

Knowing How To Hold It: The Work of John Malpede

By Linda Frye Burnham

Some 30 years ago, in my first editorial in High Performance magazine, I crafted a definition of great art. I take it out once in a while and wind it up to see if it still works: Great art is that which holds humanity up to the light in a way not done before, in a way to jar the soul.

In the intervening 30 years I have learned that great art must be evaluated not only for its transcendent beauty but also for its form, content and context – how it is made, what it's about and where/when it's set. Artist/critic Suzanne Lacy adds these considerations:

- The audience: What's their gender, race and class? Are they part of the work itself? Is it their story? Are they deeply engaged in the work's topic or location?
- The interaction of the artist with the work and the audience: Is s/he the creator of an object, a reporter, an information gatherer, an activist, a catalyst for change?
- Intention: What is the belief system of the artist, the audience, and indeed, oneself in confronting the work?
- Effectiveness: Is the work only beautiful or revealing? Or does it effectively reflect harmony or cause change or model a possibility? Is it accepted or rejected by its community?

Contemporary work operates in both the social and aesthetic realm, and our methods of measurement must be complex and multilayered, says Lacy. And by any of these measures, John Malpede's work is great art.

Malpede's construction of the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project reflects his thinking, training and experience across a very rough terrain of socially engaged artwork. In 1984 Malpede abandoned the path of the downtown Manhattan artist and traveled to Los Angeles, where the city was struggling to contain or relocate its large homeless population in advance of the influx of hundreds of thousands of visitors for the Olympics. There Malpede began work on Skid Row as a paralegal specializing in homeless outreach; he and his colleagues were eventually successful in raising the dollar amount of General Relief. And, starting in October 1985, he became the creator/director of his own performance workshop for the transients who sleep on L.A.'s sidewalks and live on mission food.

That workshop filled up immediately and soon the group had become a performance company, naming itself after the deepest issue of their desperate lives: The Los Angeles Poverty Department. With Malpede as director, LAPD began making performance about the circumstances surrounding homelessness, finding an engaged audience in their own neighborhood and instant fame in L.A.'s art world. At this writing, the company is more than 20 years old and has performed worldwide, conducting residencies that helped many large cities communicate with their own people who live without shelter. In addition, small miracles have happened in the personal lives of many of the company's members: income, homes, relationships, jobs, families, self-respect.

What Malpede emerges with as an artist after these 20 years are some awesome insights and techniques for artmaking in and about the 21st century. He has confronted and resolved some of the toughest questions about working in and with a particular community: Whose story are we telling? How can those whose story it is be incorporated into the work itself? Does that inclusion abuse or respect the participants? How does the work examine the deep and central questions of their lives? Does it suggest solutions or change? Does it make a difference? Who's in the audience? What's the best and most effective way of showing all this to an audience?

"It's all in how you hold it," Malpede told me in 1987. By 2004 and RFK in EKY, he had discovered a remarkably effective way to hold it: re-enactment of pivotal moments in a community's history.

Working with the Doors Open

When Malpede began working with LAPD, he threw the doors open to any and all participants, ideas and stories. He tried performance art techniques and theater games to mine the lives and memories of the company members for revelatory nuggets, helped them learn to tell their stories in ways unique to them and crafted settings for the stories to be told together onstage. These were most often actors who had never acted and whose lives were constantly endangered by homelessness, drugs or mental instability – or all three.

Sometimes unique solutions had to be invented to make the stagecraft work. Malpede might make two seemingly mundane and similar stories reveal their power by having them told by two performers speaking at once. If a given show had a run of several nights, he had to cope with performers not showing up, showing up incapacitated or winding up in jail. He warded off this eventuality by having company members learn each other's pieces and replace each other if necessary. This became a surprising, entertaining and revealing technique that LAPD's audience came to expect. The personal story of a large, 50-year-old African-American might be told by a petite Central American female 30 years his junior.

Soon the company moved to performing whole plays written by the members. The musical "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" was a rendering of a rambling monologue by LAPD member Jim Beam, who lived in a box on Skid Row and spent most of his time stalking the streets screaming at the sky. Not only did Malpede and company have to discover how to tell this story, which meandered from Miami to Israel and back again, it had to be told with some consistency over several weeks of performance. Beam, as lead character Schwartz, sometimes lost the thread onstage, so Malpede became his doppelganger and shadowed him through the piece, feeding him lines and directions ("Louder and funnier!"). The company took up seats at the edge of the stage and threw in lines, comments and encouragement. Music and dances tended to transmogrify through the run of the play; "Hava Nageela" was performed faster and faster each night till it was finally only seconds long.

In terms of form, content and context, this work was received by its audience(s) as utterly unique. For many observers, it was confusing as theater. For others it was the manifestation of life on Skid Row – messy, profane, hilarious, surprising, frightening and deeply true. Another night on the street with the human family.

After years of living and traveling with the company, Malpede came upon a way to "hold" this work that fit it perfectly: "Agents and Assets." Its script was the literal transcript of a Congressional hearing into the charge that the CIA had facilitated the sale of crack cocaine to the African-American population of Los Angeles and used the proceeds to finance the Nicaraguan Contras. The play was the re-enactment of the hearing, performed by LAPD members dressed as Congresspeople.

The content was undeniably factual, yet almost unbelievable: What was at first regarded as an urban myth passed around on the mean streets of downtown L.A. turned out to be taken seriously enough to warrant a hearing in Congress. The context was stunning: The crack epidemic tearing America's cities apart was being discussed seriously on stage by performers who were among those most deeply affected by it. Whether or not each performance displayed flawless acting skills, the container for the artwork held the moment in a way that left its audiences breathless. As if this weren't enough to bring the point home, each performance was followed by a panel discussion led by an LAPD member including experts on the CIA and the War on Drugs and addressing current legal and social measures and their direct effects on Skid Row.

