

Unusual Times

Arts Programs Important Part of New Anti-Gang Initiatives

By SARAH FILUS

Pacoima has been identified as a target by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's anti-gang plan announced earlier this year.

Villaraigosa launched a new initiative in February with police chief William Bratton to combat gangs, especially in some of the city's highest crime areas including parts of the San Fernando Valley.

"Pacoima is a low socio-economic, high gang area where there is a lot of access to drugs," said Ed Anhalt, the senior probation director at the Los Angeles Probation Department who also leads the Juvenile Justice Task Force in Van Nuys. "Kids are being recruited into the gangs at 9 years old now."

Los Angeles saw a 14 percent overall increase in gang related crime in 2006, and in the San Fernando Valley, it was 44 percent. As of September 2007, the LAPD has logged 41 homicides in the Valley for the year and 27,219 serious crimes. According to Villaraigosa's plan, gang "hot spots" like Pacoima will be targeted with suppression, prevention, and intervention efforts in order to quell violence.

The Unusual Suspects is in the process of developing an initiative called the Coalition of the Arts in Pacoima with a number of other arts organizations like Create Now!, Youth Speaks! Collective, and Heroes of Life, to bring arts programs to at-risk elementary and middle school students in the area. "Art for some reason is able to grab kids' attention," Anhalt said. "They are captivated by art, whether it is theater or painting, we realized that art works especially with at risk youth."

In a joint effort with the Pacoima Community Initiative—a parent-lead network of public and private agencies – The Unusual Suspects has already participated in putting on a play written and acted in by the parents of at-risk youth at Pacoima Charter Elementary School. For 2 weeks this spring, the parents collaborated to write a short play addressing issues of respect in the home. The play kicked off the parents' inaugural community retreat on May 19th, where the first-time actors performed for an audience of 100.

[continued on page 11]



US CALENDAR OF EVENTS!

Presenting our FALL 2007 SEASON written and performed by youth

NOVEMBER 17

@ 7PM

Camp David Gonzales Probation Camp in Calabasas*

December 6

@ 7PM

Star View Adolescent Center in Torrance – All ages allowed!

December 16

@ 2PM

NEW PARTNER!

Camp Glenn Rocky Probation Camp in San Dimas*

*Only ages 18+ allowed.

FREE ADMISSION TO ALL SHOWS!

For more event information or to RSVP please contact (310) 558-3190 or info@theunusalsuspects.org

Check out our web site www.theunusalsuspects.org!

Announcing the 2007 Unusual Suspects Leadership Interns

Unusual Suspects selects four South Bay youth to participate in debut leadership program.

By PRISCILLA JAWORSKI

The Unusual Suspects is proud to announce the 2007 Unusual Suspects Leadership Interns. Four outstanding student leaders, who reflect diversity in interests, skills and goals were selected from Narbonne High School for the program.

For the first time, US incorporated a paid Leadership Internship component within their regular after-school programming. This unique approach to leadership development enables alumni participants to serve as peer-to-peer mentors, providing an opportunity for alumni to re-invest their time and energy in the organization that first inspired them to reach their potential and

set previously unimaginable goals. The four selected interns received over 50 hours of training over the course of the program. Interns, program participants and the US artistic team worked together to fully-produce *For Family, Fortune or Fame*, a fanciful tale of a boxer, a mob boss and a love triangle, with the theme that when all else fails, family prevails.

[continued on page 2]



Letter from the Executive Director

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS ON THE VERGE OF NATIONAL RECOGNITION



2007 marks an exciting year for The Unusual Suspects (US). As a semi-finalist for the prestigious *Coming Up Taller* award, the nation's highest honor for after-

school and out-of-school arts and humanities programs, US is on the verge of national recognition. The awards will be announced sometime next year, and we are hopeful for good news. This recognition could not come at a more critical time, drawing attention to the need for programs such as US which serves neglected sectors of our community and showcases the power of theatre to transform young lives.

The sad fact is that as a community we are not doing a good enough job of raising the next generation. As we all know, a disproportionate number of underserved youth from the African-American and Latino communities are ending up in prison. According to Marion Wright Edelman of The Children's Defense Fund, 1 in 3 African-American boys are going to prison nationwide. The number is 1 in 7 for Latino boys, and 1 in 17 for African-American girls. Many people are afraid or saddened by this problem, but they don't know what to do about it. That's where US comes in. The

Unusual Suspects addresses these issues head on and provides a workable, rehabilitative solution to help these youth turn their lives around, empowering them to find their unique voice and experience the pride of being productive citizens.

This year, we expect to reach over 300 youth, exceeding our goal of 250, through our core acting and writing programs. Additionally, we will directly serve another 20-50 youth and at-risk community members through conference presentations and special events. A total of nearly 350 youth will benefit from the life-changing experience of US. In the last year we have increased the number of youth we reach by 50%, or 100 more youth. These are youth that are in danger of being thrown away by society to spend their lives in institutions and/or prison. These are youth that will now think twice before making the potentially fatal decision to endanger themselves or others.

In addition to implementing ten core 12-week, intensive workshops and their accompanying performances, US has also added an expanded training for Teaching Artists and new models of our program, including a 7-week writing workshop culminating in the staged reading of the youths' original play by professional actors, and a 5-week acting/

performance workshop in which participants stage their play. These models are in addition to our core 12-week program and do not replace it. The purpose is to meet the needs of our diverse youth population at all agencies.

Over the past two years, US has grown over 400%. Since spring, we have established another two exciting new partnerships: a prevention program in Pacoima with 5th graders and an intervention program in Chino with wards of the California Department of Juvenile Justice. In total, US has opened six new collaborations since we began our capacity building campaign in fall 2006. By 2008, the demand is projected to grow to at least 23 programs per year.

