

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS YOUTH THEATRE PROGRAM

SPRING 1999 NEWSLETTER

Unusual Times



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

THROUGH
IMPROVISATION AND
WRITING EXERCISES,
PROFESSIONALS IN THE
ARTS WORK TO HELP
YOUNG PEOPLE
CREATE ORIGINAL
THEATRE AND TO FOSTER
PRIDE, SELF CONFIDENCE
AND RACIAL TOLERANCE.

1999 is looking to be a terrific year for The Unusual Suspects Theatre Program. I'm thrilled about the growing success of the program as well as exciting new developments in financial support for the program.

Our 14th Unusual Suspects session produced the play, "What Society Don't See," which received a tremendous response. This powerful anti-gang play, created and performed at Central Juvenile Hall by 15 to 18 year-old young men, was about two brothers' lives in a gang. The kids got a standing ovation at each performance.

This show was a moving experience for both the kids and the volunteers. Working with these kids in Central Juvenile Hall, many of whom were in rival gangs, was truly challenging. However, I found these young men to be vulnerable, respectful and committed to the program. These

same rival gang members cooperated effectively with one another to work on a common creative goal. I can't express the effect of this program on these kids any more eloquently than Lilo, a young man in the show.

"The play went brilliant but the play was like the diversion from what was really happenin'. Unity was taking place and we didn't even notice it. People were talkin' who I knew were the worst of enemies but they didn't care, even I didn't care cause sittin' there them two hours every Sunday made me realize that this mask that we hide ourselves, our real selves, behind reveals we're the same. We all bleed the same blood, we all cry the same cry...no different or no better."

—Unusual Suspect Lilo, age 16

An especially moving moment happened backstage on opening night. Juan, who played a busi-

ness manager in the show, tried on his costume—a suit. One of the staff members at Central Juvenile Hall told Juan how handsome he looked and took him in front of a mirror. Looking in the mirror, Juan was seen in silent tears, obviously seeing himself in a very different light.

I know we're on the right track with this program when we receive a letter like Mark's, another young man from Central Juvenile Hall, who recently wrote that he's going to take a college course. Mark said that before participating in our program, he felt that he wouldn't be able to do this course. He says that because of his experience with the Unusual Suspects, he now has the confidence to sign up for the course.

Fund-raising News: Many developments on the financial support front: Our most exciting news—U.S. has received a grant from the Eisner Foundation for \$20,000!!!! In addition, we are establishing a core of benefactors for those generous individuals or corporations who donate \$5000 or more. These are the contributions which will sustain the program over time. Thanks to Peter Morton, our first **#1 Suspect!** (See the following page for a list of many of our contributors.) Also, Meresa and Matt Bahr have established a stock fund for U.S. at Soloman Smith Barney and have made the first stock contribution. We encourage any benefactors to donate stock to U.S. through this fund.

U.S. Volunteers Update: Three U.S. volunteers/athletes participated in the 1999 Los Angeles Marathon to raise more than \$3000 in pledges for our program! (See L.A. Marathon story on the next page.) **Congratulations** to U.S. Volunteer Lisa Lindstrom, one of the producers of the Avnet/Kerner television production, "Moma Flora's Family," which won three NAACP Spirit Awards.

Writer/Mentor needed to work with Twilah, 18, a talented Unusual Suspect, as she begins her first screenplay. Twilah is living in a group home in Chatsworth. Please call the office for details.

A new theatre space awaits U.S. in September! Chip Hunter, Artistic Director of Art Share, Inc. in downtown Los Angeles, has generously agreed to allow the Unusual Suspects to use that theatre space for the program. Our first performance at Art Share will be held in December.

Don't forget to come see "A Day to Remember." Mark your calendar for our next show at Central Juvenile Hall. There will be four shows only, on Saturday (no rush hour traffic!) May 15 and 22, so make your reservations early. Because of Central Juvenile Hall regulations, we are not allowed to charge for admission to the show, nor are we permitted to solicit donations at the show. Your support for this production is truly appreciated, so please review the donation form on the back of this newsletter. Thank you for your continuing support for the Unusual Suspects.

