

One can see the roots of *How to Build a Forest* in Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl's first collaboration, *The Grove* (1997), which took site-specific interest in a particular grove of trees on the side of Lamar Blvd, one of Austin's primary commuter routes. Convinced that people drove by the grove every day without actually noticing it, the two decided to make a 14-hour installation in the grove designed to be seen by the occupants of passing cars. In *The Grove's* inspiration and structure, PearlDamour discovered one of the central tenets of their body of work: *make the audience notice not what "performers" are doing at a site, but focus on the site itself and see it with fresh eyes.*

*How To Build A Forest* is a collaboration between the performance duo PearlDamour (Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour) and the visual artist Shawn Hall. The project began with an early conversation that Lisa and Katie had in 2008. Lisa was thinking a lot about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on her family and her hometown of New Orleans. She was particularly haunted by 100 trees that had been blown down on a piece of property co-owned by family – the property, called L'Esperance, is about 30 miles north of New Orleans. While musing on how much her family mourned those old pine trees, Katie says "wouldn't it be amazing if we could re-build those trees on stage." And so the dreaming began.

Katie and Lisa began thinking and researching as they finished another PearlDamour project called *Terrible Things*. They conducted two independent experiments in building and disassembling fabricated forests – Katie with students at St. Stephen's High School in Austin, TX, and Lisa at a conference about performance and the environment at the Mitchell Center for the Arts in Houston.

Shawn Hall had worked with PearlDamour before in the capacity of a traditional set designer (on their OBIE-winning *Nita & Zita*, created with New Orleans' ArtSpot Productions). PearlDamour approached Shawn Hall for several reasons: Their shared history as collaborators; Shawn's work as a painter, which springs from naturally occurring forms in nature and the human body; Shawn's deep roots in New Orleans and her own experience of living through Hurricane Katrina. From the outset it was clear to all of us that *Forest* required Shawn's total participation as a visual artist (rather than as a designer), bringing her aesthetic and working process fully to the piece. The early stages of our work as a trio (about 14 months before our premiere) involved research trips to forested areas in Mississippi and South Louisiana, as well as a trip to second- and first- growth forests on Hornby Island near Vancouver, BC. The trips allowed the artists to think about trees and the history of forests, share books that they found influential, and begin to talk about the core values of the piece. That summer they also in Shawn's studio experimenting with different materials – inflatables, pulleys, translucent fabric and more.

The first work-in-progress showing was in a theater at Appalachian State University. The premiere performance took place in the Kitchen's black box theater in New York in June 2011. The artists have spent a lot of time talking through their terminology – *Forest* is an installation, not a "set," this is a performance installation, not a "play," it takes place in a space, not on a "stage."