As always, I ask you to please give as generously as you can. For the past 15 years your donations have helped to save youth who are literally being thrown away. Support US and our *15 Years, 15 Voices* fundraising campaign (info on page five) as we endeavor to raise \$150,000 over the next 15 months. Giving to US is an investment in your future, and **right now, the Weingart Foundation will match any donation we receive from first time supporters, thus doubling the impact of your gift.**

Sally Fairman

Leadership Interns continued from page 1

Meet your 2007 Unusual Suspects Leadership Interns:

Valerie Godin Age: 16

"I decided to come back this year to meet new people and to experience new things. I can be a positive role model and if people look at me they can say, 'if she can do it, I can do it.'"



Stephan Jackson Age: 17

"In this program I want to pass down everything I learned from The Unusual Suspects to other people such as improving teamwork skills, learning more about theatre and having a greater influence on people. A leader teaches and inspires others. I can't wait for the workshops every week!"



*Stephan just began his freshman year at Otis College of the Arts this fall.

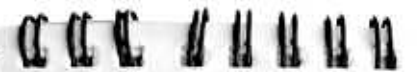
Anthony Lumbab Age: 16

"I was interested in this internship at first because I want to gain work experience. After all, this will be my first job and it should be fun. I also had a really positive experience with the show we did last year. I gained a higher appreciation for theater. I plan on being a leader to the rest of the group by showing them the ropes, setting a good example, doing my part and stepping forward."



Adam Waller Age: 16

"I hope to gain better people skills and do something constructive rather than getting into trouble. A good leader is understanding, and compromises to a certain extent. You have to be devoted and consistent. It's more than just trying to get something out of it selfishly, but instead it's about doing the right thing to make a difference. Before, quitting was an easy way out for me, but now I've learned to stick things out."



"That day really helped me realize that a lot of people do still care for others.

My love goes out to the actors, the staff and everyone who participated in building yet another valuable memory in my life."

- HARVEY, reflection on his US experience after *A Hustler's Epiphany* staged reading

*Playwright Participant at Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility

"We all put our pennies together and made millions."

— DIEGO, Heman G. Stark participant

Program participant, Terrell Jefferson (right)

[Photo credit: Melissa Denton]



YOUTH interview

BY SARA SMITH, US FALL INTERN

Name: LaCole J.

Age: 17

Program: Played the role of Melissa in the original play entitled *Trapped* at Star View Adolescent Center this past summer.

Did you have any theater experience before *The Unusual Suspects*?

Yes, I mostly did musical theater. When I was younger, I was Mrs. Cratchitt in *A Christmas Carol*.

Why did you sign up for the program?

I have liked acting since I was little and my inner desire was to be someone else for a while.

What part did you like best about playing the character Melissa?

She's actually a really cool character, yet she was really self-centered. I tried to give my character a cool feel and bring her to life.

How did the instructors help you with your character?

The instructors gave me the push — the *umph*. Sometimes I was scared of being on stage but they supported me. Sometimes I couldn't remember the lines, so they told me to act like the character and if I forgot, I could just try to go along with it.

Did the program impact other areas of your life?

It helped me a lot, because I actually realized that the character fit my personal life. It

actually changed me because it showed me that I don't have to be selfish and stuck up, and I need to consider that everybody has their own personal history.

What was your favorite part of the program?

How all the characters actually learned to get along. It helped me a lot because sometimes I have problems with some of the girls, but I actually learned that you can accept those differences and still get along, even if you dislike each other.

You sang in the performance. What did that feel like?

I was nervous because there were a lot of people. I had to learn my song in less than a week. I sang Mariah Carey's "I Can Make it Through the Rain." When they clapped, I was like "woo I feel better" and I felt happy.

What was the biggest challenge?

Sometimes I felt like giving up, but I thought, "I'm the type of girl who makes a commitment." When I make a commitment to be in a play, I keep that commitment.

How did you feel after the performance?

The mental pressure of fear just dropped off me like water. I believe that we really did pull it off.

Would you recommend this program to other kids?

Yes, because it helped me a lot. I was able to find my strength and was able to build up my motivational skills as well as keep up my courage.



[Photo by Sally Fairman]

SHOW REPORT

Camp David Gonzales

It's A CHICKEN Thang!

BY MELISSA DENTON

This spring's production of *It's a Chicken Thang!* at Camp David Gonzales marked the fourth year and fifth consecutive production at the site. The talented team of Teaching Artists and youth created an out of this world production. During the 12-week program the youth put aside any differences to collaborate on the writing of the show.

Script supervisor, Rick Paladino, details the process of creating the zany story saying, "[t]he writers broke into two camps. One wanted a story about bootleggers in the 1920s and the other wanted a war against giant chickens in the future. So we compromised. What came out of it was a chicken zapping female battle android who travels back in time to save a marriage, redeem a hard drinking Weasel and turn a crew of pitiful bootleggers into legitimate chicken ranchers. It was quite a ride."

On May 19, fellow peers, parents, probation staff, US supporters and community members were in hysterics as they saw giant chickens being chased by androids across the stage. If the uproarious laughter was any indication of the success of this "ride" then this play can certainly be added to the list of Camp Gonzales hits.



[Photo credits: David Jaworski]



May 24, 2007 seemed like another typical day for the wards incarcerated at the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino, California. But I, Harvey Lee Coronel, can assure you that it was not. We had received prior notification from staff that there would be a theatre group working with us to create a play. My initial thought was that it was going to be "impossible."

