

THEATER

An in-depth look at U.S. drug war

LINDA EISENSTEIN
Special to The Plain Dealer

"Community-based art," says director John Malpede, his voice dripping with condescension. "Oh, isn't *that* nice."

He means, of course, that people think theater created for social purposes will be earnest, well-meaning — and just plain bad. "But I like to confound expectations," he says.

A nationally acclaimed theater radical and social visionary, Malpede has been confounding audience expectations for two decades. He and members of his group, the provocative Los Angeles Poverty Department, or LAPD, have been in residence at Cleveland Public Theatre throughout November, preparing an unorthodox play in Public Theatre's new space called Orthodox.

The play is "Agents and Assets," an adaptation of congressional hearings about a provocative byway of the U.S. government's war on drugs. It explores the controversial allegation that the CIA used contractor "assets" to sell crack cocaine in inner-city Los Angeles to fund the Nicaraguan Contras.

"It was an illegal end run around the Constitution," says

PREVIEW

Agents and Assets

What: A play based on accounts of the government's war on drugs, directed by John Malpede.

When: 7:30 p.m. today, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Orthodox at Cleveland Public Theatre, 6203 Detroit Ave.

Tickets: \$5 (suggested donation). Call 216-631-2727 or go to www.cptonline.org.

Malpede, "a story all too relevant today."

The actors are veterans of the war on drugs, straight off the mean streets of Cleveland and Los Angeles. Many of the actors are formerly homeless recovering addicts, either from Cleveland Public Theatre's Y-Haven project or the LAPD, which produces theater on that city's skid row. Others are activists who have lived in communities on the front lines of the drug war.

"They're subject-matter specialists," says Malpede. "All of them have firsthand experience with the effects of ill-conceived government policies."

The play itself is only the first part of each day's event. "Theater is best when it promotes a community conversation about the issues that affect our real lives," says Malpede. Every performance is followed by a discussion

section — first a panel of specialists, then audience testimony.

Today's speakers include Ed Orlett, campaign manager for 2002's Proposition 1, the "treatment, not jail" initiative on the Ohio ballot that year; and Tony Vento, director of the Inter-Faith Council, who will speak on the impact of the war on drugs in Central America and Colombia.

On Friday, Alfred McCoy, author of "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," will speak on the current drug trade in Afghanistan. Saturday, journalist Dan Forbes, attorney Myron Watson and Brian Davis, director of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, will tackle the organized opposition to drug reform in Ohio and the impact of the war on drugs in urban communities.

On Sunday, panelists include the Rev. Charles Hurst of North Presbyterian Church and Rickey Mantley of the Los Angeles Community Action Network. They will address the ins and outs of organizing for social change.

Eisenstein is a playwright in Cleveland.

To reach Linda Eisenstein:
entertainment@plaind.com