

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS YOUTH THEATRE PROGRAM

FALL 1998 NEWSLETTER

Unusual Times

letter from the executive director

"Hesitating outside the double locked steel door to their unit, I had asked the juvenile Hall chaplain rather nervously why she had chosen these kids, rather than some less hardened, more salvageable boys or girls, and Janet had just smiled cryptically and said, "Because these boys need you more."

—excerpt from Edward Humes "No Matter How Loud I Shout"

It's fitting to include this passage in the first issue of our quarterly newsletter, **Unusual Times**, because it speaks of the very population of young people that the Unusual Suspects works with throughout the year. Most of you know that for the past six years we have worked with at-risk teens to help them write and perform their own plays. These kids, ages 14-17, live in placement facilities around Los Angeles. Last year we integrated them with others from outside of group homes. Many of the kids have formed deep friendships with each other through their work with The Unusual Suspects.

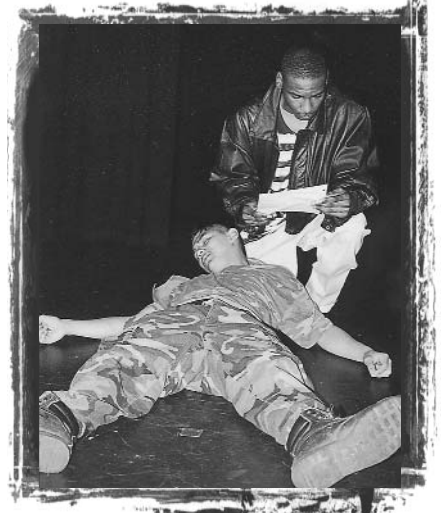
Since we began this program, The Unusual Suspects has had to continually find places in which to work because we don't have a theatre space of our own. The facilities we've worked in have been coordinated through Cheryl Silver at Free Arts. Because of her suggestion, **we are currently working at Central Juvenile Hall in downtown L.A.** with males, ages 15 through 18 who have been identified as high risk offenders.

As this goes to print, we are in negotiations for a permanent home(!), but until that is finalized we continue to look for available theatre space. We need a space that would provide a safe, stable environment for the kids to find and express their voice through stagecraft. Our goal is that these kids will discover that when they express themselves through theatre arts, they

contribute an important gift to society.

Great news on our non-profit status: We are officially non-profit! Special thanks to the enormous effort by Gabe Eckstein for securing this much-needed status. It will make it much more inviting for contributors to donate to our program. **Since the holidays are upon us, please consider making a contribution to the Unusual Suspects in someone's name as a business or personal gift.**

Which brings me to our latest **fundraising efforts...** Our goal is to raise \$150,000 for this theatre company. That sounds ambitious, but we've committed to build a strong foundation for this program and expand it. The Unusual Suspects has been designated as one of the **50 charities of the Los Angeles Marathon** to be held in March. We've got runners in training who need your sponsorship to benefit the program. More on that in the next issue.



Richard (crouching) and Danny rehearse in the HBO Theatre Space for "Simple Pictures."



THE UNUSUAL
SUSPECTS
THEATRE
COMPANY EXISTS
TO BRING
THEATRE ARTS TO
AT RISK TEENS.

THROUGH
IMPROVISATION
AND WRITING
EXERCISES,
PROFESSIONALS IN
THE ARTS WORK
WITH THE YOUTH
TO HELP THEM
FIND THEIR
VOICE AND
CREATE ORIGINAL
THEATRE.



Volunteer Devlin Mann helps Vanessa find her voice.

We are in rehearsal for our next show, "What Society Don't See", which runs—mark your calendar—**December 9, 10, 11th and 12th**. While the focus of the show continues to be the expression of these kids' voices on the stage, we are working to broaden their experience of this program. The U.S. volunteers have shown them the impact of giving back. We asked the kids to create their own way to give back even though they are locked up. Many of these kids have known the profound loss of loved ones through violence so they have decided to reach out to the families of others by making and sending cards expressing their sympathy.

As this program has shown me over and over again, it is one act of kindness

that can make a world of difference. Pass it on. See you at the December show.

Happy Holidays!

Laura Leigh Hughes
Executive Director

"What Society Don't See"

Come see
The Unusual Suspects'
New Show!

