

Camp, Interrupted

The Unusual Suspects
use theatre at a juvenile detention
facility to let kids be kids again

BY EVAN HENERTON

Residents of Camp David Gonzales participate in a playwriting workshop.

COURTESY OF UNUSUAL SUSPECTS THEATRE COMPANY

"There are a lot of squares around here. Don't look like my 'hood."
—Lucky Boy, *How Far Would You Go?*

THE PLAY HAS 15 SPEAKING ROLES, NEARLY half as many parts as it has playwrights. There are three sets: the lobby of a high-rise building, a television studio and what would have to be one the world's roomiest freight elevators—a space big enough to contain nine men and one woman. And give them space to fight.

Some 33 young men, ages 13 to 18, are the play's credited authors. They've filtered in and out of a uniquely structured 10-week theatre program, offered in conjunction with New Roads Camp Community Partnership, which gives participants community service credit and provides them a creative outlet. When *How Far Would You Go?* gets two staged readings with professional actors, the playbill has to be left behind because it mistakenly listed the playwrights' last names. These are shielded for legal reasons, since the playwrights are minors in a juvenile detention facility.

The anonymity here is stringent. Program administrators and teaching artists of the Unusual Suspects Theatre Company—a 17-year-old Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization born in the aftermath of the 1992 L.A. riots—don't know how the young men ended up in this probation camp at Camp David Gonzales, and they are not permitted to ask.

"Drugs, stolen cars, theft; they could have had a gun on them," says Melissa Denton, program director for the Unusual Suspects. "A lot of these kids have been in and out

of probation. A lot of times, we have to break apart two young men who have known each other from the street."

They may not discuss details, but teaching artists and the minors alike often speak of "wrong choices" and "better choices." A camper due for release is always told: "Call us when you get out, and even if you don't call us, don't come back here." Other absences are less predictable. When a regular program participant doesn't show up, it may be because an in-camp transgression led to a punishment, a stint in lock-up or a transfer to a different facility.

After 10 weeks of improvised games, script sessions and arguments over plot, it's clear that these young playwrights have written themselves completely, and often unabashedly, into their plays. The ex-gangbangers, junkies, underachievers and hopeful athletes who dream of winning a cash prize, a scholarship, a car, a new house—these are more than fictional characters from their imaginations. They are creations, no doubt, but they undoubtedly reflect their creators.

"José," says Maurice proudly of a 50-year-old ex-gang member. "I created him. That's my character."

"Dixie's been through a lot," says Adony. "In a way I could relate to her."

DRIVE OUT OF L.A.'S SAN FERNANDO VALLEY AND you'll pass fruit stands and ranches, horses and hiking trails. Continue on, and you end up adjacent to the tony Pepperdine University, with Malibu and the Pacific Ocean stretching out in the distance. That's where you'll find Camp David



Kevin Sussman and Julie Mann in the final staged reading.

Gonzales, named in memory for a decorated WWII veteran and nestled in a rural ravine off Las Virgenes Road in the suburb of Calabasas.

Within the camp, which is run by the L.A. County Department of Probation, the young men wear gray T-shirts and loose orange or tan pants. Living quarters sit adjacent to the gymnasium, a chilly concrete building where the Unusual Suspects rehearsals take place. The facilities themselves are largely institutional, with metal detectors and armed guards carrying walkie-talkies, continuous roll calls and privileges either granted or revoked. But behind the walls, the outdoor setting is practically bucolic. In short, if you have to be incarcerated, you could choose a worse location.

Still, this is a correctional facility: A schedule dictates when the young men eat, sleep, attend class, get recreation time, see counselors, get haircuts or attend an extra-curricular activity. Their camp activities dictate when they are available for Unusual Suspects rehearsals, not the other way around. But strangely enough, Camp David G is not an altogether bad environment to create something artistic. Because the young men can't leave, they can't return to the rough neighborhoods, broken families or the enticement of the streets that landed them here in the first place. With thoughts of the outside world shut out, they can immerse themselves in the improv games and playmaking routines, and be, in a sense, temporarily set free.

"As the program keeps evolving, we get better at letting the environment be such that they can just feel safe, to just let the [gang] stuff dissipate," says Matt Orduna,

the Suspects' workshop coordinator. "It's nice when we can deal with 15-year-old boy stuff as opposed to gang stuff or race stuff. If we're just dealing with kids who are squirrely, it means we have brought them to a place where they're just being young men again."

"They are teenage boys, and they don't act any different than my 15-year-old step-

son," adds Kristin Goodman, the program's script supervisor, "except that they're in a juvenile detention center and they have a gang asking them to do things."

