

RFK in EKY: Maximum Feasible Participation

By Jane Hirshberg

"...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..."



RFK in EKY button. View slideshow of additional images.

– Robert F. Kennedy 1968

When I heard Jack Faust re-enact this speech in Kentucky in 2004, its relevance to what is happening in today's political, social and cultural arenas was striking to the point of being shocking. These words about the war that rocked our country for so many years rang like truth and wisdom, now at a time when war is, once again, dividing our populace and shaking up how we think and feel about finding truth, understanding reality and acting on our convictions.

Faust, an attorney from Hazard, Kentucky, played the role of Kennedy in John Malpede's recent work, "RFK in EKY: The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project." The event recreated Kennedy's two-day, 200-mile "poverty tour" through southeastern Kentucky in February 1968.

History tells us that Kennedy's official Senate Committee "field hearing" was one in a series of field hearings; others were held in the Mississippi Delta, California's Central Valley and on a native American reservation in New Mexico. The intent of these hearings was to build a national constituency for a second round of antipoverty legislation in the U.S. Congress. These listening tours were Kennedy's way of carrying out the mandate in the original legislation surrounding the War on Poverty, requiring that all its programs be driven by the public's "maximum feasible participation." Those three words also became the slogan of "RFK in EKY," which included the participation of hundreds of Kentuckians.

Michael Hunt, project dramaturg and development coordinator, writes, explaining Malpede's idea for the project,

"RFK in EKY" not only recreates an historic moment, it holds a mirror to it and asks people to join the conversations, exploring their hopes and analyzing what's true in our relationships to government, community and each other. Like RFK himself, the project hopes to give people the opportunity and the courage to listen, speak and act as free citizens in a true democracy.

I heard about Malpede's project at a gathering hosted by the American Festival Project in June 2003. I stayed in touch with Malpede and Hunt and eventually with Nell Fields, project coordinator, and when August rolled around this year, I was able to find a way to participate in the project,

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which thrilled me.

My involvement with community-based art-making projects (through working with Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and other groups) has kept me in a mode of inquiry for several years. What draws people to participate in making art? What draws people to become audiences to others making art? What makes people connect to an artist's work? And the question that came up several times for me throughout the days I was on the tour — is a re-enactment of an historic event really art?

Malpede writes,

As I've worked on the project, I've become aware of other artists also interested in historical recreations and documentary theater, and for similar reasons: to tell an alternative history, to retrieve history from the realm of nostalgia and cultural heritage and to inject it with critical thinking. Unlike just about every "historical recreation" I'm aware of, this project is not about recreating a battle, or any other kind of violence. It's about ideas...the force of ideas and about the history of ideas. It's about the problems confronting the region then and now. It's about social policies of the '60s and now. And ultimately, it's about the level of political dialogue then and now. For that reason, it's simultaneously heartbreaking and elevating.

I couldn't agree more. The experience as an observer/audience member/journal-keeper of "RFK in EKY" was truly heartbreaking, elevating and much, much more.

The opportunities for participation in the project were far-reaching, and Kentuckians snapped them up — from the attorney who portrayed the character of Kennedy, to the high-school band students who played music as Kennedy arrived in Whitesburg, to the older women who made pancakes for



Students demonstrate at Neon. Photo by Linda Frye Burnham. [\[View slideshow\]](#)

the first breakfast and costuming party in Campton, to the journalists and other interested folks, like myself, who came to be a part of the experience, pregnant with curiosity, anticipation and, eventually, awe. There were others who joined in the project early in Malpede's research process, providing resources for authenticity in the re-enactment, either by refurbishing actual buildings that Kennedy visited, or by providing memorabilia that informed the work, or by telling their own stories of how Kennedy touched, and, in some cases, changed their lives when he came through in 1968.

"RFK in EKY" laced moments of real time with moments of historical re-enactment, lending ample opportunity for audience and actors to ask questions, reflect on what was being said, share memories and just talk. This provided a platform for no barriers — no barriers between the material being presented and the opportunity to inquire about it, no barriers between audience and actor, and certainly no barriers between understanding the art and understanding historical events. There was plenty of time for developing a holistic sense of the events as they happened in 1968, the events as they were portrayed in 2004, and the relevance of it all. This aspect of the project was, in itself, miraculous.

