

John Malpede:



**“John Malpede’s work will
testify on the side of the angels.”**

— PETER SELLARS

Bringing the Real Deal to REDCAT

By Deborah Behrens

Photos by Eric Schwabel/schwabelstudio.com

HOW DOES IT FEEL
HOW DOES IT FEEL
TO BE ON YOUR OWN
WITH NO DIRECTION HOME
LIKE A COMPLETE UNKNOWN
LIKE A ROLLING STONE?

- BOB DYLAN

JOHN MALPEDE LOOKS LIKE A ROAD TESTED ROCK ICON. The legendary kind famous for performing guitar riffs and social policy rants with guys named Bob or Neil or Arlo or Mick. A face you'd swear your TiVo once captured headlining a Live Aid concert to end world poverty.

Not someone whose body of work is considered "one of the high points in the history of theatre" by stage and opera visionary Peter Sellars. Or whose artistic legacy remains inextricably linked to a performance group started more than 20 years ago on Los Angeles' Skid Row. In an era that heralds citizen journalism, Malpede stands as a champion for citizen artistry.

In 1985, he founded the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), the first "theatre-without-walls" in the country to be comprised mainly of homeless and formerly homeless people. What initially began as free performance workshops for inner city residents to tell their stories has evolved into critically acclaimed international project collaborations and urban residencies tackling the most pressing political and social issues of the poor.

"The original idea was to create community on Skid Row," says Malpede during an interview at his Santa Monica artist residence. "Or as I used to say, get 'The Real Deal out to Normalville.' When I started working down there it was primarily about beans and blankets. There was no art activity. People needed spiritual motivation and intellectual engagement."

Malpede began offering just that in the form of workshops, rehearsals and performances held in donated spaces with in-kind support from community partners such as SRO Housing Corporation, St. Vincent's Cardinal Manning Center, Inner-City Law Center, United Coalition East Prevention Program (UCEPP), LA Community Action Network (LA CAN) and Church of the Nazarene.

Twenty-two years later, Skid Row provides considerably more opportunities for residents to share their artistic ambitions. Current LAPD members have experience in community groups, bands, stand-up comedy, spoken word and homeless writers' coalitions. According to Malpede, those coming to rehearsal today are "really great performers by any standards."

Now our mission is to make a connection between the lived experience of people living in poverty, their communities and the social policies that to some extent impact and determine that experience."

That connection is painfully apparent in such works as *Agents & Assets*, LAPD's acclaimed national theatre project that dramatizes a 1998 Congressional intelligence committee hearing regarding allegations of CIA involvement in local cocaine trafficking to fund the Nicaraguan contras. Using the actual hearing transcript as text for Act I, LAPD members in drug recovery along with others from host cities play the suited Congress and CIA members discussing or denying the policies that have impacted their urban lives and community. In Act II, post performance expert panels and audience members together tackle topics like the rhetoric of



John Malpede in the US premiere of Peter Sellars' new production *For an End to the Judgment of God/Kissing God Goodbye*

war by examining what it means to call something a war on poverty, a war on drugs or a war on terror.

"It's a weird conjunction of the on-the-ground experience of people in the communities, the foreign policy stuff and its resulting relationship to congressional oversight," says Malpede. "One of the cool things about LAPD and similar projects is it provides a place for those who might not otherwise be heard. So everybody in the room, no matter how they got there, is operating on the same level of concerned citizen."

In 1999, LAPD received the LA Stage Alliance's Ovation Award for "Sustained Achievement in the Use of Theater Arts to Impact the Community." Four years later, Malpede accepted Cornerstone Theater's 2003 Bridge Award for outstanding community-based theater.

In fall 2004 Malpede recreated with LAPD associate director and wife Henriëtte Brouwers, Robert Kennedy's 200-mile "poverty tour" of southeastern Kentucky in 1968 with *RFK in EKY*. Four years of collaboration and memorabilia collection with communities along the historic route culminated in four days of public events featuring policy talks by former aides, visual installations, hearing re-enactments with local residents playing Kennedy and members of his entourage, a strip mine visit and radio programming.

The project was "wildly successful" according to Malpede, not simply because it garnered coverage from media like the *New York Times* and NPR but for the way in which it encouraged a diverse local populace to think about the current state of their own sociopolitical conditions just prior to the national election.

"*RFK in EKY* turned out to be a good idea because people were so responsive to it," Malpede admits. "The events were all part of the art but at the same time it was engaging people by creating a context for them to talk about the issues."

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

This year Malpede and the LAPD have engaged another local citizenry in examining an issue much closer to home—the future development of downtown Los Angeles. Mirroring the organic evolution of *RFK in EKY*, *Utopia/Dystopia* began as a series of "Come Together" events offering seven glimpses of a downtown utopia as envisioned by actual residents, business owners, community and civic agencies in response to the area's rapidly encroaching gentrification.

Come togethers originated as a randomizing performance strategy conceived by *U/D* collaborating visual artist Harrell Fletcher. LAPD members were asked to find someone they thought was doing something important downtown and who had a future vision they felt they could support.

