

Unusual Times

The Suspects Meet the Challenge of "The Eggs"

JUNGLE MURDER MYSTERY ONSTAGE AT CENTRAL JUVENILE HALL

by Jason Mayland

The Unusual Suspects mounted another successful play this February at Central Juvenile Hall. *The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'til the End*, a murder mystery set in Africa, was in many ways the Suspects' most ambitious play yet. The young men of the K and L units of Juvenile Hall set out to write a play that really used their imaginations, and they created a jungle world

where animals talk and danger is around every corner.

The story revolved around three doctors who led a group of students to Africa to find a rare talking bird. The play also peeked in on the animals, who mistrust their human visitors and argue over who is the true king of the jungle. When the adventurers begin to die off one by one, they befriend and join up with the animals in order to solve the mystery and defeat the killers. The play's wild and hilarious cast of characters included a sneaky knife salesman, a witch doctor from West L.A., a Jamaican named Rafik, and Titanic, the boat with a soul.

The process of writing a murder mystery proved to be extremely difficult, since they are the most densely plotted kinds of plays. But the writers of K/L never rested until the story made sense to their

Unusual Suspect Jasper (Gigantor) and Steven (Spider) onstage during a performance of the jungle murder mystery, "The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'til the End" at Central Juvenile Hall.



Unusual Suspect Edwin waits backstage for his cue as the elusive "Talking Bird."

Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

heads and their hearts. Led by Irving H. and Maxcium H., the young men were in charge of every aspect of the writing process, from conception to plotting, to writing, to editing and re-writing, guided by the expertise of the volunteer theatre arts professionals.

The next challenge was bringing the unfettered imagination to life on the stage. Aided by set designer and US Volunteer Noel McCarthy, the Suspects turned

(continued on page 2)



Photo by John Freedland, Jr.

What Happened to the Group Home Program? Urgent Need for Funding Keeps Program on Hold

RECENT \$25,000 CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT AWARD MOVES US TOWARD \$150,000 FUNDRAISING GOAL

Efforts to revive the Group Home/ Foster Care branch of our theatre arts program aren't moving fast enough for the kids who miss their theatre arts workshop. After nearly a year's hiatus, the kids from this branch of our program as well as staffers from the Department of Children and Family Services are growing anxious, wondering when The Unusual Suspects are coming back.

Currently, the program is operating solely at the Central Juvenile Hall location due to lack of funding. In 1999, The Unusual Suspects expanded its primary program working with kids in Group Home/Foster Care to include an on-site workshop at CJV. Since the program began, we spent a

considerable amount of time and effort getting the kids from a variety of group homes and placement facilities around the city to a single workshop space. Because of the costs associated with coordinating the logistics of the Group Home/ Foster Care branch, it made more sense to put that program on hold indefinitely while continuing the one at CJV, where all participants are living in one facility.

The repeated requests coming from the Group Home/Foster Care kids underscore the urgent need for acceleration of our fundraising efforts. The Unusual Suspects recently received an award of \$25,000 from the California Endowment. This grant

(continued on back cover)



Unusual Suspects Sba and Tameka from the Bresee Center, left, and Daniel (in mask), right, are some of the kids from the Group Home/Foster branch who are eagerly waiting for the return of their acting and writing workshop.

Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

GROUP DISCUSSION

What were your favorite moments from the show?

Here's what some of the young men who wrote and performed in "The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'til the End" said about the show:

Hugo: "I just liked the whole play. It gave me a rush, and I got hooked on going up there. Every time I got off, I just wanted to go back up. I liked the whole play, even backstage when we were fighting—that was a totally different scene from what was going on onstage. Like someone saying, 'I don't want to go up there. How am I gonna go up there?' right in the middle of the show. And we're all shouting, 'You're gonna go up there right now!'"

Hunter: **My favorite part was at the end when the scientist was talking to the bird and he made a joke about 'This ain't Def Comedy Jam.'**"

Damon: "When the ranger died, that was real. He seemed really scared. His character seemed too cool to die. I liked doing the caveman part. I kept trying to get Antoine to stop upstaging me. He was laughing—we were laughing. I had to go back and forth a lot, changing clothes, coming back on as something different. That was hectic."

Hugo: **"We all kept saying, 'My family's out there. Do me a favor and get it right.'"**

Damon: "Dr. Hope's stand-in had a really short, bitter time jumping in, and I want to thank him for jumping in and being ready at the last minute."