Wednesday, September 8, 2004

We gathered at the University of Kentucky in Lexington to hear Peter Edelman speak. Edelman was RFK's primary advisor and confidant, and was the person who organized the 1968 tour through eastern Kentucky in order for Kennedy to have a deeper understanding of some of the primary reasons that poverty was so prevalent in the region, and to get a sense of the people who were living there. The room was packed to capacity, and when the speech was over, people stayed for a long time, curious about who else was there and seemingly delighted to be participating.

Edelman talked about his role in putting together the 1968 tour as an advance person; he talked about some of the logistical problems they encountered because they hadn't anticipated that so many journalists would want to come along. Peter explored what impassioned Bobby Kennedy, his deep interest in solving the problem of poverty, and how he believed that it was all about creating jobs. He talked about some of the great work RFK did during the short time he was in Congress.

In relation to current times, Edelman talked about "bad news and good news and good news and bad news." The bad news is very bad — about how the gap between the very, very rich and the sub-poverty poor has widened in the last three years, and how now there are over 15 million people in the country whose households bring in less than \$7,500 annually. He spoke about the need right now for a movement — a movement for change, a movement for making things better. He talked about how important it will be to get people registered to vote in the 2004 presidential election. Listening to him, I was struck with a deep sense of being robbed of the great RFK vision — one that many people in the audience must have known firsthand.

The people in the room represented every level of participation that this project offered. Don Quinlin, a community member who performed in the re-enactment of the Neon hearings, got involved through his interest in Appalshop, the media and cultural center in Whitesburg that sponsored "RFK in EKY." (Appalshop itself was created through Office of Economic Opportunity funding in 1969 as part of the War on Poverty.) Quinlan became intrigued with this project and the opportunity to participate in a way that was different from the usual way he experienced art. I ran into him several times in the next few days, learning about his life, his work as an arborist and his nervousness about his performance. I was curious about what drew him in, what made him decide to commit so much time and energy to being a part of these events. He had no clear answer for those questions. He just wanted to be there.

On that first night I also met Harrell Fletcher, an artist working in a variety of media, who is based in Portland, Oregon. We talked about his work, and about this thing called "community art." When I asked him about how working with people who are not trained artists affects his own art making, he talked about how there is no real delineation between the different kinds of work that he makes or the different processes involved in making it. Whether he is working with developmentally disabled adults, or with students at Portland State, his approach is pretty much the same.

I also met Nancy Butler — the sister of Tom Johnston, who worked with Peter Edelman as an advance person for RFK's original tour. She talked about her work on the Kerry campaign, and her dismay at how, politically, Kentucky has shifted over the past few years from a hotbed of yellow-dog Democrats to a more conservative state that succumbed to Gingrich's Contract with America and never really came back. She talked about how much work there was to do on the upcoming election, and important it was that everyone get involved.

After hearing Edelman, we all loaded into cars and headed south to Campton, where the next day's events would begin. The enthusiasm of the evening's speakers, coupled with the opportunity to meet such committed

and passionate people who were all experiencing the same event, made for the perfect entrée to the rest of the tour's activities.

Thursday, September 9, 2004

The day started with a pancake breakfast and styling party at the Wolfe County Senior Citizens Center in Campton. Malpede was especially keen on putting everyone in the mood – and in the performance -- by offering a closet full of '60s outfits and a battery of hair and makeup stylists. The place was buzzing with people — some eating, some looking for costumes, some getting their hair done, some getting interviewed by the documentation crew of filmmaker Robert Salyer. There was no speech here, just a gathering of happy and excited people.

There was Greg Wagner, who had planned on speaking during the re-enactment, but decided just to go along for the ride. He learned of the project at the Seed Time on Cumberland Festival, an Appalshop annual event. The "RFK in EKY" project team had a booth there, and Greg was captivated by the videotape of archival footage being shown, and the idea of reinvigorating some democracy in the region. He ended up putting the project team in touch with some alternative journalists in Louisville, where he lives. He was a warm and friendly presence, and our conversation continued to unfold over the next three days.

