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MALIBU LIFE

'How Far Would You Go?'

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The county juvenile probation department works with The Unusual Suspects to create theater.

By Melonie Magruder / Special to The Malibu Times

The Los Angeles County Probation Department might be fending off allegations of criminal behavior on the part of some employees (31 probation officers are being investigated for charges ranging from child cruelty to misappropriation of county funds), but the beleaguered department can also be touted for innovative programs designed to bring out the best in the youthful offenders it houses.

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company will present a staging of its teen-written and performed comedy/drama "How Far Would You Go?" at the juvenile probation Camp David Gonzales on Aug. 28. Entrance to the public is free.

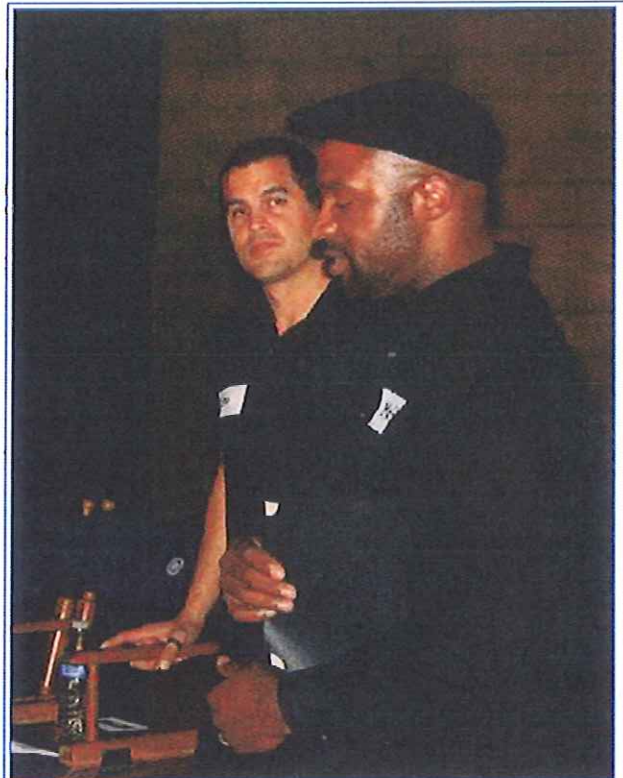
Unusual Suspects was formed in the wake of deteriorating community relations following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Designed to assist youth in underserved and at-risk environments, the company offers intensive 10-week theater arts mentoring programs to help participants develop self-esteem and communication skills.

Much like another probation department program that has been profiled in these pages, Susie Duff's improvisational performance troupe Locked Up in Malibu, the emphasis is on teaching youth the value of working cooperatively on a project and highlighting conflict resolution.

Kristin Goodman is a teaching artist with the theater company and leads the twice-weekly workshops at Camp Gonzales, located in the mountains of Malibu. She said she was consistently startled by what the camp participants reveal, from the writing part of the program through to the performances.

"When you talk to these boys about the first element of theater, which is conflict, they can't even think of conflict as an articulated idea," Goodman said. "Using that to build characters and a story is all new to them. But in the streets, where they're from, they've had to do plenty of role playing. So they understand that concept."

Typically, Goodman launches the workshop by inviting the students to develop a cast of characters with a who, what, when, why and where. From there, they devise a plotline with a central conflict and come up



Teaching artists Matt Orduna and Leo Vargas. Photo courtesy of The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company

with a treatment. They break the treatment up into scenes and then improvise them.

"If they get stuck in an improv, I remind them to go back to their character," Goodman said. "What does your character really want?"

Goodman said the finished play, which deals with several reality television show contestants stuck in an elevator, was surprisingly more complex than she had initially expected. She gives her charges every opportunity to explore that complexity.

At a recent camp rehearsal, Goodman worked with assistants Matt Orduna, Jennifer Fukutomi, Leo Vargas and professional actor (and program volunteer) Sal Viscuso to loosen up the teens through a series of voice warm-ups and games subtly designed to encourage teamwork.

Then they sat down in a circle to read through the play and discuss character motivation.

"What are your triggers," Goodman asked. "What are you responding to?"

"Use your choices to bring your characters to life," Orduna said.

The young men began hesitantly, but as the story emerged with themes of pain, addiction, abuse and disillusionment, they found their characters' voices.

One boy experimented with accents. Another sat up and found righteous indignation in his lines accusing another of fraud.

Orduna reminded the group that they were supposed to be "off book" (with their lines fully memorized) within a few days.

"Believe me, when you guys are in front of an audience, you will want to be completely off book," he said.

There were skeptical chuckles all around.

Bruce Sakamoto is the supervising deputy probation officer at Camp David Gonzales. He said he has seen visibly positive results in the youth who have participated in the Unusual Suspects program.

"Mostly, I've seen a real sense of pride in their accomplishment," Sakamoto said. "And maybe there's a hope that they've developed a skill beyond what they've learned on the street.

"This program requires a lot of commitment," Sakamoto continued. "They give up recreation time for this and they know that if they blow off rehearsal, they will be letting others down."

Even with the success of such programs within the Probation Department, Sakamoto acknowledges that the biggest roadblock to successfully helping these youth is in transitioning out.

"It goes to a societal level," Sakamoto said. "We can't change the world. But we can plant seeds. We can give them tools and hope that they make better decisions when they get out."

Goodman is under no illusions that a theater class will necessarily be the saving grace for many of these youth.

"I constantly try and figure out what this program does for them," she said. "I believe these boys need healing. In this program, they hang out with kids they wouldn't normally hang out with. Maybe guys from other gangs. There is a camaraderie from working together and they know that the others have got their back. Do they carry that feeling out into the yard? I hope so."

"How Far Would You Go?" will be presented Saturday, Aug. 28, 1 p.m. at Camp David Gonzales. Admission is free, but by reservation only for security purposes. Reservation deadline is Aug. 25. Please note that minors are prohibited from this event due to probation regulations. Reservations may be made and more information found by calling 213.488.8488, extension 201 or by emailing RSVP@theunusualsuspects.org.