



Fearful Symmetry in Bolivia

By James McEnteer

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In August, artists from Skid Row Los Angeles teamed with Bolivian actors to perform a play throughout Bolivia about the "war on drugs." Drug issues have strained relations between the U.S. and Bolivia and the "war" against drugs has claimed many victims in both countries. The idea of the tour was to see if the play might stimulate citizens of the two countries to find common ground and create a more constructive dialog than their governments.

Bolivian President Evo Morales, the first indigenous leader of any South American country, has been for many years, and remains, head of the federation of coca growers. The Bush administration accused Morales of failing to stem the tide of cocaine production and distribution. In turn, Morales accused the U.S. of meddling in Bolivian affairs and plotting with his political enemies to overthrow his government.

Both countries expelled each other's ambassadors. The U.S. ended its preferential trade terms with Bolivia, citing the country's lack of drug enforcement cooperation. In retaliation, Bolivia threw out U.S. government employees of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Peace Corps. Morales and some U.S. officials have expressed a cautious optimism that relations between the two countries may improve in the Obama era, but recently the Bolivian president accused the U.S. of complicity in the Honduras military coup.

The California group—named the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)—has been performing radical street theater for 25 years. Made up of recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, ex-convicts, and formerly homeless men and women, the group voted to name itself using the initials of the police force with whom many of them had sparred.

LAPD founder and director John Malpede based his play *Agents & Assets* on a 1998 transcript of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee hearings that examined allegations of CIA complicity in the crack cocaine epidemic that ravaged minority communities in California cities. As journalist Gary Webb detailed in an explosive 1996 newspaper series, "Dark Alliance," the CIA enabled huge shipments of cocaine to enter the United States to raise money for the anti-government forces in Nicaragua known as the Contras.



Setting up Agentes y Activos in Prado, La Paz; Javier Mendizaval and Augusto Hinojosa in front, Nilo Berrocal on stage—photo by Cristina Lopez

The U.S. Congress had denied funding for the Contras, even as President Reagan called them freedom fighters and compared them to America's founding fathers. So Oliver North and the CIA found a way to get money for Contra military actions, though it contributed to creating a huge new class of crack addicts among America's ethnic urban poor.

As Malpede told a Bolivian audience after one performance: "We work in the poorest part of Los Angeles, where people come when they have no place else to go and end up living in the streets. LAPD lives and works in an area affected by drugs. It was the anger of Los Angeles citizens that the CIA might have been involved in smuggling crack cocaine into the country that sparked these legislative hearings. These hearings are also a metaphor for all things the U.S. government does all around the world that they shouldn't, instead of taking care of their own people."

Malpede edited the hearing transcript for length and clarity, but did not change a word of it. Each performance is unique since Act Two is a discussion among local expert panelists, the actors, and the audience about how the issues raised in the play are relevant to the "here and now" of each production.

Agents & Assets began its run of performances during the post-presidential election period of 2000, touring many cities throughout the United States. With different drug reform laws up for votes in various states, *Agents & Assets* proved relevant not only in the U.S., but also in Europe, which suffers its own intransigent problems with drugs and drug law



Bolivian actor Wiler Vidaurre as CIA Inspector Fred Hitz—photo by Cristina Lopez

For its South American premiere, the play (called *Agentes y Activos* in Bolivia) toured a country where much cocaine originates. Bolivian media and government officials had expressed interest in this project combining the efforts of Americans and Bolivians. After rehearsals and performances in Cochabamba, the show played Oruro, La Paz, El Alto, Sucre, and Santa Cruz. Questions and comments in every city reflected the intense emotions the issues of the play raise about the drug war, notions of justice, and international relations. Bolivian historian, activist, and ex-government official Rafael Puente reminded audiences that, though events in the play might seem remote, the same sorts of things were happening here in Bolivia at the same time. In 1980, the CIA assisted the violent "narco golpe de estado" (drug coup) of General Luis Garcia Meza, which former DEA agent Michael Levine wrote about in his book *The Big White Lie*.

As the play shows, in 1998 CIA Inspector General Frederick Hitz denied and obfuscated the CIA connection to Contra drug smuggling. Recently, under pressure from the ACLU, the Agency released a highly redacted CIA Inspector General's report about CIA torture techniques. Some of the same players were involved in both episodes. Porter Goss, chair of the dramatized hearing, played down the allegations of CIA malfeasance in the 1980s. Later, as CIA Director under George W. Bush, Goss lobbied for keeping the torture report secret to avoid damaging America's reputation and CIA morale.

Agents & Assets reveals the hypocrisy of lawmakers who decry illegal drugs, even as they refuse to sanction the CIA for enabling Americans to become cocaine addicts in order to pay for an illegal war. LAPD actors and others who play the 12 committee members, and the CIA inspector general called to testify, are men and women who have been personally affected by illegal drugs and the "war" against them. Some have suffered addiction or incarceration. By speaking the words of lawmakers who permit systemic abuse, the actors bear witness against them.