Michael: "When I got here, it was a brand new community. Every time we grew and keep improving. Later, when we were trying to give it a title, a couple of weeks before it happened, we started messing up the play. A lot of people got sentenced, and I'm glad that a lot of people pushed themselves to do the play. A lot of people started taking parts quick, forming a community that we were wishing to form. And at the end, we formed it."

"We used our own imaginations. **It really did seem like we were on a safari trip. Every time I went to my room, I would relax, thinking about the safari.** We created something that most people wouldn't even try to create. It made me feel happy and proud of myself because I knew my mother would be proud and the audience was rooting for us. It was a good play, and I know that the play came out the way we wanted it to come out because we created what we wanted to create. I wouldn't mind being in the next play. **I give it two thumbs up.**"

(continued from page 1)

The Suspects Meet the Challenge of "The Eggs"

the Juvenile Hall chapel into a jungle scene complete with a campsite, a waterfall, a hidden cave, and a river.

The show's elaborate costumes, which were hand-made by costume designer and US Volunteer Denise Martinez, were challenging and fun at the same time. "I remember being backstage, and Charles had to change from his Lion outfit to his doctor outfit very quickly," Antoine recalled. "The zipper on his costume got stuck. I was shouting, 'Hurry up!' and then I realized that I wasn't helping or anything, so I started to help and we got the costume on."



Photo by John Freedland, Jr.

Unusual Suspects Maxcium and Irving as Dr. Loo and Dr. Johnson on their mission to find a rare talking bird.

One of the biggest challenges of producing *Eggs* was a constantly changing cast. Many actors were transferred out of Juvenile Hall to other facilities, and had to be replaced at the last minute. But the remaining Suspects filled their shoes courageously, taking on extra roles and learning lots of new lines. Irving said, "I was really worried the play wasn't going to come together. But when Damon and Charles (other suspects who took on multiple roles)

were rolling with it and learning their lines, I knew we were going to make it." The Suspects met their many challenges, and inspired each other in the process.

Thanks to all the kids and volunteers for their amazing work which made *The Eggs* a smashing success. Even during an unlikely L.A. rainstorm, over a hundred and forty people attended the final performance on Sunday, possibly the biggest audience ever for a single US play! Suspect Hugo had this to say: "After doing four shows, I was exhausted. But I had so much fun, I would have done it a hundred more times in a row if I could. I didn't want it to end." Neither did we.

Oh—and about those eggs. They belong to the talking bird, and they're poisonous. But that's a long story.



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

Many thanks to Unusual Suspect Volunteer Denise Martinez for creating the fabulous costumes for "Eggs." Denise is seen here adjusting feathers on Edwin's (Talking Bird) costume. The imaginative costumes helped the actors transform from Unusual Suspects into jungle characters.



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

Unusual Suspect Deon stands tall in this clever costume as the boat with a soul, Titanic.



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

Unusual Suspect Steven transforms into the Spider in this imaginative costume.

Unusual Suspect Rey Takes Home His Own “Golden Mike”

by Gisele Sanchez-Rochet

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. This one is worth a million words, but because this is a newsletter and we're on a budget, this story will be only 647 words. Nonetheless, this is a real success story and a beautiful picture, if I may say so myself. Let me tell you how this picture came to be.

Last year, during the Unusual Suspects production of *Far Away From Home*, the Spanish language news station KMEX—Channel 34, came to our rehearsal to shoot a story on the play and our program. Reporter **Norma Roque** interviewed a couple of the actors: Rey Luna and Antonio Siddique. Norma and Cameraperson **Art Quezada** were touched by the kids' work and the news story was very heartwarming.

Meanwhile, **Rey Luna** went to trial and was found not guilty. He went home—something that rarely happens with the majority of the kids in our program. We were all so happy for Rey and for his family. Even the jury helped Rey celebrate his innocence by giving him a party. After his release, Rey decided to relocate to Alabama. He wanted to make sure that he stayed far away from trouble and got an education, with hopes of becoming a veterinarian. Antonio Siddique, the other youngster in the story, is in County jail awaiting his fate.

Months later Laura Leigh received a call from



Celebrating their Golden Mike Award with Art Quezada and Norma Roque (second from left, second from right) of KMEX are Unusual Suspects Laura Leigh Hughes (left), Rey Luna (center) and Gisele Sanchez-Rochet (right).

Channel 34. The story which Norma and Art produced won a **Golden Mike Award**, a prestigious award given to journalists in radio and television for excellence in their work. The station wondered if Rey was available to attend the awards ceremony. Rey just happened to be coming to Los Angeles for the holidays and he extended his stay in order to attend the event.