Laura Leigh Hughes, Executive Director

**NEXT
SHOW DATES!!!**

COME SEE
THE UNUSUAL
SUSPECTS' NEW SHOW!

A Day to Remember

Saturday

May 15: 1:30-2:30 p.m.

May 15: 2:30-3:30 p.m.

May 22: 1:30-2:30 p.m.

May 22: 2:30-3:30 p.m.

Central Juvenile Hall

1605 Eastlake Ave.

Los Angeles

(near USC Medical Center)

RSVP required (310) 523-6800



Backstage at "What Society Don't See," Unusual Suspects Volunteer Denise Martinez, a costumer, adjusts a young man's costume.

The Unusual Suspects are establishing a core of benefactors who will make contributions of \$5000 or more in order to sustain the program. We extend our deepest thanks to Peter Morton, whose generosity has established himself as the original **#1 Suspect**. We invite any individual or corporate benefactors to join the #1 Suspects Roster to help us continue this valuable program.

Super Suspects

Endowments
City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department
The Eisner Foundation

#1 Suspects

Gifts of \$5000 or more
Peter Morton

Prime Suspects

Gifts of \$1000 or more
Anonymous
Meressa and Matt Bahr
Jacki Blum, Film Roman
Dr. and Mrs. Firestone
Tony Ganz
The Gas Company
Liberty Hill Foundation, Joseph B. Kirshbaum Memorial Fund
Los Angeles Marathon
The Steve Tisch Foundation

Suspicious Characters

Gifts of \$100 or more
Edward Asner
Jon Avnet
Gina Blumenfeld
Joan and Malcolm Campbell
Kimberly Chang
MaryAnn Dolcemasclo
Anni Edwards
Lisa Ehrenberg
Wilbur T. Fitzgerald
Paul Michael Glaser
Tom Hagan
Leslie Holland
Joseph D. Hughes and Family
Molly Hughes
Kathryn Layng and David Henry Hwang
Stacy Keach
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Colorful Characters

Gifts of in-kind donations
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Space doesn't permit U.S. to acknowledge every donation, but we truly appreciate your generosity. **Thank you** so much to **everyone** who has made donations to support the Unusual Suspects Theatre Company.



UNUSUAL SUSPECT PROFILE

Suspect's Name: David

Interest: Actor

How long a suspect: Three months

How did you get involved with the group? My roommate was going to the Unusual Suspects. I know that I have a good sense of humor, and I don't mind showing it. I asked my roommate if he could ask the staff if I could get signed up. And the staff said it was ok, and I started.

How would you describe your work in the group? I take pride not only in how I do it, but when I start to do a part, I start to believe in the person. I'm no longer me for that moment—I'm acting. I enjoy it when people laugh.

If your best friend asked you what the group was like, what would you say? It's very fun. It takes your mind off a lot of things. I would say it's good to experience something else, to take a lot off your chest, especially if you're focused.

What sorts of things have you learned in the group? Personalities. That there's nice people even though they're carrying a mask around when they're here. And that I have a little potential in acting.

What advice would you give to someone coming into the group for the first time, especially if he's a

David, whose identity must be protected by Central Juvenile Hall regulation, participates in the Sunday evening workshop.

*I'm in the process of changing.
The people that I associate with every day...being more kind to them or whatever. I act different. I know that much.*

little afraid? Don't focus on what's around you. That's what tends to make you shy. Don't focus on all the eyes on you. Do what first comes to your mind.

Do you think the group has changed you? I've always been me. Just a little rough because of where I grew up. Otherwise, I got a good little personality. My personality came out a little bit more.

Can you say more about that? I'm in the process of changing. The people that I associate with every day...being more kind to them or whatever. I act different. I know that much. Probably because I got to know them. And they know me. They thought I was funny and told me.

Do you think the Unusual Suspects is important? And if so, why? You think about all the bad stuff going on in your life. It takes your mind off that. It puts a smile on your face.

—Sally Fairmans

BRIGHT LIGHT IN ME

As the sun and moon dance together as friends forever sends light down on me. What could have been better, warm bright light in my eyes not to surprise to what awaits me in the cold night to erase all my dreams just because of something that was meant to be, but I'm not going to be blind for me, I'm going to see, I'm going to stop trying to be this person that I despise to see and just let my heart take over me.

