The two-day "RFK in EKY" holds a mirror up to the promise of the War on Poverty

WHEN KENNEDY CAME
by Linda Frye Burnham
WHILE THE TET OFFENSIVE RAGED IN VIETNAM in February 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was on the mountain roads of southeastern Kentucky, shaking hands and setting fire to hearts from Vortex to Prestonsburg. Conducted as part of a Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty examination of War on Poverty practices, RFK’s Appalachian tour occurred one week before he announced his candidacy for President. A few months later he would be dead. But his visit touched off what the mountain people still call “a ripple of hope” that empowered them to take their future into their own hands.

This fall the people of southeastern Kentucky will look back over the past 36 years and “hold up a mirror” to history with the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project, a real-time, multi-site recreation of RFK’s 1968 tour of the region. Designed and directed by performance artist John Malpede and performed by an all-local cast at the tour’s original sites, the 48-hour “RFK in EKY” Project will reproduce Kennedy’s chats with children in the Barwick one-room schoolhouse, his visit with Mayor Willie Dawahare in the African-American Liberty Street neighborhood of Hazard, his surprise stop at the Yellow Creek strip-mining site, his address to students at Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes and his speech on the Letcher County Courthouse steps in Whitesburg.

Most significantly, the project will re-create word-for-word the three-and-a-half-hour hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty at the gym in Flemingsburg, 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 will play activist student newspaper writer Tommy Duff, who was suspended from high school for testifying about substandard school conditions. Others will portray 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.

Some of those activist students, now activist adults with prominent positions in the community, took part in an April 2004 press conference on the Letcher County Courthouse steps (with John Childers playing RFK). Dozens of high-school teens arrived on a school bus to play the audience and cheer “Kennedy” for his speech. The community leaders directly addressed the teenagers, saying they were their age in 1968, inspired by Bobby Kennedy to testify in the Senate hearing about political conditions affecting their lives in the mountains. They urged the high-schoolers to become involved this year in the same way.

The folks of southeastern Kentucky remember RFK with extraordinary fondness. His touching intimacy and directness had a lasting effect on them, says attorney Jim Pruitt, a local Democratic Party activist who was only six when RFK came through. Pruitt now works in an office in Pikeville with pictures of “Kennedys looking at me from every direction.” He says he is inspired every day by a Bobby Kennedy quote from a speech in South Africa in 1966:

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Anna Laura Craft, superintendent of Letcher County Schools, drove the car when Kennedy arrived in Whitesburg. “His hair,” she remembers, “was the color of a copper penny.” As they drove, he asked her personal questions about her plans for her life. “RFK” project coordinator Nell Fields was a little girl when her father took her to the hearing in Neon, which she believes changed her life forever. “It taught the value of hope in the face of despair,” she says, or, better yet, it taught empowerment. “Something happened inside of people.”

“RFK in EKY” is sponsored by Appalshop, the legendary arts and education center in Whitesburg that began in 1969 under the federal War on Poverty’s Office of Economic Opportunity. Appalshop was designed to train disadvantaged Appalachian young people for jobs in the urban film and television industries. Rather than leave their rural homeland, the trainees incorporated as a nonprofit dedicated to creating opportunities for regional self-expression. Appalshop is now producing original films, video, theatre, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, books and Internet projects in the heart of Appalachia. In the process, the organization is teaching mountain people how to document, analyze and report on their history and environment in their own words.

APPALSHOP’S AMERICAN FESTIVAL PROJECT BROUGHT artist John Malpede from California to southeastern Kentucky to work with communities there in 2000. He heard about the 1968 RFK visit and was intrigued by its resonance with current conditions. So many of those concerns about economics, environment and education are still around today, says Malpede. The deep coal mines, disappearing in the ‘60s, are now gone, and corporate strip-mining and “mountain-top removal” are an everyday reality. The area still needs jobs, not welfare. Environmental degradation continues apace, with the most recent disaster, the Martin County mine-sluurry spill, releasing more than 300 million gallons of sludge, nearly 30 times more liquid than the Exxon Valdez. And, just as in 1968, the resources of Appalachia are again being drained away to support an unpopular foreign war.