December 9, 10, 11 at 7 p.m.
December 12 at 3 p.m

Central Juvenile Hall

Reservations are required,
so please call (310) 523-6800.

Don't miss it!



Some of the Unusual Suspects volunteers include: Top: Lisa Ehrenberg, Varina Bleil, Sabina Weber, Richard, Lisa Lindstrom, John Freeland Jr. Second row: Susie Spear, Gail Lerner. Front: Devlin Mann, Laura Leigh Hughes, MaryAnne Melloan.



Suspect's Name: Richard

Interest: Actor/Writer

How Long a Suspect: Five years

How did you get involved with the group?

When I started out, I was in placement. I was on the basketball team, and Laura Leigh came up to me and said she needed people to act in a show and asked me to fill in for someone. And I said, 'Sure,' but then I had to go home that night. I practiced my lines all day. There was a bar scene, and I made up a 'reserved' seat sign, and wrote my lines on it. And any lines I didn't remember, I improvised through the whole show that night. There I was, and ever since then, it's been working out real good for me. I was away for a year, and I was a special guest for one show, but since then, I've been with the show.



*Richard with fellow Suspects (left to right):
Andres, Denise, Vanessa and Danny*

How would you describe your work in the group? I would say I'm an actor, staff member, poet, and writer.

What would you tell someone who wanted to join the group but didn't think they had any skills? Once you get in, you gradually grow, day by day, and as you learn new things and you stick with it, you get better and better. You're not doing it on your own because the staff helps you out—they help you to be a leader.

I would inspire them to do it, and I would encourage them that they can be as high as I am and more. Everyone's a hero within, and they just don't know it. And if they do know it, they have to show it. I have

to help other people have the same courage. You have to teach someone something to learn it yourself. By teaching, I'm saying, "Brother or sister, you can grow." And then I realize I'm growing myself and accomplishing my goals. I had someone who didn't have anything, or didn't want to be anything, and now they want to be it, and they can. And when they thank me, I look at myself and realize I've accomplished my goals, too.

"I used to judge a book by its cover. If I saw someone who was a bum, I'd block him out, even if he was trying to tell me something. Maybe I'd listen, but I wouldn't comprehend. Now I listen to the conversation. I would listen to the whole deal and respect it all."

Do you think the group has changed you? It helped me out a lot, because now I talk more and I see things from a different perspective. I used to be a close-minded person, but now I don't just see things one way.

I met you a year ago, and I don't think of you as a close-minded person at all. Can you give me an example of how you feel you used to be?

I used to judge a book by its cover. If I was walking down the street, and I saw someone who was a bum, I'd block him out, even if he was trying to tell me something. Maybe I'd listen, but I wouldn't comprehend. Now, I listen to the whole conversation. I would listen to the whole deal and respect it all.

Why do you think the Unusual Suspects is important? I think it's important not just for me, but for the rest of the community. If this could be a bigger foundation, it would be better for the whole community—having all its kids writing and acting and singing. A lot of parents don't know their kids have potential until they see it. Every day, I see kids in LA saying, "Look, Mom, I can flip, I can sing," or whatever, and the parents say, "Uh huh. Sure." And they don't really see it or get involved in it. I call it a blank potential, because they don't really watch their kids and play with them. Even if the father is disabled and can't play with them, there's always someone, a brother, or an uncle, or a sister who can encourage them."

The Unusual Suspects completed our 13th program session this summer with the show "Stories from our Side."

For our thirteenth session we worked with kids from a variety of facilities: CCS Home for Boys in South Central, Rosemary Cottages in Pasadena, H.E.L.P. Group in Van Nuys, New Economics for Women in downtown L.A., and the Herbert Benton Youth Home in Los Angeles. St. Agatha's church provided the space for the production as well as several of the kids from their church youth program. It was exciting to bring such a variety of groups together, however the logistics were sometimes challenging in terms of coordinating the different facilities.

"Stories from our Side" was a terrific show which included five extraordinary plays and several inspiring poems and raps written by the kids. Twilah wrote a powerful play about racism dramatized on a chess board. She was unable to see what she created due to transportation problems. Fortunately, we were able to video the evening.



Denise and Vanessa rehearsing a scene from "Crazy Love" written by Golda.