HARVEY'S CORNER

Memories that will Last a Lifetime

By HARVEY LEE CORONEL, PARTICIPANT

On May 24, 2007 we were introduced to The Unusual Suspects program made up of five instructors who would train us to be playwrights. Their names were Melissa, Nino, Dustin, Matt and Priscilla. That day we had our first manifestation through improvisation. We shot from the hip with words and body motions that connected to make a scene. That day I believe myself and my co-partners involved, dealt with harsh realities and embarked on days of hope. In seven weeks we all wrote down ideas in our composition booklets, came up with characters, learned about themes, settings and objectives and did lots of improvisation. As fellow program participant Terrell said to me, "I learned to step out the box and out of my 'comfort zone.' I finally let go of all self-doubt. I felt like my input and ideas truly held significance." In those seven weeks of diligence and collaboration, guided by our instructors, we came up with *A Hustler's Epiphany*, a story consisting of all our ideas, lives, minds and even some personal experiences.

It wasn't until June 30th that we really felt our total sense of self-accomplishment. At the library a staged reading was held involving professional actors, encouraging volunteers and correctional officers. It was a day when everyone witnessed our creativity, ingenuity and commitment! To be able to see professional actors read our script and translate our characters gave us a feeling of pride. It felt so rewarding to all of us for so many people to take notice of what we had made. Seeing the play come to realization is a memory ingrained in our minds and heart of hearts.

Derrick explains, "It made me feel tremendously happy to see the hard work we all put together was a masterpiece."

Devon realizes, "I felt rejuvenated watch-

ing and visualizing the play. It gave me an opportunity to feel liberated and take off the 'mask' that masquerades my creativity! I learned to work and associate with different groups of people and would have never associated with."

Joshua explains, "Witnessing the play, I have found in myself more creativity and a place to direct that creativity to."

Looking back on those seven weeks, I learned so many significant traits about myself that I wasn't privy to before. It challenged me to leave behind who I was before, a young kid who grew up in the South East part of San Diego, captivated by gang violence and street hustling. It compelled me to search deeper within myself and made me discover my creative side. The program helped me become more confident with my social skills, which I used to present myself more confidently when my time of eligible parole came around. The program broke my inhibitions to interact with a diverse group of people. This experience became an inner-revelation. It converted my way of thinking, it taught me to respect everyone's ideas and it made me truly proud of myself. I have so much more confidence now. This program has been so important to me. It showed me that I have to learn how to "look" beyond what's in front of me. There are opportunities out there for us, we just have to be open to them! This experience made me consider going to college and attending classes.

With that: I AM Harvey Lee Coronel and today and forever more, I FEEL proud to be a part of The Unusual Suspects program...

Dedicated to those discouraged and those finding a way out of it.

Bringing Together Parents & Law Enforcement in Pacoima

By SARA SMITH, US FALL INTERN



This past May, the Pacoima Charter Community Initiative invited The Unusual Suspects to lead a workshop for the *Building a Community of Respect Parent Retreat*. The retreat was the culmination of The Village/El Pueblo Parent Project, which involves parents who are currently active in community advocacy activities. The parent project provides training for parents and addresses community issues identified by both parents and law enforcement. For the retreat, US guided the parents in the performance of their original script, which included key ideas addressed in the program. Parent participant Eva commented, "[w]e wanted to demonstrate how to be aware of our children. Nowadays, it is truly difficult to understand our kids." The parent project centers on the loss of respect for parental figures and authority both at home and in the community, and US guided parents to express themselves through theatre. "This has been a new experience for me," explains parent participant Josefina, "and I felt enthusiastic because we performed for youth and other parents." US is honored to be involved in this dynamic collaboration. We look forward to continuing our gang prevention and intervention efforts in Pacoima!

Luz & Raul Hernandez



US Launches **15** Years Voices Fundraising Campaign

This year The Unusual Suspects celebrates its birthday by spotlighting 15 voices from the last 15 years. These voices represent the community of youth, artists, staff, volunteers, funders and partners that have been such an important part of our history. Keep your eyes open for the next 15 Years, 15 Voices and make the next 15 years as transformative as the last by helping us reach our goal of raising \$150,000 over the next 15 months!

A special thank you to Carol Biondi for her kick-off gift of \$10,000! Giving to US is an investment in your future, and right now, the Weingart Foundation will match any donation we receive from first time supporters, thus doubling the impact of your gift.

THE SPARK...

When asked of her motivation for starting The Unusual Suspects, founder Laura Leigh Hughes often tells the story of catching a falling ash in her hand. While this may sound like a metaphor for the spark of social consciousness, for Hughes the translation is literal.

"I remember on April 29th 1992 when I caught a black ash in my hand that was falling from the sky. It was part of our city, burning to



the ground during the uprising." Indeed, the Los Angeles uprising is still considered the worst race riot in US history. The six days during which the riot raged, from April 29th 1992 to May 4th, have come to be known as L.A.'s darkest hours, not only by the Angelenos who witnessed the devastation and violence that tore apart the city, but also by those who watched the event unfold through national and international media coverage.

To read the full article about this extraordinary voice, please check out our web site at www.theunusalsuspects.org.

SHOW REPORT Vista del Mar Child & Family Services

THE SECRET JOURNEY OF THE SUPERHERO

BY URSULA STRAUSS

The Secret Journey of the Superhero debuted at Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services in June. The performance was a thrilling show about the final showdown between good and evil. In the play, the "V-Team" takes on the "Villains" in a fight for world domination, only to discover that the fate of both groups lies in the hands of two seemingly ordinary young women.

Laquita, a first-time workshop participant, had no idea what she was in for when she signed up to be part of the show. She turned out to be pleasantly surprised. "I am not afraid to be on stage after all," she said.