Rey sat there the rest of the night, in shock, holding the award. What a special moment.

When Laura Leigh asked me to attend the black tie event with her and Rey, I asked my friend, costume designer Michelle Cole, if she could help get a tuxedo for Rey. She came through and thus began my trips from East Los Angeles to Hollywood to help Rey look like the dapper young man you see in this picture. Four trips to

UNUSUAL news

be exact. There were so many considerations. The traditional tuxedo? No, boring. A bow tie or a regular tie? Should the tie be gold or black? And what about a vest or the cummerbund? Rey would look at me and say, “What do you want?” I would reply, “Whatever you want.”

The night of the event, Laura Leigh and I picked up Rey at his house where we took pictures of him and his mother. She was so proud of him. At the event, we sat at the table with Norma, Art, their spouses and several producers from KMEX. Prior to the dinner we all shared a bottle of champagne, except Rey, and toasted Rey's success. Then came the moment for the presentation of the awards.

When the award for Best Entertainment Reporting—“Unusual Suspects” was introduced, they showed a clip of the piece. As Norma and Art got up to claim the Golden Mike, they came around the table and took Rey by the hand and brought him to the stage. The Master of Ceremony identified Rey as the kid in the news piece who was found not guilty and the award was handed to Rey. Everybody applauded as all three returned to their seats.

Norma and Art told Rey that this award was for him to keep. And that they hoped this would be the first of many awards in his life. Rey sat there the rest of the night, in shock, holding the award. What a special moment. What Norma and Art did is unheard of, but so touching.

After the event we took this picture. We all felt so good. It was truly a special night. And that is the story of how this picture came to be.

UPDATE

Welcome New Board Members

We want to welcome **Heather M. Field, Edward Kummer, Susie Spear, Susanna Styron** and **Jamie Wine** as new members of The Unusual Suspects Board of Directors. The success of this program depends on the volunteer service of many people, including those who serve on our board. Thank you to all our board members, past and present, for the generous contribution of their time and effort to help US offer theatre arts to at-risk youth of Los Angeles.

HELP WANTED

Help US Out With Your Support

- **Administrative Assistant:** Basic computer skills; knowledge of Microsoft Word on the MAC; data entry, letter writing, etc. 2 days per week.
- **Grant Writer:** Experienced writer of government and/or foundation grant proposals for non-profit organizations.
- **Publicist:** Help get the word out about US! Any media contacts welcomed.
- **Board Development:** Coordinate efforts to recruit and interface with prospective Board members.
- **Fundraising Activity:** Coordinate fundraising activities and events, working with Board of Directors Subcommittee.
- **Production Assistant:** Help with pre-production and backstage at our shows.

Please call the office at (323) 634-0383 to volunteer your services.

DONATIONS

■ **CLOTHES COLLECTION REMINDER** The Unusual Suspects continues its ongoing program to collect clothing for the kids at Central Juvenile Hall. Please send appropriate clothing (no provocative or revealing clothes for girls; no offensive slogans or emblems on boys clothing). The clothes should be cleaned, in good condition and ready to wear. If you would like to donate clothing for boys and girls ages 9-17 please call Eric Zucker at (323) 226-8988 or e-mail: ezucker@co.la.co.us for more information.

■ **KEEP US IN STOCK!** Don't forget, your charitable donation to The Unusual Suspects can now be made in the form of stocks. Our stock portfolio, handled by Merrill Lynch, continues to grow thanks to donations by Matt and Maresa Bahr and Rodrick Spencer. Please call the Unusual Suspects office for more information.

WISH LIST

■ We're looking for a donation of a new **MAC compatible scanner** for use in the office, **video camera, film and processing**. Anyone?

CONGRATULATIONS

■ Congratulations to long time US volunteers **Gail Lerner** and **Colin Campbell** for their Academy Award® nomination for their film *Seraglio* in the “Best Live Action Short Film” category. Volunteer and Board Member Susie Spear acted in the film and Volunteer Noel McCarthy worked on art direction.



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

SPECIAL THANKS

■ Thanks to **Laura Ferretti** of Impact Philanthropy, Producer **Robert Greenwald** and **Rodrick Spencer** for their invaluable guidance and support for our program.