—David, *Unusual Suspect*, 17

One of David's original poems

L.A. Marathon Benefits The Unusual Suspects

A group of the Unusual Suspects gathered at the Pantry restaurant in downtown L.A. to cheer on the three athletes participating in the 1999 Los Angeles Marathon to raise money for our program. As one of the 50 official charities benefiting from this year's marathon, the Unusual Suspects received over \$3000 in pledges from the athletic and fundraising efforts of Jason Mayland, Mary Ann Hagan and Marsha Oglesby.

Jason Mayland, an Unusual Suspects volunteer, finished in 4:13:37. He says, "The marathon was a thrilling experience. It's one of the few days when L.A. seems like a small town, with people from every neighborhood gathered at the side of the street, cheering you on. I want to thank all of my friends and family who made donations in honor of my run. Thanks also to the Unusual Suspects of the K/L Unit, and to my amazing fellow volunteers for giving me much-needed inspiration." Jason noted that "As the kids say in one of their raps, 'Be in it to win it.' I was in it to finish...and I did."

MaryAnn Hagan, who produces the *Unusual Times*, ran her first marathon in 5:11:52, while Marsha Oglesby cycled in the Los Angeles Bikeathon on the same day.

Special thanks go to Jeri Anderson for coordinating our participation in the marathon. And many thanks to everyone who made pledges and donations to our athletes.



Unusual Suspects Volunteer Sabina Weber, left, pictured with Denise, a program participant

spect's Name: Sabina Weber

ccupation: Occupational Therapist/Actress

ow Long a Suspect: Four years

What is your role in the group? "I'm the sergeant-at-arms, mostly. I facilitate the evening's progression of events to make sure they run smoothly. I help with the mprovs, occasionally lead warm-ups. I fill in the lanks and do a little bit of everything."

Why did you join the Unusual Suspects? "A friend of mine took me to a workshop, and I saw one of the ehearsals, and it was very exciting and inspirational. I hought it would be an interesting way to give something back."

What keeps you coming back? "The sense that I have purpose, that for one day out of the week, I feel a love f what I do and a love of giving."

ow has the group's work changed in the past four ears? "The adults have become able to assess each ther's strengths and weaknesses very rapidly, and recognize what each adult's strongest contribution is, and hen we capitalize on that. That, in turn, benefits the ids more rapidly because they understand why we're here, so that gives them a sense of purpose."

ow has this work changed you? "It's increased my wareness of how important the arts are toward fosing a sense of self and how, through creativity, the

because they show you their vulnerability, and you in turn can express yours because you have no fear in this situation."

Is there one story that has stayed with you? "There was a kid in one of the earlier workshops at the Alliance Theater, who was being harassed for being black. A girl in the workshop had a boyfriend who was a racist, and she would come to the workshop and give this boy grief for being black.

And one day he started using racial slurs toward her. And I pulled him aside and we talked about how returning those kinds of remarks only furthers the aggression that has occurred, and that if he wanted her to see him clearly, he would have to take the opposite role and take a step back and treat her with more kindness, which is harder to do, but in the end would maybe help bring them together rather than separate

It was nice to feel that there was a possibility for growth and change. You realize that if you take a minute to address issues, you can make a change.

them further. He listened to what I said, and a couple of workshops later, when we were doing the "one-good/one-bad" exercise, his "bad" was that he used a racial slur against her and felt very bad about that and hoped they could find a way to work together in the play. And they actually wound up doing a scene together. It was nice to feel that there was a possibility for growth and change. You realize how important you are, and that if you take a minute to address issues, you can make a change.

Why do you need to do this work? "Because I feel like everything I do, six days a week, is for myself, and it's nice for that one day a week to be there for someone else."

Any final thoughts? "These kids make me very happy. And every Sunday, I'm like, "Ugh, I have to go," and I just want to lie on the couch, but then I get there, and they're so happy to see us and I'm so happy to see them... those hours make the rest of my week tolerable."