Director Omar Ricks and writing supervisor Kristin Goodman both put more than 80 hours into the production and were quite pleased with the outcome. "The program was a success. The youth gained courage and overcame obstacles that they had created for themselves. We encouraged the students to be tolerant of one another. Social consciousness was discussed through the play's message, which dealt with characters making positive choices. We discussed what altruism is and how we can better understand what truly makes a hero," Goodman said.



[Youth art work by Rian]

The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, Announce US as a Semi-Finalist for Coming Up Taller Award

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company's youth workshop program was recently recognized as a semi-finalist for the prestigious 2007 *Coming Up Taller* award. The award is the nation's highest honor for after-school and out-of-school programs and is given out annually by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and its partner agencies, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company was selected out of 350 candidates nationwide as one of 50 semi-finalists to be recommended for the award. The *Coming Up Taller* award recognizes and acknowledges organizations that work to make a remarkable difference to our nation's youth.

We anticipate the announcement of the CUT finalists to be made at the beginning of the new year. Please keep your fingers crossed for good news!

"As a former member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH), I had originally proposed the creation of the Coming Up Taller Awards, and envisioned the Unusual Suspects as an ideal recipient. I am thrilled that PCAH has now recognized US as one of this nation's premiere artistic service programs. Semi-finalist status is a major tribute to founder Laura Leigh Hughes, Executive Director Sally Fairman, the staff and volunteers, and, most importantly, the kids themselves, who are this program's true miracle workers. Congratulations, and good luck to US as the selection process continues!"

— DAVID HENRY HWANG

Probation Camp; as Seen Through the Eyes of a US Volunteer

By JAMIE DIAMOND, US VOLUNTEER

"I was in the military, stationed in Germany, when I had one of those 'wow' moments. I saw this little kid race out in front of a car. Instead of the parent shouting, 'Get over here, don't ever do that again,' the parent grabbed the kid and hugged him. Obviously the kid didn't get hit by the car and I thought the lesson the parent taught was: Oh, I'm so glad you didn't get hit, I don't know what I would have done. And that was an epiphany to me, that you don't have to beat a kid to teach him a lesson. You take time and say, I'm going to love you to death. I still always think about that."

— MR. ALBERTO RAMIREZ, DIRECTOR, CAMP DAVID GONZALES

HOW DOES THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS PROGRAM EFFECT THE PARTICIPANTS AT CAMP GONZALES?

A kid may not do well in school, sitting at a desk, reading and completing homework, but with Unusual Suspects, he gets to be up on his feet, moving around, expending his energy, animating his gestures, and doing something with his voice. There's something different going on. You provide an arena in which he can succeed. Although the program has an educational component and the kids are learning, it doesn't have the stigma that school has for some, such as, "I can't read. I can't write, everyone else is smarter than me, and I sure don't want to be put in that situation."

With Unusual Suspects you tell the kids they have the strength to memorize their lines, perform this character and learn the actions that are consistent with the play. There's a lot going down. Our kids can come to Unusual Suspects and achieve something different than

sitting in a room and listening to a lecture.

At the same time, some of the kids have difficulties working with certain members of the probation staff, but when they work with Unusual Suspects they can stay on task because they get so much focus and attention from you guys. You guys are neutral and the kids open up and tell you things they wouldn't tell us.

At some point, maybe the third or fourth session, the kids finally figure out: *I'm part of the Unusual Suspects team.* Once they identify with that team, that's their higher calling. Then they respond to the pressures from the other students. Every positive experience they have serves as a reinforcement. They might get back out into the community and all of a sudden everything clicks: *Oh, this is just like Unusual Suspects. I can do it, just like I did it then.*



Alberto Ramirez, Yolie Aguilar and Carol Biondi [Photo credits: Sally Fairman & Melissa Denton]



INTERN spotlight

Ursula Strauss

By PRISCILLA JAWORSKI



LACAC 2007 summer intern, Ursula Strauss

[Photo credit: Priscilla Jaworski]

We are proud to spotlight our Los Angeles County Arts Commission (LACAC) summer intern Ursula Strauss! Ursula kept herself busy this summer as a Program Coordinator intern for US. She played an integral role in overseeing logistics and artistic implementation to four separate programs in 10 weeks! In addition, she supported the communications department by writing for *The Unusual Times* Fall 2007 newsletter and designing e-mail blasts and promotional campaigns to expand our audience base.

Ursula is currently a third year student at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she has created her own major "Theater for Social Change and Youth Empowerment." She aspires to one day start up her own theatre school for teens, and says, "[y]outh in our society need more creative outlets and they should have the right to have access to them always, no matter what situation they are in."

Thank you Ursula and LACAC for your support this summer!

{ in their words }

"Most people think of us as young criminals that are going to hit the penitentiary one day. For some of us that's sadly true. But still you guys came in and turned a bunch of gang-bangin' criminals into big kids having fun. A lot of us did not have 'normal' childhoods, so for you to come in and let us be young again, means a lot to me and the other guys."

— DE ANDRE, Camp G spring 2007 youth participant

"The experience with the US program had a great influence on me. I am better able to deal with my anger in a constructive manner. The program helped me realize that I have a great deal of potential in theatre. I now have more confidence with my studies and other activities that I do. The Unusual Suspects program has given me the tools to succeed in my academic as well as personal life. It has helped me to become a positive role model for others who experience similar difficulties."