KIDS updates

JOB SEARCH

■ **KAI**, 20, is seeking an entry level position. This Unusual Suspect loves music and the entertainment industry, and is willing to pursue any available work opportunity. Kai has been involved with the Urban League job training program. Look for his resume to be posted on the US website www.theunusualsuspects.org and please help US find this young man a job.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

■ **DANIEL** was featured in the last issue of *Unusual Times* as he auditioned for his first professional acting role. The young man came to The Unusual Suspects through the Group Home/Foster Care branch of our program. While residing at McLaren Hall, Daniel was involved in many creative activities: serving as the chief editor of the school newsletter, taking piano lessons, working in the computer lab and acting as the host/speaker/anchor for the school tv show. Daniel was recently released from the hospital after a few weeks of treatment for sickle cell anemia. While there, he appreciated the visit from US Board Member Maha Dakhil. Daniel has continued using his writing skills to pen a play called *Mark* chronicling his life, including his experiences facing his disease. He recently wrote a rap for West Covina Valley Playhouse for the play *Les Miserables*.

■ **BENNY** is an Unusual Suspect from our first session at Central Juvenile Hall. Benny was found not guilty and upon his release from CJV has continued to support our program. The 21-year-old collected suits for the kids at CJV and recently made a \$100 donation to the Unusual Suspects. He said, "It's the least I can do for the group. The volunteers had touched so many souls in there. I've witnessed it and I am so glad you people were there for me and the rest of the unit." Thank you, Benny for your generosity and good luck with all your ventures.

AN INTERNATIONAL CONVERSATION

A TRIO OF UNUSUAL SUSPECTS shared a surprise conference call of sorts when Laura Leigh Hughes, who was on the phone in The Unusual Suspects' office with Devine in County jail, received an instant message online from US Volunteer and Board Member Lisa Lindstrom. Lisa was 'messaging' online from Slovakia(!) where she is filming a mini-series about the Warsaw Ghetto entitled *Uprising*. Devine talked to Laura Leigh, who relayed the message to Lisa, and vice versa. So the three Unusual Suspects chatted across the globe. Here is some of that exchange:

LAURA LEIGH: Hello....I'm on the phone with Devine in County jail.

LISA: Send him my love and tell him I think about him alot.

LAURA LEIGH: He says he loves you, too...thank you for thinking of him. He thinks it's wild that we're talking so far away.

LISA: I tell everyone I meet about the work with The Unusual Suspects. So all the way over here, Austrians, Slovaks, Frenchmen and Italians and alot of others know about what we're doing and how special it is.

LAURA LEIGH: I'm reading this to Devine. He says this is all new to him.

LISA: Good. Tell him I hope he keeps writing because his words in the last show gave inspiration to alot of people. And writing is something you can do anywhere--by yourself. That's one of the things that's great about it.

LAURA LEIGH: He's writing a book. He says "Thank you and he hopes he sees you one day and God bless you in all your endeavors." He wants to know if you know how to speak French or Italian. He's learning sign language--he just corrected me...he *knows* sign language.

LISA: I speak French a little, but here we speak mostly English on the set. There are 22 different nationalities working on the project, if you count all the cast and the crew. That's one of the things I really love about this experience. I think it's fantastic about the book and about learning sign language. I want to hear more about the book as it comes along. I have to run to a dinner meeting but lots and lots of love to you both.

LAURA LEIGH: Devine said he'll keep you updated on the book he's writing and he'll make sure you know where he's at. He's still amazed you're going to dinner right now and you'll be going to bed in a little bit--he's just getting up. He says bye bye. Thanks for this amazing conversation.

LISA: Bye bye.

And **DEVINE** sends a message to all The Unusual Suspects: "Whooop de whoop whoop. God bless and thank you...thank you very much."

KIDS poetry

NIGHTMARE

Life is too short,
so most live it too fast.
Not worried about yesterday,
because it's in the past.
But your past can haunt you
in more ways than one.
Do you ever wonder
how your death will come?
Will it be agonizing and slow,
or like life, will it come fast,
not from natural causes
but from a powerful gun blast,
Straight through the heart,
or would a head wound be best?
Ambulances, red and blue lights,
you know the rest.
Another young adolescent,
with his resting place outlined in chalk,
because he thought he was invincible
and because he thought he would walk
the talk.
All this unnecessary violence
will never get us anywhere,
except to funerals
with lots of dead friends to share.
No one really knows
how to end all the bull,
but when they have the trigger in hand
they are so quick to pull.
Taking another person's life
in the blink of an eye,
but they don't think of all the tears
that the hurt mothers will cry.
Your mother will shed tears, too
when she sees you in your county clothes
confined by walls, cuffs and cells,
wearing shirts, socks and underwear
riddled with holes.
This may sound far from the truth,
but why would I lead you the wrong way?
Because I live this damn nightmare
every single day.

