

# The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company

# E-News Report

Special E-News Summer 2004

[www.theunusualsuspects.org](http://www.theunusualsuspects.org)

## Letter from the Executive Director

*All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous unpremeditated act without the benefit of experience. -Henry Miller*

Half a year has gone by since I first sat in the director's chair this past January. At that time, we had great leadership in Laura Leigh Hughes, our beloved founder, and Shawn Amos, our board president, who led the transition together. I was handed the fate of this fantastic organization with a great board, a great foundation, a great reputation, great programs, and great volunteer artists. It was a golden opportunity in my eyes. On the other hand we had been off for over a year without programs and had only four months of funds in the bank. That gave me four months to make a start or it would quickly be an end!

As a group of stakeholders- volunteers, board and staff- we developed a new 3-year strategic plan focusing our efforts. Thanks largely to our great and committed board and Sally Fairman's tireless help, we have been able to raise \$60,000 in new money to move forward with new programs. We held a fundraiser in June sponsored by David Henry Hwang raising \$24,000. We secured programs this fall at Camp Gonzales Residential Treatment Camp of Los Angeles County Probation (thanks in part to Carol Biondi's patronage and guidance) and at Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services, a foster care group home. In these two sites we will have access to 700 youth for our programs. We formalized our curriculum including California State Standards for theatre and English language writing as well as violence prevention techniques. Our artists now go through 36 hours of training every year to assure quality in our programs, starting with a 12-hour training we held in July. Artists are trained in first aid/CPR; state education standards; working with art therapists; violence prevention/mediation; curriculum; and team-building. This fall interns from UCLA's Public Policy Institute will be studying our work as a violence prevention program. We are in the process of forming a coalition with other arts groups working in institutions to secure large contracts, large grants, and to lobby for our issues.

In short, many great things are happening building upon the wonderful foundation Laura Leigh, the board and the volunteer artists started and built over the past 12 years. But there is still much to do. Please continue to help us with this important work.

Thanks for your tireless help and support,



Zoot Velasco, Executive Director



Zoot with Board member Roderick Spencer and Alfre Woodard at benefit

## HOW A BUTTERFLY HELPED THE HOMEBOYS

On Friday, June 4th at 6:00 p.m., Playwright David Henry Hwang hosted A Special Preview Performance of his Tony Award-winning play *M. Butterfly* to benefit The Unusual Suspects. The group presented an award to Mr. Hwang for his years of dedication as a board member and a surprise award to Laura Leigh Hughes for founding the Suspects twelve years ago. The event took place at East West Players David Henry Hwang Theatre in Little Tokyo.

Guests enjoyed cocktails and sushi from 6–8 PM as former cast members from the National Tour of Miss Saigon sang. The evening also featured a Silent Auction by The Andrew Weiss Gallery, where attendees bid on 20th Century master's artworks.



Awardees: Boardmember David Henry Hwang & Founder/Boardmember Laura Leigh Hughes with David's wife Kathryn

The awards ceremony featured proclamations signed by LA City Councilwoman Janice Hahn; LA Mayor James K. Hahn, Culver City Councilwoman Carol Gross and Culver City Mayor Steve Rose; and Assemblyman Herb Wesson, with a presentation by his deputy Anna Brathwaite.

Celebrity presenters and attendees include Edward Asner, Roma Maffia (*Nip/ Tuck*), Tony Okungbowa (DJ, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*), Broadway star Lea Salonga, and Film star Alfre Woodard.

We grossed \$24,715 on our fundraiser. After our expenses of just over \$12,500, our **net was just over \$12,000**. Sally Fairman did a fantastic job coordinating the event. She is the real hero of this event and proved to be a great asset in event production.

We have to thank our **volunteers**: Ada Luz Pla, Anna Pheil, Calvi Pabon, Christina Faulkner, Denise Martinez, Elizabeth Logun, Kathryn Arnold, Marlene Lindner, Russell Bell, Summer Mahoney, and Vivianne Nacif. Our **alumni**: Benny Wong, Daniel Jackson, Dina Fuentes, Freddy Membreno, Sophia Sou, Tameka Smith. Our **Hosts** and Celebrity Assistants: David



Presenter/host Edward Asner with Alumni Sophia Sou

Henry Hwang, Laura Leigh Hughes, Edward Asner, Mariska Hargitay, Roma Maffia, Tony Okungbowa, Lea Salonga, Roderick Spencer, Alfre Woodard and our celebrity bartender Carl Capotorto. Our **Performers**: RobKendt and Monette Velasco. Our **Sponsors**: Phillip Yee at Sushi Central; Hugh Armel at Trader Joe's; Steve Krizek @ KES Mail; □Thomas Reed and Affiliated Financial Services; Miki at CAA Foundation; Lilly, Talya and Olivia at Andrew Weiss Gallery; Miguel Mendoza at Monarch Printing; Merrick Velasco, our webmaster; Lydia Chung, our graphic designer; and Mary Ann Cyphers and the Volunteer Center of the South Bay. Our **Production Committee** members: Kristen Kirchner and George Abou-Daoud.