Malpede calls the project a simultaneous “reconstruction and deconstruction” of the RFK visit. He has spent many months sifting through news stories, research reports, memorabilia and
transcripts (much of it in the Berea College archives), and sitting in people’s kitchens listening to their stories. For instance, the stories about the Warwick School site: During Kennedy’s 1968 visit, Bonnie Jean Carroll, now a Head Start teacher in Chavies, was the teacher in the one-room Warwick School. The school is still standing and will display memorabilia during “RFK in EKY.” Looking at old pictures of the school, Carroll recalled for Malpede that she did a lot of cooking in the classroom; for many children it was the only hot meal they would have all day. She has fond memories of the classroom stove.

Malpede learned that political writer William Greider was writing for the Louisville Courier-Journal when Kennedy visited, and covered his appearance at the Warwick School. The children were intimidated by the more than 80 reporters accompanying Kennedy, Greider said, so RFK talked intimately with each one of them, crouching beside their classroom chairs. “Greider told me he was touched how they were transformed by his physical presence,” Malpede said in a recent interview.

“I had no idea what a good idea this would turn out to be,” said Malpede. “I didn’t know to what extent RFK’s visit resonated within the community.” As more and more people find out about the project, they are calling to volunteer stories and mementos. Malpede has been touched to find that so many people made audio recordings and photographs of the 1968 activities, or kept items that were given to them by Kennedy. He has involved Portland visual artist Harrell Fletcher in making replicas of these objects to use in memorabilia displays.

Malpede is best known for his founding in the mid-’80s of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a performance troupe of homeless and formerly homeless people who have gained international recognition for their theatre work about the conditions surrounding poverty in the U.S. One of LAPD’s most-discussed recent pieces is Agents and Assets, a literal re-enactment of a congressional hearing into the charge that the CIA sold drugs to the African-American community in L.A. to finance the Nicaraguan Contras.

“I’ve been working historically,” says Malpede, “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.”

The full “RFK in EKY” event is structured over four days, and will open with a speech in Lexington by Peter Edelman, who was RFK’s legislative assistant in 1968, designed the 1968 tour and traveled with him. The actual re-enactment will take two days and will be followed by the memorabilia display and an in-depth public conversation about the issues surrounding the concept.

In the ’60s, Edelman, now a professor at Georgetown Law School, drew Bobby Kennedy’s attention to issues of child hunger on a tour of the South. “We had discovered that in this great wealthy country, there were children who were very close to starvation,” Edelman said in a recent interview. “We went to eastern Kentucky to dramatize the issues for the public, to be a vehicle so people could tell their own story to the rest of the country.”

Asked if he thought “RFK in EKY” would make a difference, Edelman echoed a Kennedy sentiment when he said, “Every little bit helps. We can always make a difference if we work on it. One reason I teach law is to help grow a new generation of public-interest lawyers.”

Another reason Edelman and Kennedy went to Kentucky when they did was to draw attention to upcoming congressional reauthorization hearings for various War on Poverty programs. The publicity and the timing were crucial. One of the most spectacular aspects of the War on Poverty was its tone, Malpede says. There was a great deal of talk about putting power directly into the hands of the people. Money went from Washington straight to local citizen groups, bypassing the control of state and
counties. However, they did not last long, and the governors eventually got a slice of the pie, effectively ending the most controversial—and empowering—projects by defunding them. Head Start, says Malpede, is one of only a few remaining programs left over from the War on Poverty in which funding goes directly to the recipients, without political interference. Currently up for reauthorization, all the parts of Head Start that carry the spirit of the War on Poverty are endangered.

