

# The Arts

The New York Times

## 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](http://www.appalshop.org).

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

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Robert

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New York Times

## Political Theater in the Original Settings

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Associated Press

Robert F. Kennedy talking with schoolchildren in eastern Kentucky on Feb. 14, 1968.

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mittee with jurisdiction over employment and poverty programs, had come to eastern Kentucky to study how President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty was faring.

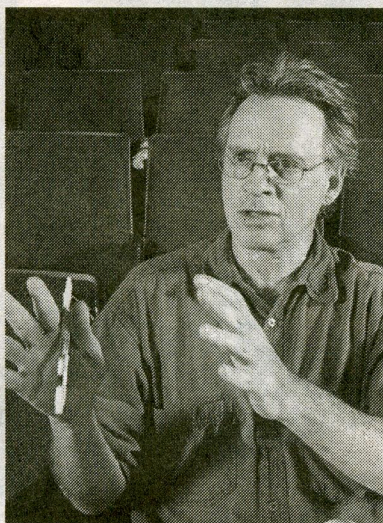
But in his two field hearings, in Vortex and Neon, witnesses veered off into an array of regional problems, from environmental degradation to unsafe working conditions to inadequate schools. Between hearings, Kennedy stopped at a one-room schoolhouse, spoke to college students, visited a strip mine and chatted with clumps of 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 inadvertently, gave national voice to Appalachia's woes.

Mr. 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.

There were will also be a film presentation, an exhibition of Kennedy memorabilia and talks on Kennedy and the War on Poverty by Loyal 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.

Portions of the four-day event will



Shawn Poynter for The New York Times

John Malpede directing actors during a rehearsal.

also be broadcast on Appalshop's FM radio station, which is available on the Internet at [www.appalshop.org](http://www.appalshop.org), will be featuring period music to help set the atmosphere. Mr. Malpede also plans to archive much of the memorabilia on his Web site.

This is not, Mr. Malpede is the first to acknowledge, a big-budget re-enactment with details honed to every narrow tie and beehive bouffant. (It will cost about \$300,000, raised by Mr. Malpede and Michael Hunt, formerly of Appalshop, from foundations.) The actors are amateurs, and some have never performed before. The costumes come from churches, rummage sales and attics. A few 1968-vintage cars may be provided by participants in a classic car show. Daily pancake breakfasts will serve

as makeup and coiffure calls.

One intriguing question is just who will be in the audience. Mr. Malpede says he expects several dozen people, including some former Kennedy aides, to fly into Kentucky to see the production. There will also be crowds of students at the college and high school where scenes will be re-enacted.

But 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?

Mr. Malpede does not really know, since he is not selling tickets. (All the events are free.) But if the performances turn into a chaotic jumble, with cars chasing the performers down narrow mountain roads, that would at least be historically accurate.

In 1968, "it never occurred to us that there would be that many reporters," said Mr. Edelman, who helped plan Kennedy's trip. "We had a caravan of what seemed like 50 cars that was following us through rural roads snaking through the hills."

Almost as intriguing are the diverse motives of the actors who are devoting so many hours to this extravaganza, all for no pay.

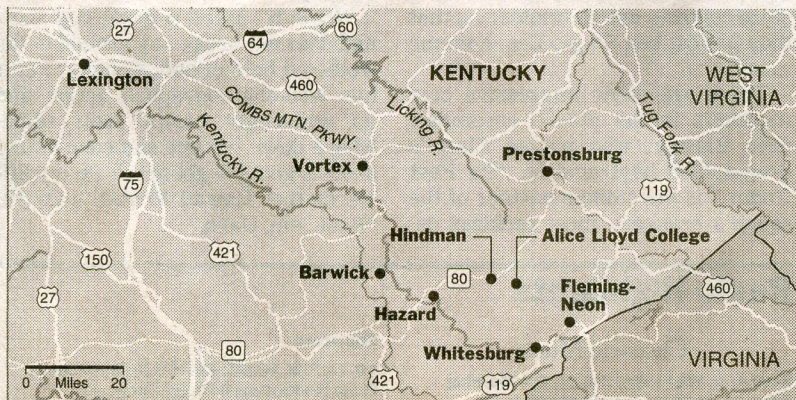
Samuel P. Chandler, a 53-year-old lawyer from Jenkins, was attracted to the project because he vividly remembers skipping school — and being suspended for it — to see Kennedy. He was moved by the testimony he heard that day in Neon, and now will read the part of Judge George Wooton, who gave an impassioned speech about the paradox of poverty in the coal-rich region.

John Childers, a 17-year-old high school senior, was captivated by the testimony of a student named Tommy Duff, whom he will play on Sept. 10.

Mr. Duff had been expelled for documenting decrepit high school conditions in his muckraking school newsletter. "If I do continue to fight for better education," Mr. Duff told Kennedy, "will you fight with me?"

"He was a very powerful figure," Mr. Childers said after a recent rehearsal. "His anger just seeped into the crowd."

Roy Crawford, 52, whose family



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