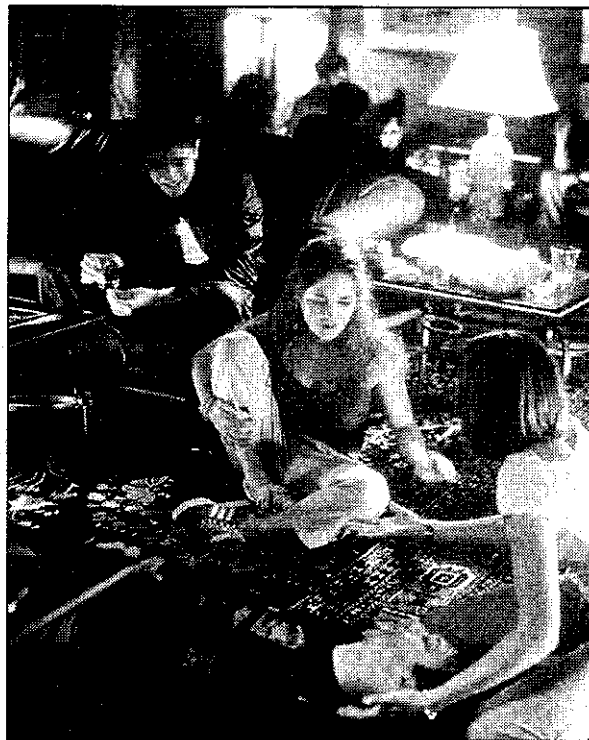


Courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department

Actor Rick Mantley, above, is one of the performers in the Los Angeles Poverty Department's "Agents and Assets." Topher Grace, from left, Majandra Delfino and Corey Spears appear in Steven Soderbergh's "Traffic," at right.



BOB MARSHAK

Itinerary: The War on Drugs

By **ROBIN RAUZI**
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In his last statement as the U.S. drug czar, retired Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey said it was time to abandon the metaphor of a "war on drugs."

It seems a little late. Since 1970, the federal anti-drug budget has grown from \$1 billion to more than \$17 billion a year. Indeed, the efforts to fight drugs grew to fit that war metaphor.

In the U.S., drug use dropped between 1979 and 1992—from 14.1% to 5.8% of Americans over age 12 saying they'd used some illegal substance in the last month. At the same time, drug offenders went from making up less than 25% to nearly 60% of inmates in federal prisons.

The politics of the drug war have provided ample material for artists and entertainers. From "The French Connection" to the teenage dealer in "American Beauty," there are some serious—and humorous—examples this weekend.

Thursday

"Agents and Assets" is a theatrical show combined with real symposiums about the war on drugs.

Starting tonight at 7:30, Side Street Projects (425 S. Main St., 2nd floor, downtown Los Angeles. \$8-\$10. (213) 620-8895), the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) dramatizes a congressional hearing on the CIA's alleged involvement in drug trafficking. The LAPD is a theatrical group of homeless and formerly homeless actors, many from Skid Row. In "Agents and Assets," they play congressmen and government officials during the 1998 hearing about whether the CIA sold crack in Los Angeles.

Tonight, the post-show discussion is with Dave Fratello, who managed the successful Yes on Prop. 36 campaign—which requires drug treatment for nonviolent drug offenders—and has also coordinated initiatives for medical use of marijuana.

Friday's show, also at 7:30,

includes a discussion with Sandra Alvarez, head of the Colombia Human Rights Program at Global Exchange, who is leading an education effort about the U.S. government's role in Colombia's civil war. Saturday, theater directors John Malpede and Peter Sellars lead a discussion on the arts and social change at 2:30 p.m. Saturday performances are at 1 and 7:30 p.m.

If you drive up the 5 Freeway on your way home, you might pass the mural titled "Just Say No" near the interchange with the Pasadena Freeway. It was painted in 1991 by Steven Rose, a member of the other LAPD.

Friday

In "Traffic," (rated R, in wide release) film director Steven Soderbergh gives an epic drama about the drug war an independent movie feel. It has three story lines, all related to the war on drugs in the U.S. and Mexico. Michael Douglas plays a judge who is tapped to

be the next drug czar. Little does he know, his own teenage daughter is developing a problem. Catherine Zeta-Jones plays the unsuspecting wife of a drug lord, and Benicio Del Toro plays a Mexican cop on the border trying to figure out what's the right thing to do.

"Traffic," Soderbergh's second critical hit this year after "Erin Brockovich," won the best picture prize from the New York Film Critics Circle.

Saturday

Lighten up and go see "Heroin Addicts," which has *nothing* to do with the illegal narcotic. The all-female variety show has just gone weekly at bang. (457 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A. 8 p.m. \$8. [323] 653-6886) after two years running monthly. Host Penelope Lombard and fellow comic Amy Simon lassoed top talent from other comedy theaters—Groundlings, ACME, etc.—to assemble "Heroin Addicts," which moves beyond sketch comedy and parody into hilarious character pieces.

PLAN AHEAD: NEXT WEEKEND

• "Margaret." Timothy McNeil's coming-of-age play, circa 1968, directed by "You Can Count On Me" star Mark Ruffalo, runs Jan. 19-Feb. 25 at the Hudson Backstage Theatre, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. \$15. (323) 856-4200. (323) 860-8835.

monologist Spalding Gray performs two of his latest solo shows, Thursday ("A Slippery Slope") and Friday ("Morning, Noon & Night") at the California Center for the Arts, 340 N. Escondido Blvd., Escondido. \$32. (800) 988-4253.

• "The Knackers ABC," Boris

Fist Theatre, 1625 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles. \$15. (323) 882-6912.

• The Iona Pear Dance Theatre of Honolulu performs Cheryl Flaharty's full-evening contemporary spectacle "The Mythology of Angels" on Jan. 18 at Pepperdine University, 2007 Pepperdine Way, Los Angeles. \$20. (818) 467-1111.

Also Jan. 20 at 8 p.m. in the Alex Theatre, 216 N. Brand Blvd., Glendale. \$20 to \$43. (800) 233-3123.

• Momix performs "Baseball" in two different versions at 2 and 8 p.m. on Jan. 20 in the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton St., Los Angeles. \$20. (213) 475-1111.