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Troupe from the 'hood

L.A. theater company, 2 Philly groups stage play

By SHAUN BRADY
For the Daily News

AS BEHIND-THE-scenes matters were being hashed out in a nearby room, the two actors sat across from one another in the church basement hallway. Wendel Young ran through his lines, while Ismael Rodriguez followed along, feeding him the next word in the script whenever memory failed.

Young's brow furrowed as he froze mid-recitation.

"'Of,'" prompted Rodriguez.

"Man, you gotta give me more than 'of,'" chided Young.

They were working out the kinks, but Young and Rodriguez are far from professional actors. They are recovering drug addicts, residents of a North Philadelphia facility run by Project H.O.M.E. Founded in 1989, that organization battles poverty and homelessness through affordable housing, education, employment and health care assistance.

Young and Rodriguez were soon joined in their impromptu rehearsal by another resident, Reginald Cintron. Cintron had found his own way of preparing his lines: He recorded them to play on his Walkman while riding the bus.

These and eight other Project H.O.M.E. residents are taking the stage this weekend through a partnership between Philly's Art Sanctuary (see sidebar) and the Los Angeles Poverty Department (aka, the LAPD), a theater company based on L.A.'s Skid Row.

The play they are performing here, "Agents & Assets," takes an admittedly provocative look at U.S. drug policy using testimony from a congressional hearing. A panel discussion and audience Q&A follow the production, to be held at the Church of the Advocate, 18th and Diamond streets.

Founded in 1985 by director, actor, activist and writer John Malpede, LAPD was initially composed primarily of homeless people. It remains committed to projects that affect and draw participants from the communities where it performs.

"We're interested in hooking up the lived underground expertise with the social policy for the benefit of everybody - so people can get the big picture," Malpede said. "And perhaps we can change the big picture as well."

Part of the big picture Malpede and the LAPD want people to see more clearly involves United States and international drug policies and their effect on the local level.

The text of "Agents & Assets" is drawn entirely from transcripts of a 1998 hearing by the House Committee on Intelligence into allegations that the CIA had funded the Contras in Nicaragua via cocaine trafficking, essentially resulting in the 1980s crack epidemic.

"They allotted two hours and 15 minutes for this hearing," said Malpede, "and we only gave them an hour and 15 minutes. So it's been trimmed down, but with the intent of not altering anyone's point of view."

So with no editorial input beyond condensing for time, how does LAPD expect this presentation to be more than C-SPAN theater?

"I think the transcript speaks for itself," Malpede replied. "I think it could have been played for comedy."

During rehearsals that night at North Philadelphia's Honickman Learning Center, the material was further developed through performances.



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

The combined cast will perform "Agents & Assets" this weekend.

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Wendel Young, who had complained earlier about the too-passive Committee member he was playing (his grumbled "I play a Republican" met with quite a bit of laughter around the table), was encouraged by Malpede to further explore the part.

Young managed to find a few lines where he could bring out his own anger and frustration, pounding the table with his fists for emphasis. Those feelings sprang in part from his own military experience.

"I'm a veteran," Young explained. "While a lot of this stuff was going on, I was serving in the military. And I was out there fighting for a country that was trying to kill my people."

Participating in this play and in other events Project H.O.M.E. arranges is essential to Young's recovery, he said, because it's far too easy to fall back into old habits. One of the men originally cast had already been replaced after he fell back into drug use.

"This isn't my first time in recovery," Young admitted. "When I stopped using the drugs, I sat home and I vegetated. I vegetated and I got bored. I got bored and I got high. Because that's what I knew how to do. So it's like we have to fill our lives up with something again."

Andre Hart, case manager for Young and the other men from Project H.O.M.E., said it wasn't difficult to choose who would be cast.

"A lot of times, they can get diverted," Hart said. "But these are a few of the guys that I truly believe can actually stay focused."

"Agents & Assets" was originally produced in 2001 in Los Angeles, shortly after the passage of a drug reform initiative in California. Since then, the LAPD has brought the play to other cities, always making sure to involve local issues and community leaders.

Malpede refers to the piece as a three-act play, with the performance itself comprising the first act, panel discussions the second, and audience Q&A the third.

According to LAPD's Henriette Brouwers, who is assisting with and acting in the Philadelphia production, gathering activists from disparate concentrations can kick-start conversations that otherwise may not have happened.

"That's really what we try to do every time we land somewhere," she said. "To make new connections in the community where we are."

Jeffrey Hart, Art Sanctuary program coordinator, said this community connection was the real attraction of the piece.

"Art Sanctuary felt the need to bring this project to Philadelphia after seeing that this not only could benefit those that are in recovery, but it could benefit an entire community to understand the role that they play in the structure of their community, and of their city, and of their lives, but the lack of control that they have when outside entities have the opportunity to control them."

Malpede summed the concept up: "I feel like this play is about citizens witnessing the government."

*Church of the Advocate, 18th and Diamond streets, 7:30 p.m. Friday-Sunday, \$5,
215-232-4485, www.artsanctuary.org.*