

# Counting the Cost

Angelenos and *bolivianos* dramatize casualties of the drug war

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT



American and Bolivian actors dramatize a U.S. congressional hearing in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

## 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 leftist government of President Evo Morales, this unlikely image confounds 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 culled the script for *Agents and Assets* (its original English title) from the congressional record, had been touring the show to U.S. cities with drug-law 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 realization 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.”