At the beginning of each session, campers and teaching artists form a circle. Next comes check-in time, with each participant—campers and artists alike—offering a check-in number between 1 and 10 (10 being highest) to indicate his or her level of contentment. No fractions or partial numbers are permitted, since fractions can be codes for gang affiliation. The check-in circle also includes an imaginative "if I were" scenario, i.e., "My name is Evan, I'm checking in at a 9, and if I were a color I would be ocean blue." Large sheets of white paper taped to the walls list elements of ensemble building: "Teamwork, no gang activity, respect for each other, bring your best."

The March-June session is a playwriting residency, while a subsequent summer residency focuses on acting; its members will stage *How Far Will You Go?*, the play created during the writing residency. Still, to write something suitably theatrical and act-able, the playwriting campers are learn-

ing performance techniques, ranging from tongue-twisting vocal warm-ups to improvisations. The physical warm-ups that involve running around or acting goofy are favorites. A camper tends to shuck off his inhibitions, to say nothing of his dignity, when asked to lead the circle in an enunciation exercise (“what a to-do to die today at a minute or two to two”) with a Jamaican accent.

The play’s characters take shape through another set of improv exercises. A character with little more than a name (“Jack”) and an ambition (“to rule the world”) is placed in the Hot Seat, where members of the “press corps” pepper him with questions: What’s a wish you have for yourself? For someone else? What’s your greatest fear? The character initially named Jack Offwith (these are high school boys, after all) eventually morphs into Mr. Jackson, a nerd who makes *Star Wars* lightsaber noises when he gets uneasy.

The teaching artists are as much on the alert for crudeness infiltrating the process as they are for skittishness, flashed gang signs or sullen moods. Sixteen-year-old Ulises, for instance, is challenged to get through an entire session without uttering an expletive.



COURTESY OF UNUSUAL SUSPECTS THEATRE COMPANY

Professional actors in a final reading at Camp Gonzales.

When Brian, 18, a regular participant, is uncharacteristically quiet, it is learned later that a close friend was killed and that his infant son has been in the hospital. Brian received the news shortly before attending the session but came to class anyway.

TEN PEOPLE END UP TRAPPED IN A freight elevator where they are secretly being

filmed live for a reality show program. Each is given a personalized test of will: a heroin fix, booze, a revelation from their past. Those who succumb or don’t stay strong are given “the boot” by game-show hostess Melinda.

In addition to vying for the prize, Dixie, the psychologically damaged prostitute, is gunning for a different kind of distinction. Orduna tells his young male charges that, in

all of the seven previous workshops he has conducted, no Camp David G playwright has ever created a convincing, non-clichéd female character. Dixie, if properly fleshed out, could break the streak.

By early May, the treatment for *How Far Would You Go?* is nearly complete, although the winner of the reality show is still yet to be determined. The two contestants who have not been disqualified are Joe Cool, the star high school athlete whose dreams of football fame were dashed when he was hit by a bus, and Dixie, the young woman sent into prostitution by her father.

The mood is somber at the camp on Cinco de Mayo. When they arrive, the teaching artists learn of a near race riot (“black on brown”) in the recreation yard of the camp earlier in the day. One inmate called out the name of a Mexican gang, attempting to incite an incident. Open fighting was averted but tensions are high. One of the residency participants, Darwin, has left the camp after taking a metal tray to the side of another kid’s face. The camp staff, after some deliberation, decides to cancel the day’s session with the Suspects, as they’re unwilling to take the

chance that any incident might have negative repercussions for the drama program.

“If we had a program today, and something did pop off, what would show up in the paperwork was that the Unusual Suspects has a violence problem,” says Orduna. “In a strange way, by calling it off, they were protecting the program.”

Asked later whether the incidents of the day would have prevented them from pushing forward with their script, the most steadfast of the workshop-goers say the show should have gone on.

“Most of us were like, ‘Man, why did they stop?’” says Maurice. “I knew some other cats that were ready to go. It probably would have been a good workshop, too.”

“I would have still done it,” agrees Adony. “No matter what.”

OF THE 33 CREDITED PLAYWRIGHTS, seven are around to attend the second and final staged reading of *How Far Would You Go?* Following the reading, they receive completion certificates and tell the invited audience of family and friends how they put the play together. Maurice, who had attended the camp

reading the day before, was not allowed to attend the final event. An incident the previous day landed him in lockup, forcing him to miss not only the Suspects’ finale but his GED confirmation ceremony, as well.

After the reading, the Suspects’ executive director, Sally Fairman, tells the audience that a year of education within the Los Angeles Unified School District costs approximately \$11,000 per student per year, while the cost to keep a juvenile incarcerated for the same period is \$90,000. A 10-week session with the Unusual Suspects costs about \$1,900 per student. “There’s a better way,” Fairman says. “Spread the word. These types of interventions work.”

Despite some rigorous debate from the playwrights as it was being written, *How Far Would You Go?* concludes ambiguously. By a show of applause, it is left to the audience to determine whether Dixie or Joe Cool will win the prize. At the final reading, the winner is overwhelmingly Dixie—the girl who, above all else, just wants to go home. ■

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