The community that was created by the pack of people who followed the re-enactment had its own rich dynamic, and its own set of opportunities for a unique kind of participation. The car rides between sites, the shared housing along the way, the meals together, the continuing sidebar conversations — all of these elements were unique to the "RFK in EKY" experience, and certainly worth discovering.

There were several student interns who helped with various logistical tasks, including Ashley Sparks, who just started in a new program at Virginia Tech, exploring theater direction and civic dialogue. She had been given an assignment to be at this event. The emergence of graduate programs around the country, giving give students the opportunity to explore more deeply this whole concept of community art, is truly a positive sign of changing times. And one that brings up many questions -- questions that provided a lens for me as I participated in "RFK in EKY" and as I thought about how to write about it:

- What is at the heart of doing art in community settings?
- Where is the intersection between quality of artmaking and quality of community engagement?
- How do you know when it's all over?
- How do you know what "all" is?
- What are the various ways that artists interact with people new to art making?
- How do collected people and stories inform and/or shape the work?
- How does the work change?

We headed off to Vortex next. There were classic cars, and Kennedy was the leader of the caravan in his glorious 1958 Edsel. The convoy numbered about 20 cars, and at each stop throughout the day there were people who joined in from the local communities. Each



time we stopped, it seemed about 100 people eventually gathered to see what was going on. **Kentuckians testify in Vortex. Photo by Linda Frye Burnham. [\[View slideshow\]](#)**

The re-enactment of the hearing at Vortex was very compelling, authentic and, again, relevant to current issues. The actors were totally committed to their testimonies, and seemed to be relaxed and comfortable in their roles. Jack Faust as RFK and Frank Taylor as Representative Carl Perkins (D-Kentucky) were completely immersed in their characters. It was as though they became Kennedy and Perkins, whether testifying or not, for the entire tour.

The audience was engaged and curious, very appreciative not only of the performance, but of what was being communicated about life in the mountains, then and now. When the hearing concluded and we filtered out of the Vortex Community Church, substituting for the long-gone Vortex School, no one wanted to leave. There was some kind of magical thing happening for me in that moment, where I thought that if we all just stayed there long enough, maybe the world would change.

But we were gently coaxed to our next destination — a one-room schoolhouse in Barwick where Kennedy made a surprise visit. On the 1968 tour, the children at the school apparently were somewhat shocked by his appearance and by his entourage. The accounts of the visit say he didn't address the room, but walked around and touched the children, speaking quietly to them individually. In our 2004 visit, there was not a talk, but a remembrance by Peter Edelman and Bonnie Jean Carroll, who was a teacher at the school in 1968. We also watched a video of the 1968 visit, projected onto the schoolhouse wall, and listened as John Malpede read a letter written by William Greider, now of The Nation magazine, who in 1968 covered the RFK tour for the Louisville Courier Journal. There were three or four people in the room who had been students at the school when Kennedy passed through who talked about the experience. When hearing these stories, I was struck by the gentle humility that abounds in these Kentuckians.

Our next stop was in Hazard, which is a community that has changed dramatically since Kennedy was there in 1968. We parked on Liberty Street, where throngs of people were gathering to walk up the hill with Kennedy as he was being interviewed by a local reporter, accompanied by the town mayor. This re-enactment was especially effective — the reporter asking pointed and insightful questions, the mayor engaging in a lively and impassioned discussion, and Kennedy joining in with commentary and questions all along the way.

As we walked down the street, we could only imagine what this same scene must have looked like when the real tour took place: a coal camp, houses very close to one another, no real road, a creek running through, a hill on one side, covered with houses, children, trash, shamed faces of people in poverty. Now the hill is fully overgrown with trees, and the houses on the other side are single-family dwellings, with the look of a community on the mend.

Walking in the crowd was exhilarating, happy, intense. Again, it was amazing to witness the actor's commitment to truly recreating what must have been a pivotal moment in this tour, where Kennedy saw some of the most devastating evidence of how poverty had overtaken this region.