Carlos B.

US Program Reminds Volunteer of the Reasons She Acts

Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

VOLUNTEER PROFILE

interview

Suspect's Name:
Susie Spear

Suspect Profile:
Volunteer and Board Member for The Unusual Suspects

How long have you been volunteering with The Unusual Suspects? 3 years.

Why did you want to become a volunteer for The Unusual Suspects? I was looking to get involved in a group that worked with at-risk kids. I got involved with one and met Laura Leigh Hughes at a fundraiser and realized that The Unusual Suspects was where I needed to be. It felt like the program was honest and genuine and was here to help the kids discover their voices.

What would you say to someone who was thinking of joining The Unusual Suspects? You need to be willing to be process-oriented instead of product-oriented; roll with the punches; truly believe in the arts; and open your heart.

*"I know this is scary,"
I said. "But if you do this
and get it, you can say,
'I faced a fear; I did it.'"*

What effect has The Unusual Suspects had on the kids? It's helped them realize that they have a voice which gives them incredible self respect—which in turn gives them compassion for others.

What kind of changes have you seen in yourself? The program constantly reminds me of why I'm an actress and why I believe in the arts. It helps me become fearless in my work and in my life because it shows me how much I have and how thankful I should be for the life I've been given. Every Sunday night when I walk out

of those gates I am reminded of how important this work is. It gives me a reason to continue to act.

How would you describe the process of your working with the kids? We collaborate with them—brainstorming to help them reach their heart and give a voice to their message. Once we get that, then improvisation, music and movement help put it on its feet. It's about midway through the session that the kids start to realize that they're an ensemble. They have to do it *together* to pull it off. That is the essence of the process—watching them discover what theatre is.

What is the most challenging part of volunteering in this program? Discovering the fine line between allowing the kids to express themselves and maintaining discipline. We teach them theatrical tools which are also life tools. Life and art require some sort of discipline and these guys don't have the tools for discipline. They are actually starved for discipline. We find that when we set boundaries for them, they equate that with caring, and that means so much to them.

Do you have any specific experience that has stayed with you? In one of our shows one of the guys was playing a female stripper. He didn't want to play a woman—he was scared about it so I took him aside. "I know this is scary," I said. "But if you do this and get it, you can say, 'I faced a fear; I did it.'"

During a performance, I was waiting backstage to help him make a costume change. He would be changing into a one-piece chartreuse shimmy dress that was so small it was balled up in my hand. He came backstage and threw off his cap, chains, baggy pants, and I looped the dress over his head. All of a sudden, he looked at me in horror and said, "You forgot my bra!" We're looked everywhere and then we both burst out in laughter. "I'll bet you never said that before!" I said. "No, never."

We got him in his size 12 white pumps, arranged his wig and got him ready to go onstage. Through the curtain, he saw his mother walking in late. "Oh my god, my mother is going have a heart attack, seeing me like this," he worried. "Breathe and have fun," I encouraged. Well, he walked out there with such vigor and conviction



Unusual Suspects Volunteer and Board Member Susie Spear

*At the end he hugged me
and said, "I faced a fear!"
That's what this is all about.
These guys are moving
forward and learning how
to face fears without guns.*

and just lit up the stage in that one-piece outfit. His mother was beaming in her seat as brightly as he was on stage. At the end he hugged me and said, "I faced a fear!" That's what this is all about. These guys are moving forward and learning how to face fears without guns.

PUZZLE by Maxcium H.

My life is like a puzzle.
When I first was born I had all the pieces.
Now as I grow I keep losing pieces.
I've lost so many pieces that my life has fallen apart.
Now I'm sitting in jail wishing I could put my puzzle
back together.
I thought long and hard about this until it hit me.
I can't put that old puzzle together,
I've got to start a new one.
So I decide to leave that old puzzle behind.
To start anew. Now, as I start to put this puzzle together,
it looks beautiful.
I wish I could have looked like this from the start.
I call it from nothing to something!

TODAY I have faced the fact it's gonna be quite a while before I stomp on concrete and soil. But the fact has not shocked me as I once thought it would. True enough, I will lose some precious years of my young life, but in the very back of my educated brain I am glad I haven't lost it all. For a long while I had that great fear, the fear of a life with nothing to look forward to except more incarceration. Bus rides from prison to prison, facility to facility. But I've lost that fear. I don't plan that far ahead. Why concentrate on tomorrow when I haven't finished living today to the fullest extent of happiness I can?

