

The Arts

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It's 1968 in Kentucky: Two Days of Political Theater

By JAMES DAO

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," Mr. Faust was flattered but perplexed.

There was, first off, the matter of his appearance. Mr. 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," Mr. Faust said.

More significantly, Mr. Faust was struggling to understand "RFK in EKY," Mr. 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.

If it was drama, it seemed nothing like the roles that Mr. Faust had performed in community theater in nearby Hazard. But Mr. Malpede liked Mr. Faust's style and encouraged him to read transcripts of Mr. Kennedy's speeches and hearings from 36 years

Recreating Robert F. Kennedy's visit to Appalachia.

ago. As he did, Mr. 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," Mr. Faust said.

Mr. Malpede could not have summed up the purpose of his project any better. From its beginnings three years ago, Mr. 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. Recreating Mr. Kennedy's trip, which many people remember fondly, seemed an ideal way to stimulate that kind of discussion, Mr. Malpede said.

"Kennedy's visit provided a platform for local people to talk about issues like poverty and economic development," Mr. Malpede,

59, said. "Our program has provided a trigger for people to express what that moment means to them. It has engendered conversations without our having to pull teeth."

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, Mr. Malpede said he did not plan it that way. He conceived the re-enactment before the invasion of Iraq. 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 to the performance, he said.

"Reality has been accommodating to us," Mr. Malpede said.

He is producing the project with his wife, Henriette Brouwers, in conjunction with Appalshop, an arts and media organization here 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 of events is available on the group's Web site, www.appalshop.org.

Mr. Kennedy, then a Democratic senator from New York and chairman of a subcom-

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Robert