—Gail Lerner

poetry

TAKE A LOOK AT ME

Take a look at me
and tell me what you see.
Can you look past the violent scars
or the tattoos on my body
or are you like the rest that fail to see,
the other guy inside of me
The one that carries all this pain
not the one you think is insane
the one that has a son of his own
A son that he loves, and he can't leave alone
Why is it so easy for you to see
the bad but not the good inside of me.
Never judge a book by its cover
is what people say
but in reality this is how the game is played.
You judge me when you don't even know me.
I can't believe this harsh reality
I hope one day you will open
your eyes and see,
see the guy inside of me.

—Jess A., 16, *Unusual Suspect*

SOMETIMES

Sometimes I wonder
but I don't seem to know
About the things in my future
and where I'm going to go
The things that I see
are the things that make me realize
That's where I'm going to end up
comes to me as no surprise
I just can't believe
I ended up in this place
Hoping to feel
the warmth of an embrace
Filled with this animosity
with no other feeling inside
With a lost soul
having no one to be my guide
My mind grows weary
maybe it won't last
Everything I remember
are the things from my past
Soon everything I know
will finally come to an end
I won't have no one
not even a friend
I just can't believe
I ended up in this place
Hoping to feel
the warmth of an embrace
Filled with this animosity
with no other feeling inside
With a lost soul
having no one to be my guide
If it's going to be this way
I really know for sure
I will finally give up
I will be impure

—Alex, 19, *Unusual Suspect*



olunteers (left to right) Jeri Anderson, Laura Leigh, Gail Lerner and Colin Campbell at the L.A. arathon, cheering on the athletes who raised over 3000 in pledges to benefit the Unusual Suspects outh Theatre Program.

Omar, 19, who made us laugh playing an old woman in our last show ("What Society Don't See") at Central Juvenile Hall, is now home and doing well. Omar's talent for visual art was seen in program cover design for our last show. He's currently looking for work and we arranged an appointment at Film Roman to explore the possibility of learning animation. Many thanks to Jay Francis at Film Roman and Jacki Blum for their helping make this possible..

Kai, 18, landed his first job working for TASK (The Adult Skills Center) working with developmentally disabled adults, helping them learn life skills. "I like working there because I like the chance to interact with them and know that I'm helping them," Kai says. This hard-working young man is currently studying to take his G.E.D. We're very proud of his success.

Crystal, 16, who was in three of our shows, says "Life has been good for me. I'm about to move out of a group home and into a foster home." Crystal recently reunited with her 19 year-old sister who she had not talked to in 6 1/2 years. "It was great to finally be in touch with her after all this time. I went and stayed in her dorm at University Laverne. We watched movies and talked for a long time."

"The Unusual Suspects taught me that I could be open in front of a large audience and not be so shy. I liked the staff and all the kids. I liked how we got to act and put on a show in front of people and make them laugh."

Vanessa, 13, has been in two of our shows (one at HBO) where her she acted and sang so beautifully. She's graduating from junior high school in June and will be attending Crenshaw High School. She's planning to do a CD where she'll be singing in her dad's band, Grupo Dialogo. Vanessa says that she used to be quiet and shy but after working with the Unusual Suspects, now she's more open. "When I was down and went to the workshop I would always come back happy. It made me relax, too. I liked sharing my feelings and acting them out. I made new friends and it was like having another family. I learned to talk about problems. I feel it helped my self-esteem and made me think twice and realize that there are consequences to behavior." Vanessa was part of the St. Agatha's youth group who participated in the program with kids from group homes and placement facilities. Currently, Vanessa helps her Sunday school teacher with third graders (8-9 year-olds). "I really like helping kids learn their prayers," says Vanessa.

GRADUATE U.S. UPDATE



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We want to hear from you!

Please share your thoughts about any U.S. performances you've seen, ideas about the program or comments about the newsletter to:

The Unusual Suspects

P.O. Box 360975
Los Angeles, CA 90036-1475
(310) 523-6800
email: Unusuallh@aol.com

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Thank you for your generous support.

wish list:

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

- Grant writers
- Publicists
- Macintosh lap top computers
- Video Camera
- Art supplies
- Journals
- 35mm camera, film and developing
- Volunteer office help
- Binders

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

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 Core Benefactor \$5000 Other _____

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