Malpede sees a parallel in present-day politics. While founding LAPD, he was working for Legal Aid in Los Angeles as an advocate for the poor, and was able to make a real difference in the dollar amount of basic welfare and improvement in Skid Row housing because he was able to access federal funds for court costs of class-action suits on behalf of homeless people. “It would have been impossible to make the difference we did without access to that money,” said Malpede. “We could make the whole county jump because our suits each had a $30-million hammer attached to them.” In the 90s, says Malpede, Senator Jesse Helms and others in Congress attacked that provision, forbidding the use of federal dollars for class-action suits and disempowering a whole class of people—those, like themselves, who couldn’t afford to assert their rights themselves. It was a case of politicians reinterpreting laws made for the public benefit, just as the Clean Water Act and other measures are being reinterpreted by the Bush administration today.

Though he hopes this parallel will come up in discussion, Malpede claims there is no political intent in staging this event on September 15, right before the presidential election. “That was a coincidence,” he said. “We just had to do it now. We couldn’t wait.”

Malpede, a dyed-in-the-wool conceptualist, thoroughly enjoys the concurrence of events in this “mirroring” strategy. Performing with people who have mental and emotional challenges on L.A.’s Skid Row presented him with wonderful opportunities for improvisation. When the best-laid plans go awry, he simply looks at things from another angle, in an attempt to discover what is really going on. “It’s all in how you hold it,” he has said.

He can’t wait until September, when so many of the people who were involved with the RFK tour will be part of the re-enactment.

Ella Tolliver, a Neon high-school majorette in 1968, is going to play Pat Gish, a 1968 housing worker. Gish is now a Whitesburg newspaper publisher. Carl Banks was a young teacher in the county in 1968; he will play Harry Caudill, author of Night Comes to the Cumberlands and a star witness in the Neon hearing. Bobby Kennedy will be played by Mike McNeely, a former coal miner who is now a nurse.

**ANOTHER LOCAL WILL BE SIGNED ON TO PLAY PETER**

Edelman in 1968, and both he and the real Edelman will be part of the tour. Malpede has drafted some arts writers to play journalists in RFK’s entourage, and he is tickled by the possibility that the same person might interview both Edelmans on the road. “There’s a porous boundary between what’s being enacted and what’s being watched,” Malpede said. “We’re encouraging the audience to wear their Buddy Holly glasses.”

Malpede’s wife and partner, Dutch theatre artist Henriette Brouwers, is acting, with gusto, as assistant director. Her favorite part of the process is interacting with local participants, who are also now her neighbors. As a foreigner, Brouwers recognizes the sensitivity of Appalachians to the picture people paint of them. “I have always felt like an outsider, even in Holland,” said Brouwers. “I come from the south, and my accent sounds stupid to Amsterdamers. The people here feel like outsiders in the U.S.”

When “RFK in EKY” holds up a mirror to February 1968 in September 2004, who knows what it will see twinned there? The year 1968 was pivotal in world history. It saw the Poor People’s March on Washington. Students led the May Revolution in France and Bernardette Devlin led civil-rights demonstrations in Ireland. Czechoslovakia was invaded by the U.S.S.R. Columbia University and San Francisco State were closed by students in anti-war protests. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. The Democratic Party Convention in Chicago erupted in violence. U.S. troops committed the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was underway, and U.S. troops had peaked at 550,000. Richard Nixon was elected president.

At this writing, the most gripping parallels between the two eras are a hotly contested presidential election and a controversial and divisive war.

Before Robert Kennedy spoke at Alice Lloyd College in 1968, sociology teacher Lawrence Baldridge told the students in the audience that Kennedy was a “heart person,” and not to confront him about the Vietnam War. In fact, that was the first thing they did. This September, their sons and daughters will be playing the parts their parents played in 1968. They will be considering their votes in the upcoming election. Some may be considering military service in combat. Thanks to this project, the words of Robert F. Kennedy will be ringing in their ears, as they should ring in ours: “...our nation must be told the truth about this war, in all its terrible reality, both because it is right, and because only in this way can any administration rally public confidence and unity for the shadowed days which lie ahead.”

“RFK in EKY” is scheduled Sept. 9-10 in southeastern Kentucky. For information, call Appalachshop at 606-633-0108 or go to www.appalachshop.org. Linda Frye Burnham is a writer who is co-director of Art in the Public Interest and the Community Arts Network. She has written about John Malpede’s work since 1979.