Think about all the time we waste thinking about what will happen in the future. We forget what's happening in the present. I enjoy and appreciate each moment I live, each breath I take. Even when times are rough and I feel fed up, I think "Smile, you're still breathing." And I realize why waste your time sulking when you can laugh and have fun? Depression is dull, life should be good. Does anybody feel what I'm speaking about? Forget about tomorrow and remember today! There's a whole lot of things that you're missing out on, get it, before it's lost to the past. 'Cause yesterday is gone and tomorrow's not here yet, so take a look at your life, today. **Carlos B.**

THANK YOU THANK YOU

The Unusual Suspects are establishing a core of benefactors who will make contributions of \$5000 or more in order to sustain the program. We invite any individual or corporate benefactors to join the #1 Suspects roster to help us continue this valuable program. Thanks to our benefactors:

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* Indicates donation of memorabilia for the silent auction to benefit US.

Space doesn't permit US to acknowledge every donation, but thank you so much to everyone who has made donations to support The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company.

"Damn, I can't turn this down even if I want to."

AN UNUSUAL SUSPECT'S INTRODUCTION TO THE THEATRE

UNUSUAL SUSPECT PROFILE interview

Suspect's Name:

Irving

Age: 17

How long have you been in Juvenile Hall?

Twenty months.

How long have you been an Unusual Suspect?

I did three shows: *Inside Out*, *Far Away from Home*, and *The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'til the End*.

Do you have a favorite? The first one, *Inside Out*, was the most fun. When it was time to do business we did business, and when it was time to have fun, we had fun. And there were a lot of funny people in it. But scriptwise, *Far Away From Home* was the best because it had a good plot. It had a little bit of everything. Funniness, and serious moments, too. *Far Away From Home* showed how you could be easily influenced to be a gang banger and how there are two different worlds out there, which people fail to recognize: a spiritual world and the flesh.

Why did you join the group? My roommate was in the first play about the marriage. He'd leave to participate and I'd just sit in our room. When I used to come out, I'd see him making all kinds of gestures and noises and I'd laugh at him. I thought it was stupid, but then I recognized that the guys were having a lot of fun and talking about it in school and stuff. That's when I realized it was boring in the room, and I asked him to get me on the list. A month later I joined the group.

How was it for you? I'm shy. I've been a shy person for the longest time, and when I first came out, they wanted me to run out and make a scene about my dad getting killed. It was a big part, and I had to do it. At first I just did something to make everyone happy, and then Devine, one of the guys, told me I looked fake, and he showed me what to do. And when I saw what he was doing, I did it, and everyone started laughing—not like it was funny, but like it was cool.

Do you still think of yourself as a shy person now? I'm still shy in certain aspects, but I'm more free now than I was when I first came to jail. Before, I didn't do shows in front of a lot of people without being nervous. This helped me come out of my shyness. I wrote letters before this and poems, too, but this was a new thing for me, writing a play. You've just got to write what your mind says. I think, "What would you like if you were the audience?" and that helped me write the play. If you say a line to one of your fellow actors and they laugh and say it's good, then you know you've done a great job.

What would you say to someone who was unsure about joining? It may seem stupid now, but when we write the play there's gonna be real acting. You'll feel good to be out of the unit, wearing your clothes—just putting your hands in your pockets feels good. Just to be free and have people see you, and to



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

Unusual Suspect Irving was recently featured in an L.A. Times Magazine article about our program. To read the full story, log on to www.theunusualsuspects.org.

get to see your parents, and get to work with people—'cause where we're going, we won't get to work with people like that for a long time. It feels good to be free like that.

Any other thoughts on how being in the play is different from daily life? There are a lot of politics here, and different races really don't talk because of gang things. But in the play, you have nothing but respect for another person and you get to talk with them and laugh with them, and see they're cool individuals.

(continued on page 7)

"This was a new thing for me, writing a play. You've just got to write what your mind says. I think, 'What would you like if you were the audience?' and that helped me write the play. If you say a line to one of your fellow actors and they laugh and say it's good, then you know you've done a great job."

In the eight years since she founded The Unusual Suspects Program, Executive Director Laura Leigh Hughes has witnessed the stories of the kids off the stage. Here are some of her impressions of those kids.

September 27 First night of the workshop in Juvenile Hall. We're working with male high-risk offenders ages 15-18. We walked across the barren compound towards the building where the KL units are. Eleven volunteers on a mission. The woman had to make sure their bodies were sufficiently covered up. No skin showing. A burst of warm steam hit us when we arrived at the unit and the staff unlocked the door to let us in. The kids had just taken a shower and the place was like a sauna. I was about to faint after a short time because I'd worn long sleeves and pants to cover myself up and the heat was intense.