— BRYANT, Vista del Mar summer 2007 youth participant

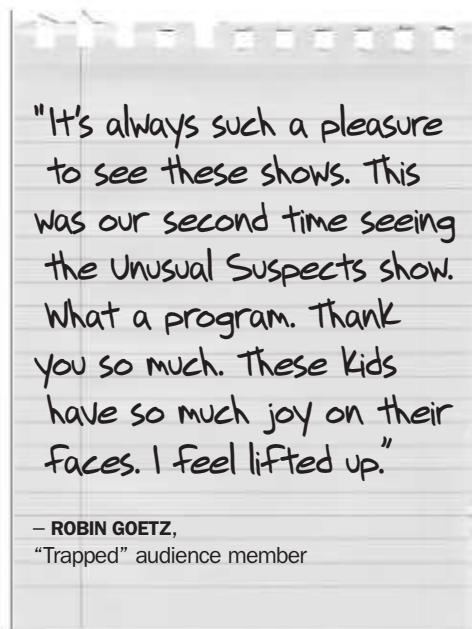
TRAPPED

By URSULA STRAUSS

On a hot Saturday afternoon in July, 50 audience members squeezed into Star View Adolescent Centers' cafeteria to see *Trapped*, the story of a group of high school students who bicker and gossip until one day they are locked in school by the boy who was teased the most!

Audience member Robin Goetz remarked, "It's always such a pleasure to see these shows. This was our second time seeing the Unusual Suspects show. What a program! Thank you so much. These kids have so much joy on their faces. I feel lifted up."

Set in the 1950's, the ladies wore bobby socks and poodle skirts and the guys strutted their stuff in cool leather jackets. Adding to the retro vibe, the performance concluded with a rockin' full cast dance performance to the Grease musical number "We Go Together."



"I had fun, I didn't think I was going to make it, but I did. Thank you all for supporting me." One youth participant was surprised and proud that she made it through the full six weeks,

When the show was over each participant received their awards and enjoyed their last moments in the spotlight...until next time!

ALUMNI news

US OUT & ABOUT IN LA

US hosted two field trips in August for our youth. Special thanks goes out to **Norris Theatre for the Performing Arts** for sponsoring our youth to see the musical *A Chorus Line*. In addition, internationally renowned **Cirque de Soleil** generously donated tickets for alumni to see their most recent production, *Corteo*, at the Forum in Inglewood. Youth were enthused by both performances. As one alumni exclaimed, "Watching these performances is so inspiring. It makes me believe anything is possible!"

From all of US to you, THANK YOU for your generosity and support!



US alumni and staff eagerly anticipate the start of Cirque du Soleil's *Corteo*.

[Photo credit: Michael Spillers]

US ALUMNUS LOVES THE LIMELIGHT!

US alumni Alma Deras shone in two exclusive staged screenplay readings, *Forever My Lady*, at the Lula Theatre and Stage 52. Adapted by Doreen Spicer (US volunteer) and Jeff Rivera, this heart-gripping novel is currently known as the #1 urban Latino love story in the country. Alma read for the lead character role of Jennifer. Doreen commented on Alma's ability, "She was fantastic! She was perfect!" Alma enjoyed every moment of her experience as well, "Thank you Unusual Suspects for this opportunity." Alma recently began her freshman year at Cal State University where she is pursuing a B.A. in Theatre.



Doreen & Alma pose for the camera. Alma smiles as she signs autographs.

[Photo credits: Priscilla Jaworski]



THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS LAUNCHES myspace.com & facebook

For social networking and news updates, join US on Facebook and MySpace! To stay up to date on all current news, programs and events, check us out on FACEBOOK! For our alumni, stay connected through our MYSACE page!

EXTRA, EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

The City of Lomita celebrated their 100th birthday with a parade on Sunday, September 30. The Unusual Suspects were invited by *Lomita-Harbor Connection*, a local community newspaper, to role play as "paperboys" from the 1920's and distribute newspapers to the crowd. The event was a huge success and alumni participants enjoyed interacting with the crowd calling out, "Extra, Extra! Read all about it! Get your papers hot off the press!" Over 70 groups participated in the Lomita Centennial Anniversary Celebration Parade.



UNUSUAL news

By PRISCILLA JAWORSKI

NEW STAFF

Introducing THREE new additions to our growing family here at The Unusual Suspects:



Kristen Scott is our new full-time Administrative Staff Assistant. A recent graduate of the University of Southern California, Kristen received a Bachelor of Arts in Communication

from the Annenberg School in 2007 and minored in theatre at the USC School of Theatre. While at USC Kristen co-founded the theatre company TaketheStage.

Anne Murray joins us as our in-house costume designer. She has 11 years of experience teaching art and costume design. Anne received her MFA at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY.



New to the team, Stefan & Anne (left) add a spectacular punch to our programming!

[Photo credit: Priscilla Jaworski]

Stefan Tatarowski joins our program team as Technical Director. He has 30 years of experience in technical and production management with touring companies and performing arts organizations throughout Southern California. Stefan joins *US* after a three years as technical director for the Intimate Opera Company. Stefan will be heading up the production design for all of our Fall 2007 shows.

Priscilla Jaworski was recently promoted to Managing Director. Priscilla began as a volunteer in 2005 and got hooked right away! Two years later, she's thrilled and honored to continue this crucial work alongside an inspiring team of adults and youth.

NEW PROGRAMS/PARTNERS

We are proud to announce our NEW PARTNERS **Pacoima Charter Elementary** in Pacoima and **Camp Glenn Rockey** in San Dimas.

At Pacoima Charter Elementary we've launched a pilot gang-prevention program targeting fifth graders and the "natural

leaders" of the school. This pilot program is in collaboration with Joint City and County Juvenile Justice Task Force and the Pacoima Community Initiative.