Around the same time, Malpede became engaged as an actor in a work by director Peter Sellars: "For an End to the Judgment of God/Kissing God Goodbye," comprising Sellars' translation of an Antonin Artaud text and a feminist epic poem by June Jordan. Originally debuting at the Vienna Festival in 2002, the piece was performed in the U.S. only days before the highly charged presidential election of 2004. It was described this way by one of its presenters, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco:

Artaud's prophetic text which warned of the dangers of a new America and Soviet imperialism, was created for broadcast on French radio in 1947, but promptly banned due to its controversial content. Sellars conveys political urgency with the piece by incorporating poignant images from the U.S. war in Afghanistan. "We are living through one of the bloodiest periods in history, but the story isn't being covered properly by the media. We still can't cover the Middle East properly because we can't identify with the level of pain they are in," explains Sellars. In pairing Artaud's piece with Jordan's poem, Sellars challenges existing notions about the appropriation of God to endorse racist and sexist attitudes, attacking the association of religion and militarism.

Malpede played Artaud dressed as an American general. He worked on this piece while simultaneously doing research for and creating RFK in EKY, and the two pieces were presented in California and Kentucky within weeks of each other in the fall of 2004.

The choice of re-enacting Bobby Kennedy's eastern Kentucky tour of 1968 had everything to do with Malpede's discoveries while re-enacting the Congressional hearing of "Agents and Assets" and the enactment of Artaud's radio script from 1947. The former urgently addressed the disastrous War on Drugs, just as flawed and damaging today as it was during the hearing in the '80s. The latter urgently addressed the imperialistic threat of the military-industrial complex, which has proved to be as catastrophic as predicted by Artaud in 1947. The testimony of Appalachians to their ongoing struggle with poverty is, devastatingly, as true and urgent today as it was in 1968.

RFK in EKY was startling in its form, content and context. Hundreds were drawn to the mountains of eastern Kentucky for the two-day trip by car along winding roads, stopping at one-room schoolhouses, strip mines and courthouses, just as Kennedy did. I made the trip myself, accompanied by a critic and an artist from New York, and we avidly explored the artwork as we moved along as part of it, in costume, playing the reporters who followed Kennedy. No theater experience could compare with the form of this piece.

As we stopped along the route and heard the words of Kennedy and local activists from 1968 spoken again in 2004, it was poignant to remember that Kennedy was fighting to preserve the programs of the War on Poverty that were like a lifeline to the people of Appalachia at the time. It was sorrowful to see and hear recordings and re-enactments of his touching interactions with people along the route, knowing (in 2004) that his life would end only months later in an assassination. The content of the piece had a deep resonance across the intervening 36 years.

And the context was the most astonishing of all the work's attributes. Kennedy and the 1968 activists were played by local residents of Whitesburg, Hazard and the other little towns on the route. In some cases, the actors were the children of those activists. Their participation included the re-enactment of a hearing by the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty at the gym in Fleming-Neon, where 20 Kentuckians gave testimony about making ends meet in the face of poor educational facilities, the removal of economic resources by outside investors and the exploitation of the natural environment. Local teen John Childers played an activist student newspaper writer, Tommy Duff, who was suspended from high school for testifying about substandard school conditions, a grim punishment during the years of the draft. Others portrayed his fellow students, who, some with paper bags over their heads, protested the proposed flooding of Kingdom Come Creek, which would have led to the displacement of the community.

We looked at and handled mementos of the Kennedy visit, contributed by locals who will never forget it, and who told us it had started "a ripple of hope" throughout the region. We met with local Head Start teachers who recounted their successes in working with the children of their community, and their struggle to keep one of the last remaining War on Poverty programs alive in the face of Bush Administration cutbacks and regulations.

And we were painfully reminded of the fact that our country was becoming more and more mired in the war in Iraq, and that some of the young people around us that day would be facing combat there while we listened to Hazard attorney Jack Faust speak Kennedy's lines from 1968, while the American war raged in Vietnam:

No war has ever demanded more bravery from our people and our government — not just bravery under fire or the bravery to make sacrifices but the bravery to discard the comfort of illusion — to do away with false hopes and alluring promises. Reality is grim and painful. But it is only a remote echo of the anguish toward which a policy founded on illusion is surely taking us. This is a great nation and a strong people. Any who seek to comfort rather than speak plainly, reassure rather than instruct, promise satisfaction rather than reveal frustration — they deny that greatness and drain that strength. For today as it was in the beginning, it is truth that makes us free.

There wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Malpede calls this method "working historically to put a mirror up to the present moment with public documents and hearing transcripts, which creates a doubling: normal citizens playing public figures in order to encourage civic involvement and critical examination of the relation of the citizenry to their government."

That sounds like a textbook description of what I call knowing how to hold it. And being close to Malpede for more than 20 years, I have seen him hold it surely, gently and with compassion, ever mindful of the people he is working with and the impact of the work on their very lives.

In 1987 I asked Malpede if there was an answer to the complex spiritual problems surrounding homelessness, and he told me the answer is "big infusions of love" through lots more projects like his. The fact that his medium is live performance with and in front of those who are affected by his life's work makes it easy to see the effects of these big infusions of love. I have seen them save lives.

Linda Frye Burnham has been writing about John Malpede's work for 27 years. She was the founding editor of High Performance magazine and is co-director of Art in the Public Interest and the Community Arts Network on the World Wide Web.