of us, Grandfather Jackson. I will always pay the car on the first of the month, I promise that to you.

Oliver Jackson, *with a sharp tongue*:

- Well, you'd better do just that, Barbara, because if you don't, the car will be mine, and I will sell it.

Barbara Carter, *laughing*:

- That shall not happen, Grandfather Jackson! The good Lord forbid this car be taken away from me and my kids.

LaKeshia, *aware of the tense exchange between the two*:

- Grandpa, another ham and cheese sandwich? What about a glass of Coke? I even have some ice for you. Mom, would you care for a sandwich with tomatoes and eggs?

Victor, *to his mother*:

- Mom, Lambert and I, we're gonna go downstairs throw the ball on the field. Lamb', put your Deuce McCallister shirt. I will be Aaron Brooks, the great New Orleans Saints quarterback. Let's go score some touchdowns!

Barbara Carter, *to Victor*:

- Vic, you're in charge. Do NOT abandon your little brother for ANY reason. Lambert, DO NOT talk to strangers and do not leave your big brother at any time. Be good, guys, and enjoy the practice.

Barbara Carter, *to LaKeshia*:

- LaKe, let's go to the ladies' room together. Buddy system, always. Grandfather Jackson, would you be so kind as to keep an eye on our belongings? We shall be back very soon. Meanwhile, make yourself comfortable. I've today's *Times-Picayune* in my bag. You may read it, if you like. I anticipate a short and agreeable time at the Superdome. Let's make the best of it.