Our 12-week Playwriting and Performance Program at Camp Glenn Rockey is scheduled to begin in September, with a culminating performance in December. The camp is a 130-bed facility for incarcerated boys, ages 13-18. Wards are incarcerated for petty crimes and felonies and serve time from three to nine months. *US* will be working in collaboration with Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE). This site is designated as a mental health camp.

US IN THE NEWS: Making Headlines!

The Inland Valley Daily Bulletin newspaper highlighted our debut program at **Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility** in Chino. Four separate articles detailed the staged reading of *A Hustler's Epiphany*, Teaching Artist **Matt Orduña**, program participants, and the overall process of the Playwriting Program were highlighted.

The Daily Breeze featured the transformative process of our programming at Narbonne High School on August 17 in their **LA.com** entertainment section. The article highlighted the launch of the Leadership Intern program and interviews with program participants, alumni and staff.

US was included in **L.A. Parent** magazines' *Volunteer Tip of the Month* section in their August 2007 issue. Program and volunteer submission info, along with a colorful picture spotlighted *US*' work in Southern California.

On the Web

May 2007, **Experience L.A.**'s online issue spotlighted the *US* production of *It's a Chicken Thang!* at Camp David Gonzales.

US' present status and future growth were featured on George Lucas' Education Foundation site **www.edutopia.org** in July 2007.

SPECIAL THANKS!

We want to extend a special thank you to former newsroom director and communications consultant **Ed Coghlan** and **Abigail Markward** of Bausch and Lomb for their pro bono work to support our overall communications efforts. Their expertise in branding, messaging and media training have been instrumental in strengthening our work this season.

FALL PROGRAMS

In addition to our new partner sites we are continuing collaborations at **Camp David Gonzales** in Calabasas through **New Roads & New Visions** and **Los Angeles County Probation Department**. The program started in August and will culminate in a youth performance in November

After the success of the Playwriting Program at **Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility**, *US* returned in September to fully realize *A Hustler's Epiphany* with program participants. Another Playwriting Program at **Star View Adolescent Center** began in October with a staged reading scheduled for December.

Inmates find writing play a way to express themselves

By Sheila DeRobertis
staff writer
A script written by 15 wards at Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino was read Saturday by actors in an audience of nearly 40. The professional reading took place in the library of the correctional facility and was the first phase of a play to be acted out by the wards in October.
A group of four teaching artists worked with the wards and taught them to collaborate and write a full length play during the seven-week program.
"The Unusual Suspects Youth Theatre program is a nonprofit organization that brings theatre to youths, ages 12 to 25, who are in foster care or the juvenile justice system.
Jennifer Hetherington, supervising case work specialist at Stark, said she heard about the program and invited Unusual Suspects to work with the young men at the facility.
"I wanted them to have another avenue to express themselves and be exposed to theatre arts," she said.
About half the 30 youths approached for the program expressed a desire to partici-

INLAND VALLEY DAILY BULLETIN
Main photo center
and come in and create," said Matt Orduña, teaching artist.
During a typical workshop, theatre exercises were performed as building blocks to put the play together.
In one activity, the youths formed a large circle and tossed a tennis ball in each other while following instructions from a teacher.
They were told to say the name of the person to whom they were tossing the ball, and make eye contact with them.
"Charlie."
"Devon."
"Mark."
"Mrs. Hetherington."
Then they were instructed to toss the ball without saying the person's name, and only use eye contact.
The toss soon became several balls crossing paths as competition and teamwork allowed the youths to stay focused.
Jeremy House, 19, is a ward at Stark who will be released next summer, and said he originally wasn't focused on being a part of the play.
"Then I started to realize



Matt Orduña/Staff Photographer
Silas Dossie, right, gives advice to professional actor Jared Poe from The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company before a performance at the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility.

ing because when you put a play together, some people agree and some people disagree."
He said the disagreements on writing the play were worked out through talking about it as a group.
Jeremy has a singing part that he will perform when the play is actually produced and directed by the wards in October.
Orduña said a lot of the young men could sing, rap or write, and they each brought their individual talents to the

several ways. For one, it offered a change of pace.
"It gave us a chance to step out of the YTS box for a couple hours a day," said Florence, who is due to be released in 2012.
He said he learned he could be other people in the world of acting, and enjoyed being taught how to write a script. He also will rap a poem he wrote for the upcoming production.
"The poem ties in with Mantu," he said, of one of the main characters in the play.
Orduña said Saturday's reading was performed by actors from Unusual Suspects who did not previously work with the wards at Stark, which allowed the wards to see how others interpreted their work.
"It was pretty amazing, actually," Orduña said of the reading.
He also said the wards transformed themselves into artists during the creation process.
"Whatever their personal issues may have been, they let them melt away," he said. "Cerebrally, each person dug deep. For some guys, writing one or two lines amounted to a masterpiece for them. They're such amazing people."
Stark hopes approximately

US Hosts First Ever TA Training at USC

By MELISSA DENTON

In June, The Unusual Suspects held

a 3-day training intensive in collaboration with USC School of Social Work for Teaching Artists and Volunteers. The event was also open to those interested in becoming a US Teaching Artist and individuals curious about the US -theatrical process.

During the 20-hour training, 30 attendees were immersed in US curriculum and practices. Participants gained hands-on experience in collaborative lesson planning and classroom management techniques. As a concluding project, participants were asked to design a model workshop to present to the group. A workshop environment was created to simulate the experience that participants would have at an actual partner site. Seasoned Teaching Artists were encouraged to share their expertise and strategies and all participants were challenged to try out new exercises

and ensemble building activities.

