

# A Better Neighborhood?

By Evan Henerson

**"THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD!"** is a familiar lament. It can be followed, if one is properly geographically situated, that is, by "...and here comes an even better one."

Or at least a costlier one. From the tourist-friendly cinemas, shops and restaurants at Hollywood and Highland (and the Kodak Theatre, home of the Oscars) to Echo Park, Silver Lake, Venice and the streets of spiffed up and incongruously labeled "Old" Pasadena, Los Angeles has seen many of its regions gentrify, revitalize, turn over and trend-ify with a certain cyclical regularity.

At a price, certainly. In his 2006 article "Welcome to Gentrification City," LA Weekly's David Zahniser notes the maddening duality of the G-word: "the way in which it simultaneously delivers pleasure and pain, miraculous benefits and terrible consequences."

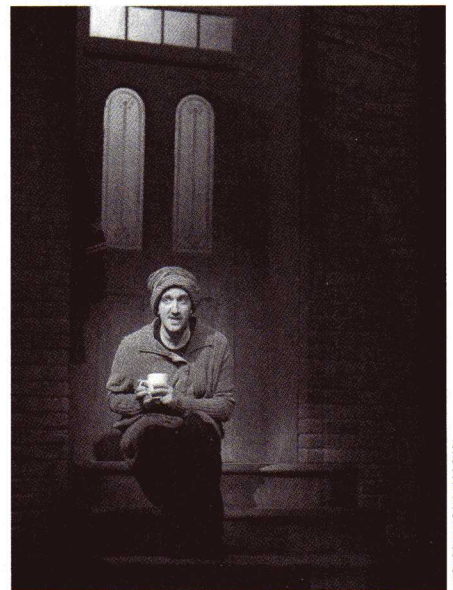
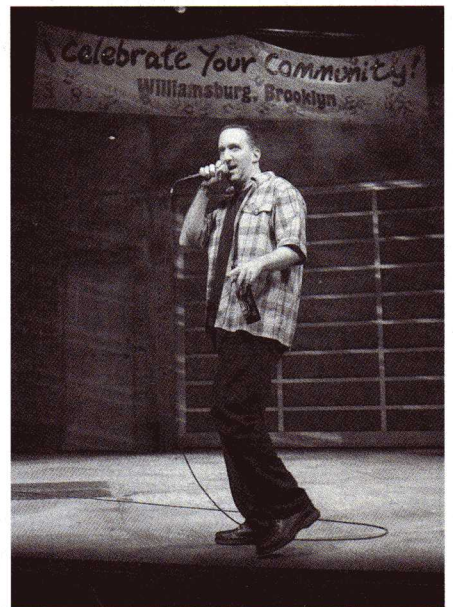
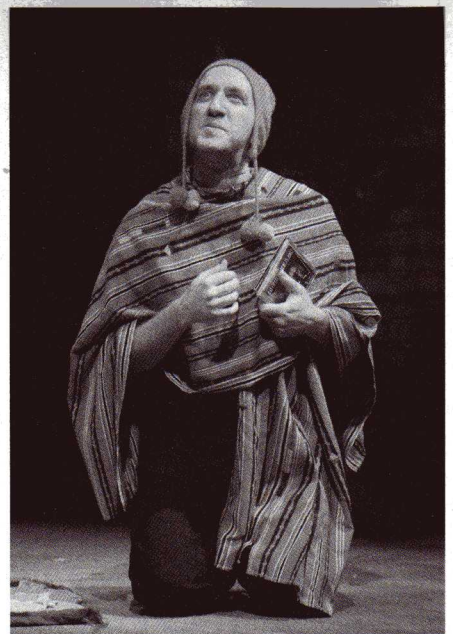
With revitalization can come demolition and, in certain cases, displacement. The longtime resident who sees himself slowly being priced out of his own neighborhood may not embrace the arrival of yet another Starbucks within walking distance or the increase of traffic and scarcity of parking that a suddenly flourishing business district can create.

The 2007 newsletter of the Central City Association trumpeting the arrival of downtown L.A.'s first Ralphs, and its 180 jobs, also heralded the opening of the Union Rescue Mission's Hope Gardens Family Center which would relocate 275 women from Skid Row to the center's transitional housing in Sylmar.

Long gone are the Victorian style homes of Bunker Hill to be replaced by enormous office buildings. In the 1950s, the community of Chavez Ravine was ejected and bulldozed to make way for a government housing project that never emerged. Even after calling the Ravine home for 50 years, Dodger Stadium and the Boys in Blue still, somewhat unfairly, shoulder the blame for shagging flies and swatting homers where a close community once existed.

That's what some label progress, and it's hardly just downtown.

