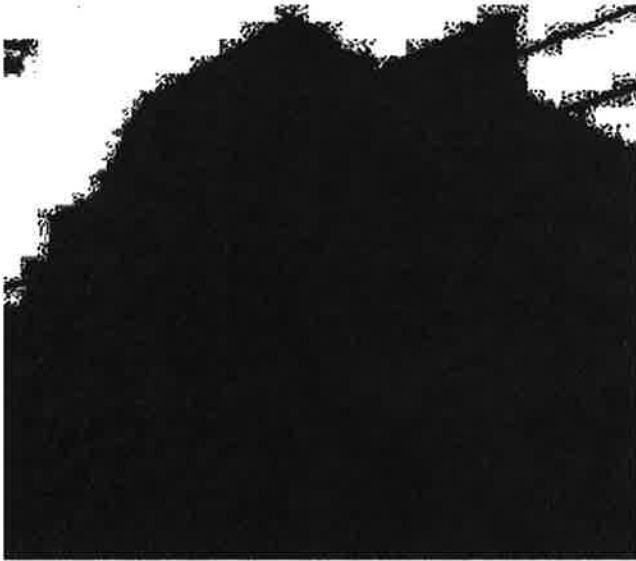


## How to Build a Forest with Pearl D'Amour and Shawn Hall

by Lizzie Olesker

Spring, and it's been raining in Brooklyn for too many days. A single, exotic-sounding songbird suddenly re-appears, having returned from a winter spent who knows where. Bits of song pierce through the grind of a passing car's engine. A voice from a radio announces that a deadly tornado has wiped out a whole swath of Joplin, Missouri, setting another "historic record," presented as another seemingly unrelated environmental disaster. You keep going with your day, telling yourself it won't happen here. It can't happen here. It's happening somewhere else. Not here.



It will all be okay, in the end. Somehow, we will fix it. In the end... *How to Build a Forest* by PearlDamour (Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour), and visual artist Shawn Hall, is a hybrid performance in which a simulated forest will be assembled and disassembled over a continuous eight-hour period, presented at the Kitchen in June. Strikingly grand and intricately detailed, the forest will feel like "an old growth forest at one moment and a deep sea landscape the next," ranging in perspective from the intimate to the large-scale. Punctuating the ongoing process of construction, are short texts by playwright Lisa D'Amour, performed by a "Flash Mob" of builders, under the direction of Katie Pearl. Self-guided tours can be taken through the installation, with the help of a field guide (also written by D'Amour) to inform about where the materials came from in the earth and where they will go once the project is finished. *How to Build a Forest* will invite the audience inside its ephemeral, poetic, and visually transparent reality to contemplate our relationship to the natural world, which is fast disappearing.

I spoke with each of the collaborative creators of *How to Build a Forest* by phone, as they're currently in New Orleans, where D'Amour, Hall, and the build team are based. They're constructing the project locally, as vividly described in an email from Katie Pearl:

We've had to rearrange our entire rehearsal schedule to accommodate for—not actor auditions or other shows, but TERMITES, who are swarming this time of year in New Orleans. For the next two weeks, we have to pause our rehearsal between 7:50 and 9 pm while the termites swarm...then we come back for the last hour of the day. It's hilarious and (frankly!) annoying, but it's all part of working in New Orleans, in an old warehouse called happyland that is just open to the outside world in plenty of places...the nature intrusions keep us connected to something that's important to the piece, and that is that human beings are not at the center of everything, controlling everything, making all the decisions. So it feels right.

What follows is a compilation of those brief, yet revealing phone conversations, held between PearlDamour's rehearsals, sewing, writing, and the completion of their transportable forest:

**Lizzie Olesker (Rail):** I've read that *How to Build a Forest* was inspired by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. Can you tell me more about this?

**Lisa D'Amour:** The initial seed of the idea for this piece came from my family's experience with Hurricane Katrina when 100 trees were uprooted from my grandmother's property. They all came down in a period of an hour leaving the landscape unrecognizable. The next day, my family was left asking how do we deal with what's left? And then they just said, okay, let's start



again. Day by day, it's a process of rebuilding—person to person, house by house, and neighbor to neighbor. Katrina had such a tremendous effect. The trees on my family's property are just one small example of it.

Remember those days? When we could just sit on the front porch  
With a beer or an iced tea or whatever  
And watch the trees sway  
As a storm rolled in?  
And feel the mist of that first bit of rain  
On our arms and cheeks  
I'm surprised I remember that.  
I usually feel the trees  
Took my memory with them.  
Snapped and cracked  
Twisted and uprooted  
Tossed into the sky  
Like a bunch of tinkertoys  
Before getting chainsawed up  
And carried away in a big ole truck.  
There it goes...

**Katie Pearl:** Katrina was as devastating as it was because of what was done to the environment and land for years before the storm happened. No one thought about it, they didn't actually see the whole effect. And now, there's the sudden realization that, oh my god, it's been happening for years.

**D'Amour:** In the 1970s and '80s, the oil industry came in and carved up the wetlands and the economy became so tied to oil. If there'd been a little bit of foresight, we wouldn't have this crazy knot of problems we're trying to deal with now. Enough mistakes were made in the last 100 years, that maybe we've learned something. But we're not talking overtly in the performance about all of this. It's more of a subtle meditation. If we can just slow down and experience ourselves in the context of other people and the world. To think about not just our own immediate needs but more about our interconnected needs.

Shawn Hall: Katrina marked a real change in my work and I began a steady documentation of its effect. I was observing and photographing the impact of the hurricane on the flora where I lived. What came back after Katrina and what did it look like?