Thanks to the copies provided by Todd AO we could send each of the kids a copy of the show. Todd Johnson, from NBC, put together a video for publicity and donation purposes with interviews from the volunteers and the kids.

One of the goals of the program is to introduce the kids to a variety of elements in the industry and expose them to ideas that they would normally not have access to. We often invite guest speakers to help with this process. This summer we had: Gary Anthony Williams (Actor and Improv. Teacher), Richard Dubin (Writer) and Joel Saltzman (Writer). We want to thank them for sharing their time so generously with us.

Wedding News: Susie Spear, one of our long time volunteers married John Papsideras this year and our volunteer John Freeland Jr. (profiled on the next page) got engaged to his longtime girlfriend, Anne. We are excited and happy for them all.

Poetry

A Poem For The People

A poem for the people that want to know
in which direction my life will go.
I'll probably get out and fuck up some more
by robbing a bank or a liquor store.

Or maybe a murder, a 187,
Repent for my sins so I can go to heaven.

But what am I saying? I don't want this life.
I'd rather get married to a beautiful wife.

Have a few children and **live my life right**
so I won't have to watch my back at night.

When I get out, I'll run my program tight, so I won't
have to worry about another gang fight.

DO YOU BELIEVE ME? I hope you do, because you would
if you only knew the feelings I feel and the thoughts in my head
every night when I lay in bed.

—Jesse, 17

This issue's poem comes from Jesse, 17, who worked with the Unusual Suspects this fall. Jesse came from the streets of Hawaiian Gardens where he lived with his mother and two brothers. We met Jesse at Central Juvenile Hall where he was being held.

Jesse's talent as a poet emerged while he was working with U.S. He said, "I hope to be a great poet instead of a gangster." He continued, "I like

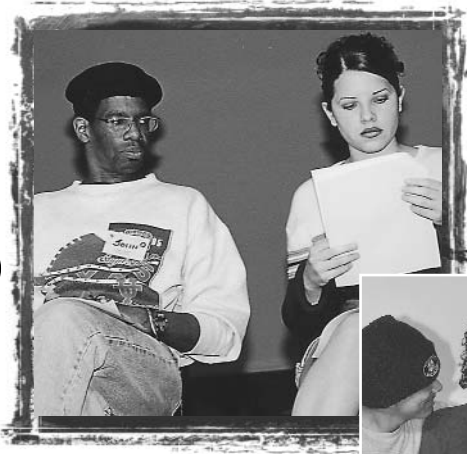
*"I hope to be a great poet
instead of a gangster."*

acting, meeting new people and sharing my poetry. This program has changed the way I feel about myself and

about others. I am seriously considering being a professional actor/poet."

At press time he had been tried in court as an adult and been moved to the county facility where he is now serving time. We hope to stay in touch with Jesse.

VOLUNTEER PROFILE



John Freeland Jr. working with Denise (left photo), and Danny (below).



Suspect's Name: John Freeland Jr.

Occupation: Actor/Director

How Long a Suspect: Four years

What is your role in the group? "I conduct warm-ups, help direct pieces and have acted in student's writings. They tend to want to cast me as the bad father or an ugly drag queen—one or the other. I also offer some technical assistance and coach them in their presentations.

Why did you join the Unusual Suspects? "I was doing a play at the Met Theatre and I met the executive director, Laura Leigh Hughes. One day she asked if I would be interested in working with the youth and I said, 'Yeah, sure.' I previously worked with incarcerated youth and adults doing theatre games, improv, etc. and I really like working with young people. So she hit me at the right time."

What keeps you coming back? "You see the talent and untapped resources in them. And even though some of them might not be able to use it, some of them might be able to pass on some of the knowledge they've gathered and that's great to see."

How has this work

changed you? I think I've changed in the sense that, working with young people, you're certainly aware of your own place in society. And if you never thought of your own place, you do now; or if you did before, it changes. They keep you on

*"You never know what
effect you have on an
individual."*

your toes, and they are truly a reflection of the society in which we live. They're barometers in a way that a lot of people don't understand—in a way a lot of people don't want to understand. Especially these kids from juvenile hall—some people think they're already lost, but I believe you never know what effect you have on an individual.

