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In HBO's new series 'Treme,' John Goodman looks back in anger

The actor costars in the series set in post-Katrina New Orleans. As a resident himself, he hopes the gritty show strikes a realistic tone for the city.



John Goodman in a scene from HBO's "Treme." (Paul Schiraldi / HBO)

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By Tina Dirmann REPORTING FROM NEW ORLEANS

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April 7, 2010

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John Goodman isn't the kind of actor who revels in the media spotlight. His default conversation is self-deprecating, his words tumbling forth in a low grumble that makes him all at once difficult to hear and curmudgeonly charming.

But mention one of his most beloved topics and his voice booms with clarity. "For so many reasons, it has just never been an overachiever," he says.

He's speaking of New Orleans, the adopted city he's called home for more than a decade.

"Or even an achiever," he adds. "But all that indifference, corruption and greed came to a head during and after Katrina. And we can't just tread water anymore."

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And for the first time in a long time, momentum is building in his city. There's a brand-new mayor. This season's Mardi Gras brought the biggest crowds since Hurricane Katrina, local authorities estimate. And, of course, the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl, the first time in the team's 43-year history.

"There's just a good spirit in the air," said Goodman, flashing a rare smile. "This is the most optimistic I've felt since I've lived here. Believe me, I wouldn't have said that a few months ago."

And yet, Goodman costars in the new HBO series "Treme," which forces him to look back -- with no small amount of anger -- at the worst moment in the city's history.

Named after a working-class neighborhood, the gritty drama, which premieres Sunday, focuses on the lives of local musicians just three months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. Created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, who worked as writers together on "Homicide: Life on the Street" and again on Simon's critically acclaimed series "The Wire," the series is already gaining early positive chatter.

Goodman, however, acknowledges early jitters. He doesn't want the show, which marks his most recent return to series television after "Roseanne" ended 13 years ago, to be a buzz kill for locals.

"Remember, I have to live here," jokes Goodman, who was working in Los Angeles during Katrina and suffered minor personal losses. "We were lucky."

It was after his turn as Dan Conner on the hit ABC series that he decided to move permanently to New Orleans, a base from which he continued to act, mostly in film, and of varying quality. In part the relocation was motivated by a desire to escape the tabloid journalists of Los Angeles, but also to get a handle on a drinking problem that has plagued him most of his life. (He's been sober now for nearly three years.)

And today, he's mindful how a fictional series, set amid the real-life tragedy, might not be welcomed by those just feeling strong enough to put hopelessness behind them.

"I don't want it to be seen as we're whining and raining on people's parade. It's a part of our history. A painful part. But if it's done right, it can show where we are coming from now. Why we have so much to celebrate. And it can show where we can still go."

In fact, Goodman suffers a little angst every time he reads over next week's script. "There's still something in me," he says, pointing toward his chest, "that just doesn't want to deal with what this character is going through."

The 57-year-old actor plays Creighton Bernette, a New Orleans transplant who moved to the city "with a romanticized ideal of what New Orleans could be," Goodman said. Bernette is a Tulane professor, rumored to be based on the Tulane educator, and colorful personality, Ashley Morris, who passed away recently.

The character was actually a late add-on, with the feisty professor created after Simon and Overmyer already had their main characters in place.

"But after we looked at the original constellation for the pilot," Overmyer said, "we realized we needed another character. And we needed that person to be a Tulane professor and a sort of commentator for the city. And the first person we thought of was John."

That's because Goodman, like his character, understood the anger and outrage pouring out of locals living in Katrina's wake.

"Not only is John an incredibly complicated and subtle actor," said Overmyer, "but he lives in New Orleans. So we didn't have to bring him up to speed. He feels passionately about this city, and its problems, the way we do."

Overmyer recalled one particular soliloquy that he wrote for Goodman's character, who rails against everyone, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the federal government.



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"And after we ran through that speech once," Overmyer said, "John came over to me and he said, 'I've thought this so many times.' We were in sync. And I couldn't think of anyone else playing this role."

Because he wasn't born in Louisiana, Goodman swore off attempting a Louisiana accent for the role, knowing the verbal beating Dennis Quaid took in 1986 after his caricature-like stab at a Cajun accent in "The Big Easy." And Goodman still cringes at his stab at the challenging accent in a role for a 1995 CBS version of "Streetcar Named Desire."

"I made the guy a yat," he said, referring to the unique blend of Creole French slang and Southern English drawl that locals describe as a "yatty accent." "And it was just the wrong way to go. I didn't even read what the critics said. They were probably right. I stunk."

But it's not just the city's accent that seems hard for TV and movie folks to capture on film. There's an elusive sultriness to New Orleans that Goodman says is hard to define, but it's palpable the moment you arrive. And he has faith "Treme" will come the closest to getting it right so far, particularly because of the series' focus. "On the musicians," said Goodman. "They are the heartbeat of this city."

Most people make a mistake, he notes, when they try to define the city by focusing on its most famous clichés: gumbo, Mardi Gras and voodoo. Then Goodman squirms in his chair, trying to sum up what he means.

"I mean, yes, there's definitely the people, the weather, the music," he says, then pauses to laugh at himself. "Now here I've gone down cliché road. But it's something in the air here besides the mosquitoes. Something you either get or you don't. Maybe it's just for those kind of people who for some reason love swamps."

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
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ChadHam at 12:56 PM April 07, 2010

What a wonderful article and interview. I am born and raised in New Orleans and this article hits the nail on the head about who we are, what we went through and why we are still here. Thank you Mr. Goodman for caring enough to help tell our story. Chad in New Orleans

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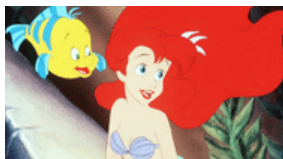
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