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## Dust Settlers Follow a Storm BY LANA BORTOLOTT



Photo by Dixie Sheridan

The Axis production of Ms. Sharp's 'Last Man Club.'

Among the many events halted in New York in the wake of superstorm Sandy was a one-act play, "Last Man Club," which closed one performance short of its full run just 24 hours before the storm's surge hit the city.

Now the play, a small, terse drama about a family of Dust Bowl survivors on the barren Oklahoma landscape of 1936, is having a second act. Writer and director Randy Sharp will remount "Last Man Club" at the Axis Theatre beginning this weekend, bringing with her a renewed mindfulness not only of survival, but of how, through history, calamity can serve as a vehicle for illuminating human experience beyond the physical wreckage of a storm

The play's title comes from the name given to the support group of farmers who stayed in their homes during the nine-year period of the Dust Bowl, which at its peak, covered 100 million acres. But it should resonate with New Yorkers who endured the storm and its aftermath in Staten Island, Broad Channel, or any of the coastal areas struck by the storm.

The family in Ms. Sharp's play is surviving in a one-room bunker. Some members are absent—a brother has fled to California, the parents' whereabouts are unknown—and others fill in their places. But what's left is what they all have in common: dust and isolation.

The irony of a play about a disaster halted by a disaster is not lost on Ms. Sharp. She discussed that and more with The Wall Street Journal in her West Village office above the Axis Theatre.

### **Why set your story in the Dust Bowl era?**

I've always been fascinated by this moonscape that happened in the middle of this country and the fact that so many Americans didn't know what the Dust Bowl was. I was interested in the drama of it, of the people that stayed. I didn't believe that everybody got on the truck with Henry Fonda in the movie ["The Grapes of Wrath"]. What happened to them?

### **You had to close the play last fall because of the impending storm. Did it feel like you were a play within a play of sorts?**

We were stunned by how strange a coincidence it was that we would have our show terminated by a very serious storm. But it was less about relating it to something specific to New Yorkers, and it was more about what happens to people who have been stripped of everything and just learning what hope really is and how it is the saddest emotion of all.

There's a lot of iconography about this era—"The Grapes of Wrath," Dorothea Lange's photo of the "Migrant Mother." Did you feel any urge to transcend that?

I didn't want to debunk it, but I just wanted to produce something that was not about these separated images. Like [Lange's] picture, I don't want people to go, "Oh, there's the Dust Bowl lady." I want them to look at that picture and say, 'What the hell was her daily life like? What did it feel like to be that lady?' I want them to look at it and accept that that is a real person, an American person, who is suffering at a level that you need to be conscious of.

### **The entire play takes place indoors. How can you convey the enormity of what was going on outside?**

One of the things we wanted to do is have the audience feel disconnected from the normal world, because these people would go to sleep and wake up in the morning and the landscape of their farms would be radically altered by a dust storm in the night. So I didn't want to put walls in the house because I wanted the audience to feel that they didn't know where the walls are ... because it was an unknown landscape for these people out there. It was a constantly changing desolation.

### **How do you see your play resonating in post-Sandy New York?**

I really hope that people can look at it without having to [say], 'That really reminds me of people in the Rockaways.' I think they can have maybe some of the experience and what it's like to have your things, your house destroyed, everything you've worked for taken away from you like that. I do think that people in New York—and this is a microcosm—have [already] forgotten ... that there are still people who don't have their houses. These people had everything taken away from them in a storm only a few months ago and people have already forgotten about them. That's why they talk about these empty houses in the play ... to think of all those lives disrupted by the Dust Bowl.



Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

Writer-director Randy Sharp, right, with actor David Crabb