Is there one story that has stayed with you? "When you think the show is going to be a piece of poo-poo and everything is falling apart, it always comes together. And you see that everything you've been ranting and raving and laughing and talking about has sunk in on some level, and there's a great sense of accomplishment, because many of them have never completed anything, and to see the looks on their faces when they hear the laughter and applause of family members and friends, it's priceless.

Why do you need to do this work? "I need to do this not so much for me as for them. To pass on something I've learned and hopefully they can pass it on to somebody else to make them better, more expressive human beings, and so we can cut down on some of the madness that's going on. And since many of the schools are not taking on the creative energies of young people, we are there to help them express themselves and to channel these energies."

upcoming EVENTS

december

December 2 8 pm Scott Sundell One-Man Show
Second Stage Theatre. Call (310) 822-6829
Portion of proceeds benefit U.S.!

December 9 8 pm Scott Sundell One-Man Show

December 9 7 pm **"What Society Don't See"—U.S. Show**
Central Juvenile Hall 1605 Eastlake Ave., Los Angeles
(near USC Medical Center)
RSVP required (310) 523-6800

December 10 7 pm **"What Society Don't See"** at Central Juvenile Hall
December 11 7 pm **"What Society Don't See"** at Central Juvenile Hall
December 12 3 pm **"What Society Don't See"** at Central Juvenile Hall

**NEXT
SHOW DATES!!!**



Unusual Times is the quarterly newsletter of the Unusual Suspects Youth Theatre Program. U.S. is a non-profit organization which brings theatre arts to the at-risk youth of Los Angeles. Please send all letters and comments to:

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Danny joined us at St. Agatha's church for our last show. He is doing well in school and has enlisted in the Marines and will begin bootcamp August 2, 1999. He and Andres, who was also in the program, are still the best of friends.

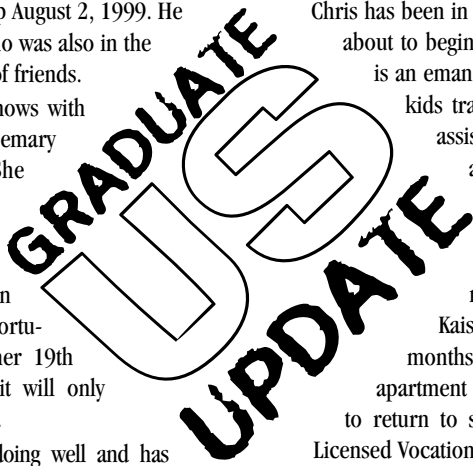
Golda has done two shows with us and is still living at Rosemary Cottages Group Home. She found a job petitioning for the Democratic Party. She continues to write and keeps U.S. updated on her latest projects. She unfortunately broke her leg on her 19th birthday. Knowing Golda, it will only give her more time to write.

William (Eli) Ellis is doing well and has progressed to an emancipation home. He is currently looking for a job as well as studying for his SAT's. If anyone has a position available, please let us know.

Chris is very excited about graduating from high school and beginning classes at Santa Monica College. He will be studying computers and theatre. Chris has been in the system for 16 years and is about to begin ROP (Rites of Passage). This is an emancipation program which helps kids transition into society. They are assisted in finding an apartment and are taught life skills.

Karmiesha, who performed in the very first Unusual Suspects show is now a Clinical Assistant at Kaiser. Her daughter, Lanyah, is 23 months old. Karmiesha has her own apartment in Inglewood and is planning to return to school to study to become a Licensed Vocational Nurse.

We're proud of all the graduates of The Unusual Suspects program. Please let us know if you have any updates on U.S. graduates.



The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company welcomes any donations. We are especially in need of the following:

- Theatre Space
- Grant writers
- Publicists
- Macintosh lap top computers and printers
- Video camera and videotapes
- Messenger service for emergencies
- Binders
- Art supplies
- Journals
- 35mm camera, film and developing
- Volunteer office help

Please call the U.S. office at (310) 523-6800 for further information. Thanks!

Clip and send with contribution to address below.

Show U.S. the money!

The Unusual Suspects depends on your generous donations to continue our valuable program for the at-risk youth of Los Angeles. We thank you for any contribution you are able to give.

Yes! I want to help bring theatre arts to at-risk youth with my gift of:

\$50 \$100 \$250 Other _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____ Phone (optional) _____



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