The very theatre from which you are reading these words is part of a revitalized downtown area development that has turned the one-time bedroom community of Culver City into one of L.A.'s hipper and more bustling destinations in the past five years. The no-request radio station JACK-FM may claim to be broadcasting "from a dumpy little building in beautiful downtown Culver City," but who are they kidding? With more restaurants, art galleries, boutiques and entertainment facilities coming to town than the area can seem to hold, Culver City is fast shedding any dumpiness for bistros and cultcha.



PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS





Culver City, Culver Blvd. 1977.



Culver City, Culver Blvd. today.

The city's Redevelopment Agency traces the beginning of Culver City's turnaround back to 1971. The conversion of the Culver Theater movie house into the Kirk Douglas Theatre, opening in 2004, was a key moment in the current cultural renaissance. A couple of years later, the Actors' Gang beat out several other theatre companies for the right to produce plays at the Ivy Substation (after a brief CTG residency and refurbishing) at the other end of Washington Boulevard. Restaurants that had been open exclusively for breakfast and lunch began keeping evening hours, and new eateries entered the scene along with a movie multiplex which opened in the city's Town Plaza. Culver City's Main Street may be tiny, but empty it ain't.

To the east, an influx of galleries clustering around Blum and Poe prompted the Redevelopment Agency to brand the area between Helms and Fairfax the Culver City Art District. The area's population has become younger and more ethnically diverse and property values have climbed.

In Culver City, folks prefer the term revitalization over gentrification. Where once there was little to do in the evening, now downtown has become a destination because of its restaurants, galleries and theatres. The R.A.'s next target: Culver City's western gateway along Washington Boulevard, west of Sepulveda, where dilapidated buildings and empty storefronts are still in need of attention.

Even further east down the 10 Freeway, downtown L.A. has a rich history of gentrification. The two-story Victorian homes of Bunker Hill degenerated into slum housing in the 1950s before being razed to make way for the towering skyscrapers of the Financial District. Today you can purchase a La Salsa overstuffed grilled burrito directly next door to One Bunker Hill, the first all electric building in the Western United States.

Across downtown, developers have been buying up historic buildings and converting them first into lofts and later, into condos. It's this second step that forces long term residents to leave their once reasonably-priced rentals.

Culturally speaking, the area is still every bit a work in progress with Walt Disney Concert Hall and further south, the newly opened Club Nokia in L.A. Live, driving patrons, and, yes, more traffic, to nearby South Park. The \$2.05 billion center flanking Staples Center and the Convention Center will include hotels, a movie multiplex, retail and office space. Also condominiums, specifically, 224 palatial, Ritz-Carlton-operated condos that will set buyers back \$1 to \$10 million.

There goes the neighborhood, indeed, upwards and skywards. ●

— Evan Henerson is a freelance theatre journalist.

## Who's Who



**DANNY HOCH** (Writer and Performer) is an actor, playwright and director whose plays *Pot Melting*, *Some People*, and *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* have garnered many

awards including two Obies, an NEA Solo Theatre Fellowship, Sundance Writers Fellowship, CalArts/Alpert Award in theatre and a Tennessee Williams Fellowship. His theatre work has toured to 50 U.S. cities and 15 countries. He is a Senior Fellow at the New School's Vera List Center For Art & Politics and his writings on hip-hop, race and class have appeared in *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *American Theatre*, and various books: *Out Of Character*, *Extreme Exposure*, *Creating Your Own Monologue* and *Total Chaos*. His book *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* is in its second printing by Villard Books/Random House. His writing and acting credits for television and film include *Bamboozled*, *Washington Heights*, *Prison Song*, *Some People*, *Subway Stories*, *Thin Red Line*, *Whiteboyz*, *Black Hawk Down*, *American Splendor*, *War Of The Worlds*, *Lucky You*, *HBO Def Poetry* and the film version of *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*. Most recently he appeared alongside Joaquin Phoenix, Robert Duvall and Eva Mendes in *We Own the Night*. In 2000, Danny founded the Hip-Hop Theater Festival, which has since presented over 100 hip-hop generation plays from around the globe and now appears annually in New York, Chicago, DC, and the Bay Area. He directed Will Power's hit show *Flow* at New York Theatre Workshop, as well as the bilingual *Representa* at the SFIAP, and his own *Till The Break Of Dawn* at New York's Abrons Arts Center in 2007. He was the 2007 Sundance Theatre Lab's Playwright-In-Residence and was awarded a 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship for Drama.



**TONY TACCONE** (Director) is in his 12th year as artistic director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where he has staged more than 35 shows — including world premieres by Culture

Clash, Rinde Eckert, David Edgar, Danny Hoch, Geoff Hoyle, Quincy Long and Itamar Moses. At present, he has two hit