Former cocaine addict and current LAPD actor Kevin Michael Key told a Santa Cruz audience, "It's in the interest of the governments to continue narco-traffic as a means of controlling the people. Criminalization is the American way. Though rehabilitation exists, many drug users are simply locked up in jail. The demand for rehabilitation has to come from the people."

In answer to a Bolivian audience member's question about whether or not Obama will change things, Malpede opined that, "Changing drug policy is not a high priority for Obama. Changes in drug policy have come from communities or states in defiance of federal law, to reduce penalties and put treatment in place of jail time." Malpede's tag line for the show, that "the war of drugs imposes a military solution to a social and public health issue," was widely printed in the Bolivian press.

Bolivians have their own defective drug war in place, thanks to Law 1008 passed in 1988 under intense pressure from the United States. Anyone accused of drug violations under what one former law school dean calls this "inhumane" law loses basic human rights, such as the presumption of innocence, safeguards against self-incrimination, the right to a defense, to an impartial judge, to due process, or to a speedy trial. Law 1008 expands the definition of "trafficking" to mean "to produce, possess, keep, store, transport, deliver, administer or give as a gift." Judges routinely hand out harsh

sentences. An accusation is tantamount to a judgment of guilt and snitches often turn in people for the reward money with whom they have grudges unrelated to drugs. Police often resort to torture to extricate confessions from the accused. Such forced confessions are all that is needed for proof of guilt in Bolivian judicial proceedings. In their book *The Weight of Law 1008* (1996), the Andean Information Network compiled heartbreaking narratives of poor, illiterate Bolivians hounded into prison because they could not pay the bribes that were demanded by officials to make their cases disappear. Several of these drug war victims report being tortured under the direction of gringo DEA agents.

On the post-show panel at one of the Oruro performances, two drug officials parried questions from the audience about Bolivia's war on drugs. Alex Alfaro, departmental director of the Special Police Force to Fight Drug Trafficking, said drug production was rising in Oruro. In the year he has worked there, his forces have found 17 cocaine labs. So far in 2009, the police have confiscated more than a ton of cocaine, as much as in all of 2008.

Alfaro said a kilo of marijuana costs \$100 and a kilo of cocaine \$1,200. He handed out anti-drug pamphlets, warning of the dire organic consequences of using marijuana, cocaine, tobacco, alcohol, and inhalants. But members of the audience, unaccustomed to access to these usually invisible officials, began to ask penetrating questions.

What did Alfaro, and the public prosecutor appearing with him, Franz Villegas, think of Law 1008? Villegas fudged his opinion, merely describing it as a drug law. Kevin Michael Key asked if they thought the CIA really was involved in drug trafficking in the 1980s as the play alleged? They did not know. Was it good or bad for Bolivia that the Morales government had expelled the DEA? Alfaro said it was a national government decision, not his. He said he had worked with the DEA and "they supported us. Now the national government helps us fight drugs..."

A Bolivian woman asked: "You are preoccupied with drug consumption and apprehension. Is there any attention being paid to the health aspects of this problem?" The two officials made no attempt to respond. Someone else asked: "Is drug enforcement a form of social control?" The public prosecutor answered, "Drug enforcement involves citizen participation. It's everyone's fight. Denuncias are an important part of the system."

Someone else asked: "What about innocent people caught up and arrested under Law 1008? Like a taxi driver whose passenger might have drugs without the driver's knowledge?" Villegas said: "We don't accuse people just to accuse them. I don't know of a single case where a taxi driver has been unfairly jailed..."

And so it went as the drug officials evaded questions and shaded their responses in ways that precisely mirrored the dynamics of *Agentes y Activos*, in which the CIA Inspector General danced around



*The cast of Agentes y Activos onstage at the Casa de Cultura in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, Aug. 23
—photo by Cristina Lopez*

issues, answered questions he had not been asked, and flat out lied about the CIA's links to the Contra cocaine scandal. The show was replayed immediately afterward in an updated, Bolivian mode where everyone (except the officials) could see it.

Agentes y Activos played theaters, schools, public plazas, and even a prison, helping to show that the real struggle is not between Bolivia, where coca grows, and the United States, where much cocaine is consumed. Rather, the greater problem lies within each country, between each government and its own people.

By declaring a war on drugs, the United States and Bolivia have both declared war on their own populations, but only against the small-time users and dealers, not the powerful few who profit most from the ongoing, proliferating illicit drug trafficking. If all the world's a stage, then it's time for a new global act. This "war on drugs" thing isn't playing well anywhere, in any language.

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From: Z Magazine – The Spirit Of Resistance Lives

URL: <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/viewArticle/22736>

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