

LAPD Deploys Its 'Agents and Assets'

Theater Group Dramatizes Congressional Hearing to Tackle War on Drugs

by Victoria Loosleleaf

John Malpede, founder of the theater group Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a group of homeless actors from Skid Row, has strong opinions.

But in his company's latest production, *Agents and Assets*, a unique three-day event that combines

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cutting-edge performance followed by in-depth discussion, Malpede said there is "no tilt in any direction" of the content matter.

That content matter happens to be transcripts from the "Report on the Central Intelligence Agency's Alleged Involvement in Crack Cocaine Trafficking in the Los Angeles Region." As 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 exonerated, but discussion of the issue continues.

Agents and Assets thus capitalizes on the radical incongruity of inner-city actors taking on the roles of Congressmembers and CIA officials, and explores the human cost of high-level profiteering.

"In a large sense it has to do with our sleepwalking democracy," explained Malpede, who also directs the production. "The show is preempted by election stuff. You got to see the seams unraveling a bit and you got to see what was going on behind the perfect veneer. The reason for this show was exactly that."

Of course, a theater piece born out of detailed transcripts might be somewhat dry—hardly the stuff of high drama. With Malpede at the helm, however, provocative seems more the operative word.

"Everyone in this show has been profoundly affected by the Crack epidemic, which is what's talked about," he said. "The cast is people who can't avoid being affected by the so-called drug epidemic—it's ubiquitous—playing these very people who are talking about it and making policy decisions around it. There's a certain kind of tension between the two."

Malpede, who is also on the board of Peter

Sellers' Old Stories: New Lives, a nonprofit production company that uses the performing arts platform to generate awareness and action in response forces affecting America, has teamed with acclaimed director Sellers and Side Street Projects in Downtown to present this event.

"This is an issue—the drug war—that Peter felt strongly about and thought the project was cool when I mentioned it to him. The idea was to work together to create the panels around the show."

The Drug Debate

To that end, the 13-member cast performs the show, followed by discussions with authorities, including Dave Fratello, manager of the Yes on Proposition 36 Campaign (medical use of marijuana), Sandra Alvarez, head of the Colombia Human Rights Program at Global Exchange, and Alfred McCoy, author of *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*. Sellers and Malpede will also be on the panel.

"If art is about thinking and engaging people on many levels—from the feeling level to the idea level to the spiritual level—then you have to be able to see what's going on and say what's going on. If you're making art and you're viewing art, it's important to call a spade a spade," Malpede says.

Malpede began working with the issues of poverty and homelessness in 1984 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 welfare advocate where we were into not coating the pill. We wanted to be inclusive and representative of the reality that existed Downtown. LAPD was a very wild form that reflected the chaotic nature of the area. It veered in the direction of people acquiring skills and getting much more focused, more imagistic."

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



Photo by Lisa Lee Levine

Rick Mantley plays Fred Hitz, inspector general of the CIA. *Agents and Assets* uses theater and discussion to take a provocative look at America's war on drugs.

Patriotic Hall.

"It was the first time that I felt like it popped above the surface to say that this drug war is insane, counterproductive, and a violation on a lot of levels," Malpede said. "Up until that time, I felt it was a sacred cow. You couldn't talk against it. In a certain way, three 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 justice behind them was so unjust, 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 quality of life issues in Skid Row. And while Los Angeles remains the homeless capital of America, with between 50,000 to 75,000 in L.A. County, Malpede acknowledged some changes.

"On the one hand you drive down Fifth Street in the middle of the night and it looks exactly the same," Malpede said. "On the other hand, it's changed in a huge way. Fifteen years ago there were no other arts activities."

"Also, 50 or 60 hotels have been converted into SRO [single room occupancy] dwellings," he added. "Those are all affordable, low-income housing. There are a lot more resources in place and a lot of people have come out the other end of the [homeless] cycle. There's more emphasis on opportunity and transformation as opposed to 'beans and blankets' and maintenance and containment."

As for the parallels between *Agents and Assets* and the recent election, Malpede said that the disheartening things that were revealed during the election exist in his presentation. "When you find the endless legal stuff employed purely as a smokescreen for power politics, that's what you see here, too, in the show."

Agents and Assets, at Side Street Projects, 425 South Main Street, second floor, January 11, 12, 13. For more information call (213) 620-8895.

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