

For this LAPD, the weapons are words

Los Angeles Poverty Department takes a conversation-starter to the Netherlands.

By CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS
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Rick Mantley, a veteran of high times and hard living in downtown Los Angeles, leads a mostly modest, stable life these days. He edits a newsletter for the Los Angeles Community Action Network. He sleeps in an apartment next to skid row. But he's about to see Europe for the first time, and it's all thanks to his part-time job as inspector general of the CIA.

Mantley, 52, is an actor with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a 20-year-old theater troupe that draws its performers from the homeless and formerly homeless residents of downtown Los Angeles. Every time the troupe performs its piece "Agents & Assets," he plays CIA inspector general Fred Hitz, a veteran spy-agency official testifying before a congressional committee about the CIA's alleged role in the California crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s.

And "Agents & Assets" keeps coming back.

Created in 2001 by LAPD founder and director John Malpede, the show took the LAPD's players to Detroit in 2002 and Cleveland in 2004. In late November, Malpede, Mantley and 12 other LAPD members will fly to Utrecht, in the Netherlands, to be part of an arts festival there. The troupe will perform the 70-minute piece in English on Nov. 30, Dec. 1 and Dec. 2, each performance followed by a discussion (in English and Dutch) of international drug policies. (The festival organizers are paying for the troupe's travel, which for most of the actors entails applying for their first passports.)

"I have to refresh myself every time we reprise the play, but it comes back," said Mantley.

Since its premiere, "Agents & Assets" has won attention for the star-crossed way it brings content and performers together. The starting idea, Malpede said, was to have murky workings of the federal government explored by actors who have seen policies translated into street-level experience. And given the last few months' headlines, Malpede added, this seemed an opportune time to think about how



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HEARING ROOM: John Malpede, front, directs Los Angeles Poverty Department actors in a rehearsal of "Agents & Assets."

U.S. administrations use their intelligence-gathering agencies.

All 31 pages of the script are gleaned from testimony by Hitz and questioning by Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles) and others. The full Hitz report, prompted by reporter Gary Webb's 1996 investigative series in the San Jose Mercury News, filled two volumes and hundreds of pages.

It found that CIA officials, eager to back the Nicaraguan Contras, kept mum about their drug dealing to raise money. But Hitz stopped short of endorsing Webb's thesis that the CIA was complicit in the explosion of the crack cocaine trade in the 1980s. Webb committed suicide in 2004.

The LAPD's play is simpler than all that.

"It's set up as a hearing room.

Everyone wears suits. There are a lot of American flags, suits and briefcases," said Malpede. The dialogue "sort of speaks for itself. . . . It seemed like there was such a big gap between how policy gets made and the people who have to suffer the policy," he said.

After performances, said Mantley, "people come at me, and they're outraged. They believe that the CIA is responsible for the drug epidemic that has plagued this country, and they think I'm exonerating them." It's easier to believe all of an accusation or none it, Mantley said, than it is to see "shades of gray."

Mantley, a balding African American who stands about 5 feet 8, first won the central role because he'd been a reliable performer in previous shows, and because — despite his own admitted cocaine troubles in the old days — he has a memory sharp enough to handle a five-page monologue thick with the argot of government.

"In theatrical dialogue, you can't do a lot of hemming and hawing. It can't be like normal conversation," said Mantley. For the European audience, he noted, the cast will speak more slowly, and some tangential references have been dropped.

Meanwhile, if the show endures much longer, Mantley may outlast the original Fred Hitz in the job. Hitz, who started as CIA inspector general in 1990, left less than a year after the 1998 hearings to take a teaching job at his alma mater, Princeton University.

"He did his job," said Mantley. "He wasn't a stooge or a patsy."