

L.A. artist stages Robert Kennedy's Kentucky visit

By James Dao
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WHITESBURG, Ky. — When John Malpede, a performance artist from Los Angeles, asked a small-town Kentucky lawyer named Jack Faust to play the lead role in his latest project, “RFK in EKY,” Faust was flattered but perplexed.

There was, first off, the matter of his appearance. Faust, an amiable 55-year-old with silvery hair and a paunch, looks nothing like the man he was to play: the fiery, athletically trim, 43-year-old Robert F. Kennedy of 1968.

“I told him I thought I could play Teddy Kennedy,” Faust said. More significantly, Faust was struggling to understand “RFK in EKY,” Malpede’s attempt to recreate Kennedy’s two-day War on Poverty tour of eastern Kentucky in February 1968, just a month before he declared his candidacy for president and four months before he was assassinated.

“So many parallels”

It seemed nothing like the roles that Faust had performed in community theater in nearby Hazard. But Malpede liked Faust’s style and encouraged him to read transcripts of Kennedy’s speeches and hearings from 36 years ago. As he did, Faust experienced a breakthrough: The issues that people worried about in 1968 — war, poverty and the environment — still weigh heavily on people’s minds today.

“There were so many parallels between what was going on in Vietnam and Iraq today, it was almost eerie,” Faust said.

From the project’s beginnings three years ago, Malpede, whose

work often focuses on the poor, wanted to encourage local people to think about their socioeconomic conditions and ways they could improve them. Re-creating Kennedy’s trip, which many people remember fondly, seemed an ideal way to stimulate that, Malpede said.

“Kennedy’s visit provided a platform for local people to talk about issues like poverty and economic development,” Malpede, 59, said. “Our program has . . . engendered conversations without our having to pull teeth.”

From Vortex to Prestonsburg

He offers this example: A woman was rehearsing a scene in which she plays a nurse concerned about hunger when she suddenly exclaimed, “But this still goes on today!”

Though the presidential campaign might make his project seem more topical, Malpede said he did not plan it that way. But the parallels that the actors are drawing between Kennedy’s Vietnam context and today’s fighting have added a rich new vein of historical relevance, he said.

“Reality has been accommodating to us,” Malpede said.

He is producing the project with his wife, Henriette Brouwers, in conjunction with Appalachop, an arts and media organization in Whitesburg, a town of 1,600 in the heart of the eastern Kentucky coal country. It will be staged from Sept. 8 to 11 at locations from Vortex to Prestonsburg. A schedule is available on the group’s Web site, www.appalachop.org.

Kennedy, then a Democratic senator from New York and chairman of a subcommittee with jurisdiction over employment and



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poverty programs, came to eastern Kentucky to study how President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty was faring.

But in his two field hearings, in Vortex and Neon, witnesses veered off into an array of regional problems, from environmental degradation to unsafe working conditions to inadequate schools. Between hearings, Kennedy stopped at a one-room schoolhouse, spoke to college students, visited a strip mine and chatted with people on street corners.

All the way, he was trailed by a caravan of news reporters who saw the trip as a prelude to a presidential campaign. They captured Kennedy’s encounters with regular Kentuckians and, almost invariably, gave national voice to Appalachia’s woes.

Malpede has tried to exploit the cache of historical material from Kennedy’s tour — photographs, news articles, oral histories, letters and hearing transcripts — in a variety of ways. First, he is restaging several of the stops, including two hearings, a speech at Alice Lloyd College and visits to a schoolhouse and a strip mine.

Exhibition and talks included

There will also be a film presentation, an exhibition of Kennedy memorabilia and talks on Kennedy and the War on Poverty by Loyd Jones, the former director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College, and Peter Edelman, a former Kennedy aide who is now a law professor at Georgetown University.

John Malpede directs actors in his production “RFK in EKY,” a depiction of the late Robert F. Kennedy’s trip to eastern Kentucky on the eve of his presidential campaign and ultimate assassination.

Portions of the four-day event will also be broadcast on Appalachop’s FM radio station, which will feature period music to help set the atmosphere. Malpede also plans to archive much of the memorabilia on his Web site.

One intriguing question is just who will be in the audience. Will people come off the street to hear Kennedy’s speech at the Floyd County courthouse in Prestonsburg? And will anyone actually drive to the ridgetop where performers will tour an active strip mine?

Malpede does not really know, since he is not selling tickets. (All the events are free.) Almost as intriguing are the diverse motives of the actors, who are devoting so many hours to this extravaganza, all for no pay.

Samuel P. Chandl old lawyer from Jackson, Miss., who was recruited to the project vividly remembers school — and being sent to see Kennedy moved by the testimony that day in Neon, a read the part of [John] Wootton, who gave a stoned speech about poverty in the coal fields of Kentucky. John Childers, a high school senior, will play on Sept. 10. Duff had been experiencing a period of unmet needs in his school newsletter. “I want to fight for better conditions in my school,” Duff asked Kennedy to fight with me.”

Diverse viewpoint

Roy Crawford, 52, owns a mineral hobby, is no great fan of liberalism. But he plays the part of David M. Sisk, the state superintendent of education, who is concerned about the good mining companies that are being driven from opening hospitals for pension plans. “I thought no one would do justice to the part of the tour, who, like Faust, is a local community member,” Crawford said he was that. “This is one of the mixed motivations.”

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