## OTHER FUNDING NEWS

New Roads School and New Visions Foundation has committed \$12,000 to our work at Camp Gonzales this fall. We have raised the matching funds needed to complete that program through grants from The Entertainment Industry Foundation and the generosity of Carol & Frank Biondi. the James E. & Diane W. Burke Foundation, The S. Mark Taper Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation, The Streisand Foundation and the Bernstein Family Foundation have provided generous operating support to help us through our transition. Optimist Youth Homes & Family Services have committed \$24,000 for our work there this year. **It is our responsibility to raise \$24,000 matching funds for these programs!**

**Can you help?** *"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."* - Winston Churchill

# PROGRAM NEWS: WAZZUP?

**We have two great new programs starting this fall:**

**PROBATION CAMP:** We have scheduled our fall session at Camp Gonzalez Residential Treatment Facility. Funding for this program is committed thanks to Jack Sims, the Camp Director; Joe Perez of New Roads School; Paul Cummins of New Visions Foundation; Paul Higa of LA County Probation; and LA Probation Youth Advocate Carol Biondi.

**FOSTER CARE:** Optimist Youth Homes in Highland Park has committed to three programs over the next two years starting this fall, thanks to their Development Director Robert Weiner. We are still in need of matching funds for this program.

Both of these programs work with teen boys 14-18 years old. "Camp G" is a probation camp with 500 kids who are sentenced there for petty crimes. Optimist is a foster care group home with 200 kids also sentenced for crimes who need more in-depth treatment or have no home to which to return. We hope to impact their lives through theatre before they are released back into communities.



**WE DO A LOT WITH A LITTLE!**  
**We have raised \$100,000 this year for programs!**  
**We need \$50,000 more to get us through the year**  
**and \$60,000 to match programs for next year.**

**CAN YOU HELP?**

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT:** We know that working in ensemble theatre creates a paradigm shift in one's perspective and can change opinions on race, violence and crime. But can we prove the need for this program? We did! Through extensive research we found that of LA's 1.7 million youth, only 13,000 of them are creating problems, living on the streets, and going through our institutions. By working with them inside we can change the way they see the world when they return to the streets. We found a myriad of evidence that theatre programs decrease violent behavior, increase literacy, a desire for education and job skills like communication. It costs \$1.7 million on average to incarcerate a youth over the course of their sentence, and institutions suffer a 90% recidivism rate. Medical costs associated with juvenile violence last year in Los Angeles were over \$700 million. Isn't it more cost effective to prevent violence when they are first incarcerated with programs like ours? The full report can be seen online in our strategic plan and in our curriculum.

**CURRICULUM:** A first draft of our curriculum has been finished with input from our volunteers and based on Sally's written curriculum of last year. This new version incorporates California Visual & Performing Arts Standards from the Department of Education for Theatre and English Language Standards for Writing. These were developed in a course we took given through the LA County Arts Commission and will allow for our curriculum to be certified by the County. The first draft is being evaluated now by Saint Mary's College of California. Having this document and studying it could possibly mean future contracts with the County and setting up a model program Nationwide.

**TRAINING:** Our mandatory training of our volunteer artists will be held as an all-day retreat on July 17 in Glendale at Crescenta Valley Park. It included:

- Correctional Awareness from Camp Gonzalez staff.
- Art Therapy and Fine Arts program boundaries presented by Art Therapists from Optimist Homes.
- Conflict Resolution with the Community Nonviolence Resource Center
- Training on the curriculum and study by staff
- A post training cocktail party event to socialize
- Sign-ups for a team building Sailing Trip this fall. Board members and alumni are also eligible for this trip.

**RESEARCH STUDY:** I am working with Maciek Kolodziejczak, Director of Student Services for UCLA School of Public Policy & Social Research, to have Public Policy interns for our research study.

**COALITION:** We are forming and leading a coalition of arts service providers in juvenile institutions. This coalition of groups is in a formative process, but could lead to large contracts and grants, a performing site or multiple sites for alumni programs and a lobbying group for our issues.