As we walked, the crowd grew; a trolley arrived with about 50 high-school students and their teachers; families who currently live on the street were out on their porches, watching with curiosity as what must have looked like an odd procession passed by. We gave them "RFK in EKY" buttons, but most of the onlookers did not seem to understand what was really happening, even though there were signs prominently posted in each community, explaining the tour. But that didn't seem to matter; they

smiled and watched. People in the crowd were smiling, too — the whole event was nearly perfect as a re-enactment of hope, which is what must have occurred when Kennedy was really in town.

During RFK's original visit, he was drawn to one particular house because of a couple of beagles playing on the porch. He went in and visited with the family, talking about their conditions, asking questions and giving gentle encouragement. In the re-enactment, we went to the house (now a community center) that once belonged to this family. One of the children, Lucille Ollinger, now in her 40s, talked to the artists, and took a few questions from the crowd, which were primarily nostalgic in nature, as if they were wanting to hear firsthand some real, up-close memories of Kennedy.

In Kennedy's original tour, the next stop was an unannounced visit to a strip mine. Ours was planned, and we had a gracious host in the safety director of the crew that kept on working the whole time we were there. I can think only of the images that are still vivid in my memory of the site.

- Huge machinery
- Massive destruction of the land
- Amazing choreography by the combines
- Giant dump truck almost hit my car. Three times.
- Big noise
- Spectacular, in a disaster-film kind of way
- Proud and positive words spoken by the safety director of the mine.
- Looked like a war zone
- Shock and awe

After the visit to the mine, we drove to Alice Lloyd College where we had a fast cafeteria dinner and then went to the next presentation. It was during this event that we heard Kennedy speak about the war, among other things. Apparently, when Kennedy came through in 1968, there was an arbitrary decision made on the part of the journalist entourage to not record the address Kennedy gave to the students. So, in effect, only the people who were in that room in 1968 really know what transpired. It is through the stories John collected from these folks that the recreation was put together. In fact, the quote at the beginning of this article, which Malpede placed in the Alice Lloyd event, was actually one spoken by Kennedy earlier in the week, at a gathering in Chicago.

Somewhere along the way I met Nancy Brown, who was a VISTA volunteer in 1968 working in Cordia, Kentucky. She actually rode in Kennedy's car for part of the real tour, telling him about her experiences working in the region, and her insight about political corruption that she had witnessed when making visits to homes of the very poor. Now Brown lives in Portsmouth, N.H., and maintains a heavy schedule of political activism. We stayed together in a guest house on the campus of Alice Lloyd College, and talked about people we both know in New Hampshire, where I used to live, and about how Nancy's view of the world has been informed by her experience in Kentucky in 1968, and how her brush with RFK provided impetus and meaning for her to continue working on causes for peace and social justice.



Henriette Brouwers (I.) with Barwick School teachers. Photo by Linda Frye Burnham. [View slideshow]

Friday, September 10, 2004

We headed to Whitesburg after a rushed breakfast and found the offices of Appalshop, where people were buzzing around, doing many of the same activities they were doing on the previous morning – costuming, styling, eating, interviewing, videotaping -- and bubbling about the events of Thursday. We walked into town to the courthouse, where our RFK was due to arrive at any moment in order to address the people of Whitesburg from the building's front steps. The site really did look like something major was about to occur. Microphones and a p.a. system, lots of people with cameras, lots of people in the street cheering and waving signs, police waving traffic to alternate routes so we could spill out onto the street, which we did, and a high-school band playing '60s rock-and-roll music. I never knew there were marching-band arrangements of Jimi Hendrix songs. It definitely gave a surreal frame to the whole setting.

Our Kennedy spoke briefly, and then headed off in his classic car to Fleming-Neon High School, where another "field hearing" took place. History tells us that 20 eastern Kentuckians gave testimony, while some high-school students stood by with paper bags over their heads, protesting the proposed flooding of Kingdom Come Creek, which would have led to the displacement of the community.