**Rail:** What else would you say has inspired *How to Build a Forest*?

Hall: The connection with our families and our early experiences with nature have also informed this project. In the last few years, I've experienced a good deal of loss, which I've tried to transform through my work. In *How to Build A Forest*, we deal with a sense of impermanence—we put up a forest, and we take it down.

**Pearl:** The research phase for the project took us to Hornby Island (B.C.), where we met with workers in the logging industry. They explained to us first hand what's happening in the forest regarding growth and sustainability. We were starting from a personal and emotional place. But our research pushed us further. I had entered the project uncritically and found that I needed to discover my real point of view. Figuring this out has taken my life in a new direction. I now see the impact of the natural world, its deep connection to us, even when we live in a city.

**D'Amour:** Like when I'm walking through the streets of New York now, I'm thinking that it's still walking through nature. The buildings, the bridges, the electricity, and everything around us, it's all been made from things which came from the earth. My consciousness changed about all of this after living through Katrina. So, I wonder, do we have to wait for New York to get flooded or something? Why not consider our relationship to nature without a disaster?

Hall: Everything comes from the earth, like all the materials that we're using to create the forest. We want to be straight about it, to go head on into a conversation about it. People keep asking us if the forest will be made from recycled materials. No, I'm not a recycle artist. I'm using the materials that I feel are necessary for the work.



**D'Amour:** Later, we realized how much plastic we're using. We became interested in how inescapable that is and the ways in which plastic is connected to oil, and how connected that is to every part of our lives.

**Pearl:** I go into a grocery store now and see all the plastic, which I never really saw before. I go into H&M and instead of going oh cool, that shirt's only \$4.99, now I ask why is it only \$4.99? Where did it come from and how was it made? What went into that shirt? I'm asking questions about how we're part of a larger ecosystem.

**Rail:** Can you tell me more about the materials being used in the installation?

**D'Amour:** We were drawn to using certain fabrics—translucent, transformative, something almost not there. We also wanted it to be able to pack up easily. We wanted to have trees that are easy to put up and bring down, something once here, and then not here anymore. The trees will literally grow on pulleys, and give the feeling of being weightless and ephemeral.

**Hall:** The forest will shape shift, looking very different at different stages. We're looking at the earth as habitat and going further, in a poetic way.

**Pearl:** And we're literally sewing the whole thing together. We're making a world through sewing. I've been learning embroidery and experiencing the real build that's happening as we assemble the piece every day. It's so much work. We put an ad on Craigslist and now we have a small army of bywater, new bohemian 20-something women who come every day to embroider trees.

**Hall:** This project has been a challenge. I'm engaging in the process as a painter and an artist, not just as a set designer. In theater, the visual part usually comes later but in this process, it's been kind of reversed. I tried to meet deadlines but that wasn't always working for me because I work very intuitively—it's hard to force things. But sewing has always been part of my work as a costume and set designer. So this process was also natural for me in that I'm an assemblage kind of person, and I'm not afraid of scissors.

**Rail:** Do you want to incorporate that sense of process into the experience of the performance?

**Pearl:** Audiences usually only have access to such a small part of the process of creating theater. Personally, I love technical load-in nights. Seeing all the tools, where everything is ripe with possibility. You see how it grows, how the magic is made. In this piece, we're inviting the audience into that process.

**D'Amour:** There are so

many ways to experience the piece. We're committed to keeping it open. The audience can come for just a half an hour, or for longer. If we're doing our job when you enter the Kitchen, the pace of the building of the forest will change the way you feel. We're inviting people to spend time and have a private, slow experience. We're creating a different zone where your mind is uncluttered, like going into a forest.

**Pearl:** We want to give people a sense of how long the piece can last, before they enter it. We're thinking there might be some kind of timer, counting up from zero to eight hours. Then, we want to continue to contextualize what they're experiencing in terms of time throughout the performance. The completion phase, when the forest is done, will last about half an hour. The disassembly will be very quick.

**Rail:** How does your work draw on your being female?

**D'Amour:** We're unapologetically girly in our work and in this piece, as well, but that can be kind of dangerous. You know, all that mother earth crap. But we're three women sewing a forest together. We didn't shy away from the materials and techniques that are associated with women. What comes through in all of our work is the idea of having agency and voice, to be able to have direction. Even now, that's not always easy for women to do. In all of our past pieces, there's a mysterious and provocative figure at the center of it. Maybe in this piece, it's the forest

**Rail:** What do you hope the audience will take away from the piece?

**Hall:** I hope that the beauty of the forest will sit in their consciousness and that they'll walk away and begin to have a conversation about their connection to the natural world, its extraction and distribution.

**Pearl:** To slow down and experience being inside the forest. Not to dictate, but to suggest and to awaken awareness.  
(from *L'Esperance Section*)

The green snake curled under the moss-covered rock. The dragonfly asleep on the window screen.

The Squirrel racing up the tree trunk.

One fox in the woods digging a hole.

The chameleon turning pink.

The bird feet letting go of the branch.

The possum lapping up forgotten beer.

The blade of grass moving

The pinecone falling into the pile of pine needles.

The cardinal landing on the feeder.

A Caterpillar falling off a branch.

The spider adjusting its legs for daylight.

The cricket chewing the hydrangea.

The treefrog landing on a wet stone.

The bee hovering over the fruit plate.

A fish jumps in the dark river.

These are the things that keep me sane, Lisa.

And they are happening less and less.

**PearlDamour and Shawn Hall's *How to Build a Forest* occurs June 17 - 26, 2 - 10 PM, FREE, at the Kitchen, 512 WEST 19TH ST., NYC. 212-255-5793. It features sound design by Brendan Connelly and Christopher DeLaurenti, with lighting design by Bruce Steinberg. For further info, visit: [The Kitchen](#)**