Along with lesson planning, attendees had the opportunity to hear from experts in the field. Many of whom addressed the challenges faced by the most at-risk youth in our society. These guests included, Rafael Angulo, M.S.W. USC School of Social Work, Michael de la Rocha, Policy Advisor, City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission and Fidel Rodriguez, Executive Producer, Divine Forces Radio. The experts added their own experiences to the diverse perspectives involved and strategies for guiding at-risk youth through lectures and interactive activities.

By combining practical workshop techniques with social and developmental

practices the US training intensive strove to enrich our Teaching Artists as a way to further encourage the positive transformation of at-risk youth through theatre arts.

As we grow, US plans to hold two trainings a year to keep current on innovative ideas, so as to remain a leader in theatre arts programming for institutionalized youth.



Program Manager Melissa Denton and training participants
[Photo credit: Priscilla Jaworski]

VOLUNTEER spotlight

John Freeland, Jr.

By KRISTEN SCOTT



John sits alongside youth participant, Oscar at El Sereno Middle School.

Profile and previous credits:

An actor, director, stage manager and lighting and sound technician, John Freeland Jr. has been working in the theatre since the ripe old age of 6. For the last fourteen years

he has volunteered with The Unusual Suspects, filling the roles of mentor, teacher, designer and, in the early days, actor. John has been active in the Los Angeles theatre community since the 80's.

How did you first get involved with The Unusual Suspects?

I previously worked with youth in Connecticut and was involved in a UCLA program called ArtsReach where I worked with conflict resolution techniques and improvisation. I met Laura Leigh and she asked me to be involved with US and I said yes, not really knowing what exactly she was doing.

What was the first project you worked on with US?

We were lodged at the Lions Theatre in Burbank and the kids came to us on Sunday evenings for a couple of hours. We would do improvisation and games. The kids would write individual plays that were 10-15 minutes long and everyone would be in everyone else's play, even the volunteers.

What have been some of the most memorable moments in your time with US?

I think what stands out the most is the creativity of the plays. I remember one kid who wrote a play that dealt with race relations through chess pieces – kind of like *Romeo and Juliet* (the same kind of family and hatred issues that it deals with) but with chess.

What do you think the most noticeable effect has been on the youth that US serves?

You can kind of see their mood change over the course of the workshop. Everyone has a creative side to them. We incorporate their creativeness and give them a platform to express themselves. You can see their posture change. They smile more. It becomes okay to laugh because they are not afraid of being disrespected all the time

This year John Freeland, Jr. was awarded as Volunteer of the Year by The Unusual Suspects for his 14 year commitment to the organization. Congratulations!

MEET THE teaching artists

BY MELISSA DENTON

Zachery Barton



Zachery Barton has worked as an actor and solo performer in regional theatre and touring productions around the country. In Los Angeles, she teaches

drama, playwriting and acting. Most recently, Zachary produced the dark, political comedy, *Hard Right*, by David Barth in New York City. The play received an Albee Fellowship in fall of '05. The limited Off-Broadway run in '06 coalesced a group of artists into an ensemble focused on art and activism, The Special Interest Group.

Nino Gabaldon



Nino Gabaldon is a survivor of the streets. He says: "I had to be freed from that life if I wanted to tell stories about it." His honest desire to share his truth

through creative endeavors has inspired many others to do the same. The gift of teaching people to express themselves through human connection, creative expression and play is a blessing that he honors, because he knows where it came from. Working with family is what he loves, and so that's what he does. Nino is the current owner of Just Playin', a creative workshop that he owns and operates with his wife and two children. Nino has chosen to play for a living.

Dustin Lehren



Before coming to *US*, Dustin taught creative writing and visual arts to at-risk youth in Pacoima. He has worked on several plays and films, writing and

staging his own play, *Eternal*, focusing on Skid Row. Dustin has also published short stories and recently finished a collection of Los Angeles based monologues as completion for his MA in Creative Writing from CSUN.

Matthew Orduña



Matthew received his Bachelor of Science degree in Speech Communication with an emphasis in Performance from the University of Nebraska.

He received his MFA from the University of Washington's Professional Actor Training Program. He is the co-founder and co-artistic director of Racer Theatrical Productions based out of Los Angeles, CA. Look for him as the character Seth in the upcoming film "Think Tank."

Tinia Orduña



Tinia was born and raised in Winside, Nebraska. She received her BA in Speech, Theatre and Art from Midland Lutheran College and her MA in

Education with an emphasis in Performance from the University of Nebraska. Tinia recently finished a tour with the Flying Carpet Theatre Company in New York and Atlanta where she performed the role Madame Muskat in the play *Liliom*. When she is not acting, Tinia is co-artistic director/ founder of Racer Theatrical Productions based in Los Angeles.

Maria Pasquarelli



Maria is a graduate of the USC School of Theatre. She began acting and using theater to reach out to kids in her home town of Pittsburgh, PA. Since graduating from

USC, she has been working artistically, administratively and educationally in the LA theater world and loving every minute of it. She is a member of the International Classical Acting Project (ICAP) and has worked as an actor with various companies around town. Maria has had the pleasure of working with the *Unusual Suspects* for several years now, starting as an administrative assistant in Laura Leigh's closet.

Dominic Spillane



Dominic is a graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in NY. He has been an active member of the theatrical community in New York with performances Off-

Broadway, in Los Angeles at Open Fist Theatre, the Noho Arts Center and the Comedy Central Stage. Dominic also recently finished a short film that he wrote and directed that is being submitted to film festivals this year.

Chuck Stubbings



Chuck Stubbings is a veteran stage actor and circus performer from Chicago. He is a graduate of DePaul Universities Theater School and Ringling Brothers Clown

College. Chuck has over 10 years experience working with companies such as the Goodman Theater, Steppenwolf, Lookingglass and Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Chuck also spent years as a hospital performer for the Big Apple Circus Clown Care unit which brings laughter and joy to terminally ill patients in children's wards. Chuck is also very proud of his work as a Paramedic/Firefighter for the Mount Prospect Fire Department over the last two years.