Before I came on this trip, I had read the "RFK in EKY" Web site, and saw photographs of the 1968 tour, including several of the Neon hearing. There were people in the pictures holding protest signs, and, sure enough, when we arrived at the high school on our 2004 tour, there were the people and their signs, and the gymnasium was decked out in circa-1968 schoolroom furniture. And the high-school students with bags over their heads were there, too, holding signs and shouting out their concerns. The bleachers were packed with students, and an area in the center of the floor was set up with chairs for the people who were testifying. The area was not restricted to actors, so spectators could sit where the actors waited for their turns to testify, giving the whole scene a very realistic feel, and creating another opportunity to break down stage/audience barriers. We were all there for the hearing, all in this re-created moment, all there to hear Kennedy and the community people speak.

This part of the re-creation offered the most variance in character portrayals. Some were impassioned, like Evarts High School student Tommy Duff, who testified about school conditions, and the unemployed miner with seven children, living on \$63 a month. And there was the nasty federal employee who was in charge of the local welfare office and accused the unemployed man of using his food stamps to buy beer and cigarettes. After the hearing was over, I talked to the actor, asking what made him decide to play that particular part. He said he wanted to act in a role that no one else would want, and he figured this one was the best choice.

The audience was very responsive to each person's testimony, and especially attentive whenever Kennedy or Perkins spoke. Before participating in this project, I did not have an awareness of Perkins, or of his role in American politics. Nor did I know about Edelman, or really very much about Kennedy. It was all a history lesson, in addition to being illuminating, inspiring, depressing, exhilarating and definitely fun.

The next stop on the tour was Prestonsburg. In 1968, Kennedy stopped along the way to talk to different families. It was during this part of the original tour that Nancy Brown introduced him to people she had met through her work with VISTA.

I rode with Michael Hunt to Prestonsburg, along with Ashley, the graduate student from Virginia Tech. I met Michael at a meeting of the National Performance Network when I first started working with the Dance Exchange several years ago. We became better acquainted through our work with the American Festival Project. Michael and I have been having several concurrent conversations over the years that weather well over the times when we're not in touch. The one that comes back most easily is the one where I launch into my latest thinking about the importance of artists

maintaining rigor when working in community settings, and the challenge we have in the hierarchical "art world" to be valued for the work we do. This project provided great fodder for a lively continuation of that discussion. It was especially lively with Ashley's contributions, as she represents the future of the community arts field. Now we can add to the mix of community arts media the one that John Malpede is exploring through projects like "RFK in EKY" – that of recreating events in history, integrating the people who were somehow affected by the very events being recreated as performers.

In the original tour, Kennedy and Perkins spoke at the Floyd County Courthouse. In the 2004 tour, there were no speeches, but we did gather in the courthouse and heard a story from Ronnie D. Blair, who was a community college student when RFK came through in 1968. On the original tour, Blair planted himself under Kennedy's podium so that he could get a good audio recording of the speech and take Polaroid pictures of Kennedy. Midway through speaking, a spring from his camera actually flew out of Blair's hands and landed on Kennedy's chest, causing a little commotion before the speech continued. This incident was all captured on Blair's tape, and we listened as Blair narrated the events as they unfolded. This was an especially effective moment of linking present-tense events with the past, and provided a point of departure for the rest of the afternoon session.

Several people spoke about what they believe has happened as a result of, or somehow in connection to, Kennedy's tour through eastern Kentucky in 1968. My favorite speaker was Loyal Jones, a man who looked to be close to 80, who spoke with conviction and spunk about today's political scene and about the importance of being even a little bit of an activist in order to make change happen. Jones founded the Appalachian Studies Center at Berea College, and is a well known historian and author.

During these discussions, audience members floated in and out of the room, some finding their way outside, where the weather was perfect. Many small groups were forming on the grounds of the courthouse to talk about the day's events, about the real events that were recreated, and about all kinds of things not related to the project at all. I, for one, found myself slightly disappointed that there were no recreated events happening here. I had grown to look forward to hearing our Kennedy and our Perkins speak, but they were now just part of the crowd. This hiatus did allow me the opportunity to talk to Jack Faust, our Kennedy, about what drove him to the project and what inspired him to assume the role of RFK. He modestly responded, saying it really was just something that had come along and he thought it might be interesting to participate in. But his girlfriend inserted a comment, paraphrased here, "...once Jack found out what this was, he decided there really was no way that he could not do it. He wanted to be a part of the project and immerse himself in Kennedy's character..."

