2021 ANNUAL REPORT

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS THEATRE COMPANY
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Since 1993, The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company (US) has been dedicated to achieving our mission to mentor, educate, and enrich youth in under-resourced communities through the creation of collaborative, original theatre.

Our award-winning program models are participant-driven and free-of-charge, uniting participants and decreasing social isolation. Culminating in free performances and post-performance community discussions, these workshops have engaged thousands of friends, family members, neighbors, community members, and supporters over our 28 year history.

OUR VISION: A world where all youth are given the opportunities and support they need to succeed.

We at The Unusual Suspects acknowledge the Tongva, the Keech, the Chumash, and the Pakoivitam, as well as all Indigenous Peoples of the unceded land upon which this organization operates and serves. We recognize that Indigenous Peoples are still here and commit to uplifting their stories, culture, and community. We acknowledge that many of the institutions that make up our society, and that we benefit from, were founded upon exclusions and erasures of many Indigenous Peoples.

We are committed to beginning the process of dismantling ongoing legacies of settler colonialism through the intentional actions of our organization and ourselves.
Dear Unusual Suspects Family,

2021 was a year of innovation, change, and transformation for all of us at The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company (US). Throughout the year, 851 community members participated in our theatre arts programs online and in person. I had the pleasure of watching many of these performances as a virtual audience member, and I was inspired by the talent our youth participants demonstrated through plays such as *Finding Pandora* and *Fighting for our Golden Dreams*.

This year also brought immense organizational growth to US. In fall 2021, it was brought to the Board’s attention that meaningful change was needed across our organization’s work. With the guidance of our Teaching Artists and staff, we are all taking action through conversation and education to root our work in anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and abolition. I am excited about our future and proud of the effort that everyone in the organization is making to do this essential work, which you can learn more about in this report.

As we near our 30th year, I marvel at how our work has grown from one flagship Youth Theatre Residency Program to seven innovative program models serving participants in-school, after-school, in youth detention centers, community spaces, parks, shelters, and now online. I am inspired by the creativity of our participants and their creation of hundreds of original plays, visual art pieces, poems, songs, and short films. It is truly an honor to be a part of The Unusual Suspects Family!

We are so grateful to have had the opportunity to support resilient youth and families across Los Angeles during these challenging times. From our whole ensemble, thank you for your generous support and dedication to creating a platform for youth to share their authentic stories and have their voices heard.

SARA SCOTT
Board Chair
**Youth Theatre Residency Program (YTRP)**

Our flagship model offers experiential theatre-arts education and mentoring during after-school hours to improve the well-being of youth in schools and detention facilities via a series of two sequential 10-week residencies. Students collaborate to create and perform an original play born from their shared hopes and fears while building ensemble, exploring diverse forms of storytelling, and engaging in active and ongoing reflection, exchange, and feedback.

In 2021, we:
- Provided five 10-week residencies
- Served 61 youth participants
- Offered workshops across South LA, San Fernando, Watts, and North Hills (Thomas A. Edison Middle School, San Fernando High School, Dorothy Kirby Center, Edwin Markham Middle School, and Francisco Sepulveda Middle School)

**VAST (Voices for Arts & Social Theatre) Enrichment Program**

Offers in-class, standards-based workshops designed to help students—including English Language Learners and Special Education & Neurodiverse students—build valuable teamwork, communication, and socialization skills.

In 2021, we:
- Provided three multi-week in-class residencies
- Served 273 students
- Offered workshops in 11 classrooms across 4 schools in Watts and San Fernando (David Starr Jordan High School, San Fernando High School, Edwin Markham Middle School, and Joyner Elementary)

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**2021 PARTICIPANT ART**

- Program Art by Ashley
- Drawing by Michelle
- Costume Design by Estie
Voices from Inside Program (VIP)

Administered in collaboration with the Arts for Healing and Justice Network (AHJN), VIP combines site-adaptive in-class and/or after-school theatre-arts education with healing-informed practices, wherein incarcerated, justice-involved, and trauma-impacted youth can discover their voice and build collaborative trust with others.