THANK YOU VOLUNTEERS!

BY KRISTEN SCOTT

This August, *US* recognized our volunteers with the first ever *US Thank You BBQ!* Guests fed on tacos, horchata and watermelon at this Fiesta-themed event. Long time *US* volunteer Gisele Rochet hosted the event at her home, "I wanted to host the BBQ (for *US*) because the volunteers are the heart and soul of this organization. I consider my home my haven and I wanted to share my deepest joy with the people that are the pulse of my favorite organization. This is my way to give back and to thank them for giving so much of themselves to at risk youngsters."



[Photo credit: Melissa Denton]



■ SHOW REPORT
**Optimist Youth Homes and
 Family Services**

FOR FAMILY, FORTUNE OR FAME

BY RICHARD MORGAN

The Unusual Suspects returned to Narbonne High School this summer, better and bolder than ever before! The 3rd annual *US* Alumni Program was officially moved to Narbonne High School (from Eagle Rock Center for the Arts) and we're thrilled to announce that 25 youth successfully completed the program. Both alumni and new students participated in the 6-week theatre intensive program, focused on the full realization of *For Family, Fortune or Fame*, a play that was originally written and performed in November 2005 by participants at Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services. To make this production a success *US* sought the help of alumni with outstanding leadership skills and hired them as interns. On top of acting in the show, this team of alumni played a vital role in keeping the ensemble together. Alumni Adam Waller said he learned how to "connect with others both on and off stage" and that "tolerance and team work are key to making life and theatre a success". The Unusual Suspects will return to Narbonne High School in spring 2008.

Art Programs continued from page 1

"They decided to focus on the issue of respect because they were losing the respect of their children at home," said Rogelio Tabarez, who teaches a parenting class at the elementary school. "Police officers felt like they were losing the respect of the community, and the teachers felt like they were losing the respect of their students," said Tabarez. The play has also raised interest of a number of schools and other parent organizations for similar programs. "There is a problem with increasing detention and incarceration," said Tabarez. "That has its place, but kids have to eventually be released. They are going to be released to their homes, to parents who are unprepared to deal with them. They commit another crime and are in jail again."

On November 2nd, The Unusual Suspects presented three short plays written and performed by Pacoima Charter Elementary 5th graders. Plans to bring *US* and other arts programs to middle and high school students in the region are currently underway.

Villaraigosa's initiative allocates \$168 million of the city's budget for 2007-08 to gang prevention, intervention, and enforcement. He also proposed a \$30 million tax measure to fund gang prevention programs through a \$40 parcel tax levy on property owners in the city.

In June, Villaraigosa appointed Rev. Jeff Carr to oversee his large-scale gang prevention program which, beyond Pacoima, will target the entire Foothill, Northeast, Newton, and South L.A. Divisions of the Los Angeles Police Department. Carr will be responsible for coordinating and putting Villaraigosa's plan into action. "We can't arrest our way out of this problem," Carr said at a news conference after he was issued in to the new position. "We have got to figure out how to provide opportunities to communities who have been bypassed for years."

Sarah Filus is a staff reporter for the Los Angeles Business Journal. She covers retail, fashion and hospitality. Sarah studied communication and creative writing at The University of Southern California and received her bachelor of arts from the Annenberg School in 2007.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

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YOUTH interview

By URSULA STRAUSS

Name: Micah Barrett

Micah was an excellent participant with The Unusual Suspects at Narbonne High School this past summer. His energy and positive attitude helped to lead his peers through the rehearsal process. Some of you may remember him as "Titus" in *For Family, Fortune or Fame*.

What has been the most enjoyable part of the show for you?

I liked the warm-up games and activities. Everyone just let loose and had a good time. They also really helped build an ensemble because everyone started to work together as a team.

Have you ever been part of a theatrical show before?

Um...not exactly theater, but in fourth grade my friend and I had to do a singing duet in front of the entire school!

Would you want to be involved in another show with US?

Yeah, I like working with others and being part of something. I have also really enjoyed acting for the first time and memorizing my lines.

When you first joined US, what did you think we were all about?

I didn't know there would be all the cool games at the beginning. I never understood how much hard work it took to put on a show.

What do you feel like you have learned with US.

I learned that I am really good at memorizing my lines. I also discovered that it is a lot easier to make friends when you are working on a show in theater. People from all different backgrounds can become friends. It's cool.

Micah helps out US Technical Director Stefan, to create giant sized barbells.

[Photo credit: Melissa Denton]



youth poetry

THE DAY I PLANNED FOR CHANGE

They say I would never amount to anything.
They say it was too late for change.
They say I was just another number.

But I say...

Tomorrow I will have accomplished cleaning my record.

Tomorrow I will have accomplished getting my masters.

Tomorrow I will have accomplished getting a job.

Then I say...

I can still remember when they doubted me.

I can still remember when I started from the bottom.

I can still remember the day I planned for change.

Since that day, it came.

- Written by Camp Gonzales youth participant spring 2007

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Make a Donation

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Be a **US Ambassador** in your community

Volunteer as a Mentor Artist in our workshops

We're currently looking for Mentor Artists, Production Week Volunteers, Front of House Volunteers and Staged Reading Volunteers. Call **(310) 558-3190** for more information.

Attend a youth performance



OUR purpose

The Unusual Suspects promotes the healthy transformation of incarcerated and other underserved youth through participation in theatre arts. Our programs cultivate pride, racial tolerance and social consciousness

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