

Bonjour, Kurosawa

GENNEVILLIERS, FRANCE: Why is a 1965 Japanese film being interpreted this month in the French suburbs by a Californian theatre troupe? The reason can be traced to Oaxaca, Mexico—where **John Malpede**, taking a break from his Spanish studies, saw a retrospective of recently deceased filmmaker **Akira Kurosawa**. The director's gritty meditation on feudal-era poverty, *Red Beard*, struck Malpede as urgently relevant to the populations with whom he creates theatre in Los Angeles, many of whom are or were recently homeless. "Kurosawa envisions a dynamic in which degradation is transformed into something positive, rather than

becoming frozen as bitterness," he says.

In 2001, at a Skid Row hotel in L.A., Malpede installed a row of actors on either side of a TV set on which the film played from start to finish (sans subtitles), and choreographed the actors' gestural and choral interaction with it, for an audience of 20. "It's very spare," he explains. "There's a real tension between what's going on in the film and the way it's done live; it's always a counterpoint."

In 1999 French dramatist **Pascal Rambert** directed his play *Race* for Malpede's company, **Los Angeles Poverty Department**. Now that Rambert has taken over the **Théâtre 2 Gennevilliers**, he has invited LAPD over to

remount its *Red Beard/Red Beard* (April 1–20). The chamber piece fit with Rambert's mission—to deepen his institution's connection to the community—but not so much with its large stage. So Malpede has reconceived the show to occur in quadruplicate, on the sides of a diamond-shaped playing area, with four TV sets, four casts and four intimate audiences, all of whom can peripherally see and overhear the simultaneous performances. Only one of the casts will perform in English. The 35 French actors performing with LAPD's delegation are non-professionals. Though Gennevilliers is not one of the *banlieues* that experienced the highly publicized riots of 2005, it is an indus-



HENRIETTE BROUWERS

Pascal Rambert, left, and John Malpede.

trial suburb with plummeting employment—and Malpede is eager to hear what its residents have to add to LAPD's ongoing dialogue about poverty. Visit www.lapdpovertydept.org.

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