We lined the white plastic chairs up in a circle and we all sat down. A Hispanic kid named Phillip sat to my left. He had a tattoo above his left eyebrow that said 'Duke.' I looked at him and smiled and told him that we were happy to be here. "We're the murderers you know," he said. "Yeah, I heard," I replied. Since I didn't run from the building screaming, I think he felt safe and we started talking. There were over 30 of us. 25 youths and 11 adults. I looked around at their orange uniforms, the symbol of the violent offenders, and at their young faces and found it hard to

imagine that any of them could take somebody's life.

March 15 I headed out the door to the Los Angeles Criminal Courts Building. When I walked into the courtroom it was clear that something was wrong. David's mother was visibly upset. Walter Urban, the attorney defending David, motioned us to step outside. David had decided to take a deal—25 years to life. If the trial continued and he was found guilty, he would have been sentenced to 25 to life without parole.

We went back into the courtroom and sat down. They brought David out. The DA spoke. The judge. His lawyer. Then David's attorney told the judge that David would like to address the courtroom. He turned slowly and looked

How many lives are changed forever by these events?

at the victim's family. "With all my heart I'm sorry I didn't help save your son," he said through choked tears. The family of the victim, James Pop, started to cry. I saw sisters, mother, father, grandparents, friends. I cried as I watched David sit down and receive his sentencing date. I stared at the back of his dark head and thought that the next time he will be out in this world he'll be about my age.

Lisa, David's mom, was debating about whether to walk over there and talk to the mother. Would it make matters worse if she went over? Then something happened that I've prayed for. Witnessing this is like witnessing a miracle. The

mother of the victim walked over to David's mother and embraced her. I stared as this small blonde woman as she hugged this tall black woman; these two mothers who had both lost their young children. Crying and holding each other. Holding hands and talking. She said she was sorry for what happened to David and that she would pray for him. I can only imagine the courage it took that mother to walk over there and say that. Then the grandmother came over and said how important it was to their family to have David say what he did.

To see that healing take place outside that courtroom was incredible. It is the people left behind who so desperately need that. They needed David to say he was sorry, the mothers needed to hold each other in their sorrow, all the people standing in the hallway waiting for other trials to start needed to see that forgiveness was possible.

The mother was back over with the rest of her family. She was talking to one of the grandmothers. I walked over to her and told her how sorry I was that she lost her son and that I knew what courage it took for her embrace David's mom. The grandparents walked over and the grandfather put his big warm hand on my back. Both of them had tears in their eyes. The short grandmother with the bright white hair and pretty blue eyes said "It is a mystery why these things happen. Only God knows why. It has brought our family together as I'm sure it has yours. We will pray for David and for your family."

Days like this sweep the life out of you. It is hard to fathom the devastation of it all. How many lives are changed forever by these events? The image of the mothers holding each other gives me hope.

UNUSUAL SUSPECT PROFILE

interview

(continued from page 6)

What do you hope the people who see the play will take away from it? We're not ominous people like society says we are. Even

though some of us did bad crimes, we still have a chance in life and we just don't want to be seen as killers. We want people to see we have feelings and frustrations.

What was the biggest challenge about putting the play together? At first, I acted like I was cool with all the immaturity, but when it came time to put the play together I felt frustrated and mad that [other guys] wouldn't stop acting like little kids. We were gonna be the ones looking stupid onstage, but I can't make anyone do anything, so I had to cope and hope it came together.

Do you feel that your role in the group changed over time? In the first play, I was shy and didn't want a large part. In *Far Away From Home*, me and two other people had to write the script in a short amount of time and that was a great experience for me. Then our star player went to County and I was thinking, "Who's going to play the main part?" I wasn't thinking it was gonna be me. Then the next week, I came to rehearsal and there was my name, right at the top, playing Grace [the lead role]. And I thought, "Damn, I can't turn this down even if I want to." But I only had two weeks, and people were saying, "Man, just give the part to me," and that inspired me to really do it right. That got me going. And I did it, and I was good.

Do you prefer writing or acting? I prefer writing 'cause I'm still kind of shy. Writing is easy if you think about it. If it seems good to you, it'll be good to your



Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

peers. You just have to think and have patience and it comes to you. Acting is good because you can get up there and have fun, but the hard part is learning your lines. If your partner doesn't have it down, you gotta roll with it and not get frustrated. And that's hard. I'd rather write.

