LAPD Deploys Its 'Agents and Assets'
Theater Group Dramatizes Congressional Hearing to Tackle War on Drugs

by Victoria Lonsdale

John Malpepe, founder of the theater group Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), a group of bittersweet actors from Skid Row, has strong opinions.

But in his company’s latest production, Agents and Assets, a unique three-day event that combines cutting-edge performance followed by in-depth discussions, Malpepe and his troupe are “no too fit to any dilemma of current events.

That constant matter happens to be transcripts from the “Report on the Central Intelligence Agency’s Alleged Involvement in Clandestine Drug Trafficking in the Los Angeles Region,” a response to journalist Gary Webb’s articles in the San Jose Mercury News in 1996. These transcripts were presented to the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee in March 1998. Webb’s reporting was later found to be faulty and the CIA disavowed, but discussion of the issues continues.

Agents and Assets then explores on the radical insinuosity of a small city nation taking on the roles of Congress members and CIA officials, and explores the human cost of high-level politicking.

“I think the whole idea is to do with one, the idea of the American democracy,” explained Malpepe, who also directs the production. “The play is presented by the current staff. It’s about the system, unraveling it a bit, and you get to see what was going on before the perfect vision. The reason for the play is all about that!”

Of course, a theater piece born out of detailed transcripts might be somewhat dry—hardly the stuff of high drama. With Malpepe at the helm, however, provocative scenes meet the operatic woe.

“Every time this show has been profoundly affected by the Clandestine epidemic, which is what it’s really about,” he said. “The cast is in people who can’t come along for the ride. It’s a really good role-play, and we’re playing it very well. People that are doing it, making policy decisions around it. There’s a sense of tension between the two.”

LAPD, which is also on the board of Peter Sellers’ Old Stories New Lives, a nonprofit production company that uses the performing arts to generate awareness and action in response to facts affecting America, has teamed with acclaimed director Sellers and street theater projects in Downtown to present this event.

“This is a home—this is a home—that I feel very strongly about and thought the project was cool when I presented it to him. The idea was to work together to create the parade around the show.”

The Drug Debate

So that said, the 3-member cast performs the show, followed by discussions with authorities, including Bruce Frasier, manager of the law on Propaganda & Campaigns in Mexico and the Greenpeace campaign, and Anand, and author of the Politics of Heroin. CIA to the Global Drug Trade. Sellers and Malpepe will also be on the panel.

“If it is about thinking and engaging people on many levels—from the feeling level to the ideas level to the spiritual level—you have to be able to be open and hear what’s going on. If you’re making art and you’re engaging, it’s important to tell a story.”

Malpepe says.

Malpepe began working with the issues of poverty and homelessness in 1983 in a project he undertook while living in New York. His work ultimately brought him to Los Angeles, where he founded LAPD 15 years ago.

“There was a time working as a volunteer advocate where we were not able to understand the issue. We were in the middle of it, and we’re more focused on the reality that the world is dealing with. LAPD was a very small form that reflected the chaotic nature of the state. And so the question is, can we come together in the situation of people dealing with skills and getting more focused, more imaginative.”

Then came crack cocaine, followed by the war against drugs, which was also a topic at the Shadow Convention last August that convened in

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"It was the first time that I felt like it popped above the surface to say that this drug war is horrific, counter-productive, and a violation of a lot of lives," Malpepe said. "It was the first time that I felt it was aosed down. You couldn’t talk about it. In a certain way, these things in the last year have come to the surface—Seattle with regard to globalization and multi-national corporations, when the governor of Illinois decided to stop executions because the bodies behind them were no longer, and the war on drugs.”

A Different Kind of LAPD

Originally an improvisational group, LAPD has moved into more scripted projects, like its current show. Many of the actors in the company are active in other arts and in the liberal arts. Yet LAPD remains the home-base of the California, with between 60,000 to 70,000 in L.A. County, Malpepe acknowledged some changes.

"On the one hand, you drive down Fifth Street in the middle of the night and it looks exactly the same," Malpepe said. "It’s changed a lot. Fifteen years ago there were no other arts activities. The area is 50 or 60 hotels have been converted into 369 single mom-occupied buildings. There are a lot more resources in place and a lot of people have come out the other end of the [southern] city. That’s more emphasis on opportunity and transformation as opposed to homes and blankets and maintenance and entertainment.”

As for the parallels between Agents and Assets and the recent election, Malpepe said that the disorienting things that were revealed during the election exist in his presentation.

"When you look at this election and you end up with a something for power politics, that’s what you see here—this, the show.”

Agents and Assets at Side Street Projects, 415 South 2nd Street, proceed from January 11, 11, 13. For more information call (213) 629.8958.