

By Linda Eisenstein

## Theatre of the Outsider

A troubled Vietnam vet; an unholy trinity of prisoners; political theatre made by formerly homeless addicts from Los Angeles' and Cleveland's skid row. Three Cleveland theatre productions turn a spotlight on the plight of the outsider this November.

At Dobama Theatre, it's Highway Ulysses, composer Rinde Eckert's contemporary musical adaptation of *The Odyssey*. It re-imagines Ulysses as a Vietnam veteran who has returned from the war—yet never really come back. Holed up for several decades in a corner of small town “forgotten America,” he must find his way home when he hears that his child is being held as a ward of the state after his wife's death. Along the way, he meets various American archetypes who are clever parallels to Homer's characters—like the Cyclops as a small-town librarian.

The challenging piece is both a huge stretch and a risk for Dobama, which has cut back its season from six to four plays this year in the face of a \$25,000 deficit. But it's not skimping on this production: the theatre has assembled a cast of nine, an orchestra of four, and flown in the composer to serve as musical director.

“It's a beautiful piece,” says director Sonya Robbins, “about revisiting this earth and opening your heart. It's so resonant right now. I love the indirect way it deals with class, with things we're afraid to talk about—because we all know who's fighting this war. It raises questions about the relationship between a soldier who's come back traumatized and the civilian world that sent him into it.”

Dobama  
1846 Coventry, Cleveland Hts., 216.961.3396  
Nov. 19-Dec. 12 [www.dobama.org](http://www.dobama.org)

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Few writers have lived more as an outsider than Jean Genet, the French playwright, novelist, and poet. Genet began

his writing career during a prison life sentence after living for years as a thief and male prostitute, and survived to become an honored figure of French letters. His works feature characters who live far outside the status quo, who find a kind of transfiguration and dark sainthood in their quest for beauty within the violence of their lives.

The experimental New World Performance Lab is mounting a version of his first play, *Deathwatch*, which Genet revised just before his death in 1986. It features Colombian actor Jairo Cuesta as Green Eyes, a tormented convict serving a life sentence for murder, and his relationship with his two young cellmates, the soon-to-be-released LeFranc (Justin Hale) and flirtatious, pretty-boy Maurice (a riveting Christopher Buck), who trades sex for protection.

Are their transformational rituals all the elaborate fantasy of a condemned man in solitary confinement? Director James Slowiak's program notes hint at it, but the production, confined to a rectangular white carpet, maintains a palpable tension between the three men, one that can bristle with menace yet also exude sensuality and tenderness.

Cleveland Public Theatre  
6415 Detroit Ave., 216.631.2727  
Nov. 4-13  
[www.cptonline.org](http://www.cptonline.org)

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Over Thanksgiving weekend, radical Los Angeles director and provocateur John Malpede will confound expectations about “community art” with *Agents and Assets*, a co-production of the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Y-Haven Project at Cleveland Public Theatre. A political artist with witty, candid views (“If it's in a white room, it's performance art; if it's in a black room, it's theatre”), Malpede has been making theatre as community activism on L.A.'s skid row since 1984.

*Agents and Assets* looks at an unsavory story of the War on Drugs: it's based completely on testimony from a Congressional hearing about CIA “assets” selling drugs in L.A. in order to illegally fund the Contras. Using formerly addicted men from Cleveland and L.A. to play all the roles is part of Malpede's Brechtian strategy, and according to him, it's no stretch. “These people are subject matter experts on government policy—they live in communities that are affected by the policies and suffer the consequences.”

Malpede's productions are always about engaging people as citizens. They include panel discussions and a democracy-in-action portion where the audience can share their own stories. His most recent piece, *RFK in EKY*, recreated Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 visit to Eastern Kentucky in which audiences drove from lectures to town meetings to student rallies, crisscrossing towns, sparking conversations between strangers in cars and buses. Getting people talking is always one of the purposes of the performance.

“Theatre is inherently social,” says Malpede. “The great contribution of the arts is how it can help reknit a social fabric, create community.” And with two new wars being fought with “contractor assets” who operate outside the Military Code of Justice, where the newly liberated Afghanistan is moving more heroin than ever in its history, *Agents and Assets* is uncannily resonant. “That's the point: to hold up a historical mirror to the present moment.”

Cleveland Public Theatre  
6415 Detroit Ave., 216.631.2727  
Nov. 26-28  
[www.cptonline.org](http://www.cptonline.org)

Linda Eisenstein is a playwright, composer, & critic. Her play Eisenstein's *Monster* runs in NYC at the Duplex Cabaret thru Nov. 23. Visit her on the web at [www.lindaeisenstein.com](http://www.lindaeisenstein.com)