What are your hopes for the future? I just hope to make it. I don't want to be another statistic in the system. I want to be a person who has a chance to get out of the 'hood and make my mom happy and give my kids the things I didn't get to have. I don't want to them to experience the things I experienced. I really want to be an engineer, but if I have a chance to write, I will.

Any last thoughts? I like knowing that [the volunteers] come in on their own time and help us and work with us and make our time less stressful. Not too many people want to take time without getting paid, just to help us have fun. You know, ninety percent of us are going to the Pen. We won't have stuff like this, so this is a good experience for us to have now and to remember ten years from now. It's a good experience.

—Interviewed by Gail Lerner

US Launches Website

LOG ON TO THEUNUSUALSUSPECTS.ORG

The Unusual Suspects are now online with an exciting website that offers extensive information about our theatre program. Website designer Marc Precilla collaborated with US Volunteer John Freeland, Jr. to create the website under the direction of Laura Leigh Hughes. This informative site features news, upcoming events, photos, interviews, examples of the kids' original writing—in short, just about everything you need to know about The Unusual Suspects.



The Unusual Suspects' colorful home page features photos of the kids in action onstage and some of their original writing.

For an in-depth look at how our program got started and how it works in bringing theatre arts to at-risk youth of

Los Angeles, click on **Frequently Asked Questions** in the **About US** section. To read some of the poetry and original writings of the kids in the program, go to **Writing & Artwork**. A **Message Board** allows you to contribute your thoughts about US, any shows you've seen, or the issues facing at-risk kids.

If you want to learn how to get involved with our program, look at **Volunteer Options**. Or if you'd interested in making a donation to US, click on **Help Support US**. Don't miss the **Photo Gallery** that capture the kids and volunteers in rehearsal and onstage. And to catch up on any previous issues of this newsletter, check out **Unusual Times**.

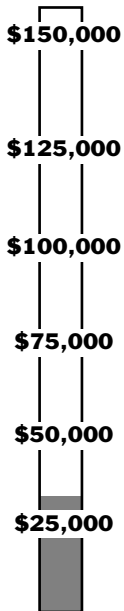
Thank you to Marc and to John for their work in setting up the site and for their ongoing efforts to maintain it. Keep up with The Unusual Suspects online—bookmark www.theunusualsuspects.org and pass it on!

(continued from page 1)

What Happened to the Group Home Program?

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS fundraising

brings US closer to our 2001 fundraising goal of \$150,000—the estimated cost of operating both branches of the theatre arts program.



2001 US Fundraising

The money received through fundraising is used to pay for supplies and services required to stage three theatrical productions annually; to teach three 12-week writing and acting classes annually; and to operate a small non-profit office. Tools such as binders, art supplies, and journals are needed for the kids in the workshops. The theatre production created in the workshop requires materials to build scenery, sets and costumes; printing and photocopying of scripts, show invitations and programs; and refreshments for the kids after the performances. Our funds must also cover any costs generally associated with running a small office such as photocopying services; printing of stationary, brochures, press kits and the *Unusual Times* newsletter; postage; phone, fax and computer supplies, etc.

Like many non-profit organizations, The Unusual Suspects relies on grant money awarded through an application process as well as the donations of individuals, corporations, and foundations. We need experienced grant proposal writers to help us secure increased funding as well as volunteers to help organize fundraising activities.

This year's plans include hosting a charitable event in Los Angeles similar to the successful New York fundraiser held last fall. If you are interested in getting involved with any aspect of fundraising activities, please contact US at (323) 634-0383.

The greatest long-term support of any non-profit organization comes from the generosity of a core group of individual benefactors. We acknowledge our donors in the "Thank You/Thank You" column in this newsletter (see page 6.) Every single contribution, regardless of the size of the donation, counts towards sustaining our program on a day-to-day basis. Please help US meet our \$150,000 fundraising goal so that we may continue to offer theatre arts to at-risk youth of Los Angeles.

Special thanks to **Gary Erickson** of the Erickson Group for consulting with US on fundraising strategies. And thanks to all of you from The Unusual Suspects for your continuing generosity!

\$50=
Buys writing notebooks & binders for 25 kids

\$150=
Buys pizza & drinks for the kids after show party

\$500=
Buys sets and props for one show

\$2000=
Buys costumes for one show

OUR mission



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.

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Laura Leigh Hughes

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We want to hear from you!

Please share your thoughts about any US performances you've seen, ideas about the program or comments about the newsletter on the **Message Board** on our website:

www.theunusualsuspects.org

or e-mail US at:

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