Counting the Cost
Angelenos and bolivianos dramatize casualties of the drug war

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

IN THE PRADO IN LA PAZ, BOLIVIA, A STAGE IS SET
with 13 pristine American flags behind a table and a dais. Given
the rocky relations between the neoliberal U.S. and the proudly
leapfrog government of President Evo Morales, this unlikely image
contentious curious locals.

But as they gather to watch four American performers and
eight Bolivian actors reenact a 1998 hearing of the U.S. House
Intelligence Committee into allegations that the CIA helped
funnel cocaine money to the Nicaraguan Contras in 1980s, the
assembled bolivianos get it: This is political theatre. Though the
case being discussed in the show Agentes y activos is decades old
and a continent away, it resonates with the still-ongoing struggle
between North and South over the fantastically lucrative drug
trade and the crushing, futile “war” on it.

“The show cuts between a very familiar reality in inner cities
and links that to American foreign policy—you’re able to cover a
lot of ground,” says John Malpede, founder and artistic director
of Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD). “It’s a very specific
story, but it works like a metaphor for an egregious disregard of
the poor.” Malpede, who called the script for Agentes y Assets (its
original English title) from the congressional record, had been
touring the show to U.S. cities with drug-laws initiatives on the
ballot since 2001. Then, in one post-show talkback, an American
activist challenged Malpede, he says, to explore the relationship
between “the victims of the war on drugs here and the victims
there,” meaning Latin America.

A contact with the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute
led Malpede to a convening on drug policy in Cochabamba, Bolivia,
where he connected with La Escuela de Arte y Talentos and its
founders, Wiler Vidaurre and Zulma Galván. A shared interest in

art and activism made this a good match: While LAPD works primarily with L.A.’s
Skid Row population, La Escuela had done eight years of theatre workshops
in Bolivian prisons.

With money from the L.A. Cultural Affairs Department and the National
Performance Network, four LAPD artists traveled in July 2009 to Cochabamba
to rehearse the play in Spanish with the
Bolivian actors, and then perform it in
seven Bolivian cities throughout August.
One catch: Spanish was not the native
tongue of the American performers, as
Kevin Michael Key recalls.

“The English speakers would rehearse our lines three hours every
morning, then go down and work with the bolivianos in the evening,” says Key.

“It was difficult; it made us concentrate.” His hard work paid off;
after the show’s first performance in the maximum-security prison
El Abra, “One guy wanted to know if I was Cuban. That was the
ultimate compliment.”

Indeed, the post-show talkbacks were lively, says Theo
Roncken, a scholar and activist who was invited to speak at two of
them.

“The drug issue is nearly never touched in this way,” Roncken
avers. “What this theatre did was give an opportunity to talk about
the drug trade, and why it continues to be strong and profitable.
Bolivians are quite aware of what happens in the war on drugs,
but you can’t talk about it too much in public.”

But LAPD artist Tony Parker says he found Bolivians quite
open to dialogue.

“There is a chance to express yourself politically there,
the way that used to happen in the States back in the ‘60s,” says
Parker. “Every day there’s a rally in the Plaza de 24 Septiembre,
and the news media shows up. It’s like revolution is in the air.” In
fact, Parker so fell in love with the country—and with a woman
from Spain—that he moved to Cochabamba in January, and now
teaches voice classes at La Escuela.

Ultimately, Key says, the linguistic and political barriers
between americanos and bolivianos were transcended by a realiza-
tion of a shared destiny and responsibility.

“Although the U.S. is the drug-consuming country, and Bolivia
is the drug-producing country, the war on drugs hits the same
people—the little guys,” says Key, who knows whereof he speaks;
he is a former cocaine addict who now counts his work with LAPD
as one of the pillars of his sobriety. “When a government declares
a war on drugs, it’s actually declaring a war on its people.”