Those selected were then asked to do a 10-minute presentation of any kind—performance, demonstration or lecture—under unifying themes such as "Is it a Crime to Be Poor?" and "Affordable Housing: What, Where and for Whom?" They in turn invited the next round of presenters. Invitees have ranged from merchants to musicians, doctors to police officers, housing authorities to city attorneys.

On Nov. 16, *Utopia/Dystopia* will present the latest come together plus a 15-minute outdoor performance called *220 More Glimpses*. Under Brouwer's direction, various Skid Row groups, area churches, universities, theatres and individual artists will participate in two workshops—one to write about their vision of utopia and turn it into a short movement phrase, plus a second to learn each other's phrases in small groups until they blend together as a singular 15 minute movement. Then take it out to downtown sidewalks.

220 MORE GLIMPSES

Fri., Nov. 16, 4 pm
Between Skid Row
and City Hall

GLIMPSES OF UTOPIA

A Come Together
Fri., Nov. 16, 5:30-8 pm
Bert Green Fine Art
102 W. 5th St. at Main
For more information, visit
www.lapovertydepartment.org

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

Plays Dec. 6-9;
Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 pm;
Sun., 3 pm
Tickets: \$20
CalArts students,
faculty & staff: \$10
Students, alumni w/Affinity
card: \$16
REDCAT
631 W.2nd St., Los Angeles
213.237.2800 or
www.redcat.org

“We’re going to line the streets like trees,” says Malpede. “Every three meters will be a person. When the gong strikes 4:00 on the 16th we’ll perform these group phases in silence for 15 minutes somewhere between Skid Row and City Hall.”

The culmination of the year’s indoor and outdoor glimpses will be presented as a theatrical performance piece with accompanying panel discussions beginning Dec. 9 at the very symbol of downtown’s new renaissance—REDCAT, the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater located in Walt Disney Concert Hall. REDCAT Executive Director Mark Murphy believes the inherent juxtaposition adds a key component to the process.

“I think it’s an important place to have this discussion,” admits Murphy. “Because it’s not just yes or no, should there be or should there not be development, but what are the complicated choices we need to make? Or that we make by not making them or ignoring them when any city goes through a change.”

“One of the functions of art is to create confusion, right? To break down whatever’s been sorted out and cause a new sorting out of it.”

—JOHN MALPEDE

“When REDCAT first opened, I thought the contemporary work in which we specialize, which is often seen in converted warehouses or more funky locations, would seem out of place here. In fact I’ve found people love the idea that one of the most famous architectural landmarks in the country if not the world is home to discussion that can have street cred in a way.”

Malpede and LAPD are no strangers to the iconic performing arts complex. Murphy first saw LAPD at Highways during the 1990 Los Angeles Festival under the then artistic direction of theatrical wunderkind Peter Sellars. An artistic director himself in Seattle at the time, Murphy offered the group a two-week residency. The three paths would later converge at REDCAT when Malpede starred as Antonin Artaud in Sellars’ fall 2004 production of *For an End to the Judgment of God*. In 2005, at Sellars instigation, Murphy agreed to allow the rare usage of REDCAT’s facilities for a benefit restaging of LAPD’s *Agents & Assets*.

For Malpede, REDCAT represents just another opportunity for LAPD to shift the public’s perception of performance as a rarified and esoteric art form to one that views it as a socially inclusive offering with wide appeal and access.

“I feel like our job is to confuse the categories as much as possible,” he emphasizes. “What is art

and what is social work? People used to say ‘oh, you must be doing social work.’ One of the functions of art is to create confusion, right? To break down whatever’s been sorted out and cause a new sorting out of it.”

“We’ve always had opportunities to perform in places like Walker Art Center and the LA Festivals. We don’t regard that as any different than grabbing a storefront and doing something. It’s all part of the job. It’s not going to stop us from performing in hotel lobbies and shelters or rehearsing in churches and offices.”

Murphy admits this “collision of ideas” is one of the things he admires most about Malpede. “He’s not afraid to let things get complicated. It’s a very challenging way to make a new work of art. Not only in terms of logistics but also the topics LAPD takes on. So much political theatre or performance art dealing with complicated social themes never evolves from the level of therapy to become art. The pieces I’ve seen by LAPD have all

developed to the point where they are definitely art and not political diatribe or agitprop.”

“A lot of our creativity has gone into survival,” Malpede concedes. “We’re very nimble as a result. It’s always project-to-project and how we’re going to get it done. It’s great to be at REDCAT but it doesn’t mean we have a secure future in any sense.”

Despite that tenuous reality, LAPD’s 2008 calendar is nearly full. It starts with a January performance of *Agents & Assets* in Manhattan with Housing Works, an April collaboration in Paris with Theatre de Gennevilliers called *Red Beard/Red Beard*, followed by *La Llorona*, *Weeping Women on Skid Row* in Echo Park, then a fall work with *Fried Poetry* collaborator Ron Allen. Not to mention a new community Malpede is currently exploring for an upcoming project—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

“We’re treating MIT as a community sort of like Kentucky or eastern Skid Row,” Malpede explains. Specifically the people that did the seminal work on open source software and alternative copyright configurations. It involves a lot of the software designers, engineers and lawyers who are connected with MIT. So the project is to develop a project on that.

“It’s still a community,” he emphasizes. “It’s still about freedom. It’s just how it gets addressed in that environment.” ■