The event at Prestonsburg marked the end of the 1968 tour. In "RFK in EKY," there were opportunities on Saturday, September 11, to participate in a street festival in Neon, to browse through RFK memorabilia that was displayed in Neon's city hall, to hear a panel discussion with the local Headstart staff and local luminaries, and to talk to and party with the "RFK in EKY" cast.

What I learned from the "RFK in EKY" experience is that people are drawn to ideas, images and connections. Participation in anything, be it a church service or a PTA meeting or a political campaign or an arts event, is ignited by a desire we all have to belong to something. Artists have a unique ability to create a frame for participation that can reach well beyond the basic tenets of just being in the room when something is happening, or watching something unfold from the sidelines, or from the theater seats.

History tells us that Kennedy's tour of the region was not a unique event: His brother John had planned to come in December of 1963, Johnson came in 1964 and, in later years, Richard Nixon, Ted Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Paul Wellstone, and Jesse Jackson all conducted "poverty tours" that included

eastern Kentucky. Of these, the people of the region remember RFK's as the most meaningful, his person the most understanding and best listener.

Malpede picked up on this sentiment when he first visited the region four years ago during an American Festival Project-sponsored artist gathering. He had the ability to identify the intensity of emotion that the RFK memory brought to the people he encountered, no matter their political orientation. He made the artistic decision to recreate these moments of meaningful history, thereby crafting a frame for participation that had no barriers or predisposed values or requirements for access or assumptions of knowledge. The project unfolded around events that had already taken place. The theater piece was informed by the direct, or indirect, or even remote memories of the people the events had affected the most. Artistic decisions were made as stories unfolded. Text was adapted as context became clearer. People joined in as the integrity of Malpede's vision became more and more evident. And perhaps one of the most important reasons for the project's success was through the steady and gentle work of Nell Fields — a salt-of-the-earth Kentucky woman with an exact idea of everything that needed to be done in order to create opportunities for maximum feasible participation.

I talked to Fields on the first morning, when we had all finally arrived at the pancake breakfast and the atmosphere was euphoric. I congratulated her, acknowledging my respect for the work she had done. She looked at me as tears filled her eyes, showing gratitude for my understanding of her tireless efforts, but also deflecting the moment by crediting everyone else but herself.

If we think of participation as a spectrum of activities, with reading an article about an event on the one end, and helping to make an original piece through some kind of community process on the other, there is validity to every point along the continuum of these two extremes. And my articulation of the two extremes is surely debatable. John Malpede chose to hop along the spectrum, through the permeability of ideas he was working with — from political statement, to nostalgic reflection, to grassroots organizing, to pure theater. His versatility and his ability to be open to serendipitous turns in his artistic process are the invaluable skills that all artists — especially the artists of the future — must understand. Bobby Kennedy offers a frame for this idea in these words:

It is a revolutionary world we live in. Governments repress their people; and millions are trapped in poverty while the nation grows rich, and wealth is lavished on armaments. For the fortunate among us, there is the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who enjoy the privilege of education. But that is not the road history has marked for us. The future does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic toward common problems and their fellow man alike. Rather it will belong to those who can blend vision, reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideals and great enterprises of American society.

Jane Hirshberg is partnerships director at Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. She has been participating in community-based art making projects for many years, first as a musician, then as a presenter, as a funder, and now as an artist representative and advocate. She lives in Catonsville, Md., with her husband, a furnituremaker, and two daughters.

"RFK in EKY: The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project," took place in southeastern Kentucky September 8-11, 2004. It was an Appalshop project conceived and directed by John Malpede, with Henriette Brouwers, associate director; Michael Hunt, dramaturg and development coordinator; and Nell Fields, project coordinator. For a map of the project, extensive background, articles, cast, partners and funders, see the ["RFK in EKY" project Web site](#).

Original CAN/API publication: November 2004

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