In 2021, we:
- Provided 5 multi-week residencies (spanning 2 to 24 weeks)
- Served 338 youth participants
- Offered workshops at Camp Glenn Rockey, Pamela Park Community Center, and Harbor Interfaith Shelter, as well as to 11 school sites through Whittier City Summer School and Woodcraft Rangers summer program

Alumni Program

This growing, multi-tiered program offers US alumni (ages 13-24) continued mentorship, training, and connections to postsecondary educational/career resources via an Alumni Program Theatre Residency, masterclass workshops through our new Green Room Series, and leadership opportunities via an ongoing Alumni Advisory Committee.

In 2021, we:
- Provided one, 14-week theatre residency of 23 workshop sessions
- Held 3 Advisory Committee meetings
- Provided 7 Green Room Series master class workshops
- Served 67 total US Alumni

Parent PrActica Program (PPP)

Strengthens parent-child bonds and communication skills with theatre-arts workshops for families.

In 2021, we:
- Provided 1 virtual workshop session
- Served 6 youth and adults
In response to the pandemic, The Unusual Suspects launched three virtual and hybrid pilot programs to meet new needs in the communities we serve.

**After School Enrichment Program (ASE)**

Created in fall 2020, in partnership with the LAUSD Arts Education Branch, because of the newfound value of distance learning, ASE participants work in collaboration after school to create original characters, stories, and performances with US Teaching Artists for a presentation of learning at the end of each semester.

In 2021, we:
- Provided 2 residencies
- Served 75 youth participants

**El Nido Alliance Programs**

In response to the pandemic-inflicted isolation in our target communities, US piloted two intensive intergenerational residencies in partnership with El Nido Family Centers, designed to increase wellness and resiliency among youth and their families.

In 2021, we:
- Provided one, 12-week intergenerational *Family Forum Theatre* residency serving 23 youth and adult participants
- Provided one, 11-week intergenerational *Speak Up With US* residency serving 16 youth and adult participants

93% of participants in our *Youth Theatre Residency Program* post-residency agreed they **plan to graduate high school**

97% of VAST Program participants post-residency agreed that they can **collaborate with their classmates**
SUCCESS STORIES

“I loved it. It was fun. I can't wait to be back next year. I have learned to keep calm in hard situations... to be more patient and more settled about the things we do. And I feel like that will really help me in life when a problem comes.”

– Tiffany, age 12, YTRP

“Me gusto mucho esta clase, porque la pase bien con la maestra. tiene muy lindo y nos ayuda. con todas me las pase, agradezco mucho por su ayuda y me gusto mucha participar....” (Translation: “I liked this class a lot because I had a good time with the teacher. She has very nice and she helps us. With all of them I had a time. I am very thankful for her help and I liked participating a lot....”)

– Jaime, age 18, VAST

“I do thank you guys for helping me out with my trust issues, and I really appreciate what you guys are doing for me. I’m not used to trusting people, but you guys made it more easier for me to do that.”

– Andrew, age 18, Alumni Program
In the fall of 2021, our Teaching Artists brought it to the organization’s attention that there is more work to be done to nurture and serve the well-being of our students, families, Teaching Artists, and Staff. **US** is taking the actions necessary to look inward at our own operations, communications, and decision-making. The need to elevate and honor voices in communities of color and to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our operations has become one of our main priorities.

Our Board, Staff, and Teaching Artists (TAs) are working with a shared commitment to our transformational action steps, centering our communities in all aspects of our work and better integrating anti-racist, anti-colonial, and abolitionist practices across all departments, allowing us to more holistically serve our communities.

**Initiatives Include:**
- Development of a *Curriculum Think Tank* that utilizes Social Justice Standards and other resources to create a revised curriculum centered on anti-colonial, anti-racist, and abolitionist practices.
- Quarterly meetings with staff, TAs, and The Board to ensure our mission, vision, and strategic plan are in alignment.
- Building strong relationships with our donors, while not centering them in our messaging and communications.
- Overhauling our public facing storytelling, including a revamp of our website, the creation of an anti-racist, anti-colonial, and abolitionist language style guide, and leading with a mindset of abundance.
- Revising our social media policy to be outward-facing on issues that directly affect our participants and their families.
- Making profiles and narratives written about our participants a voluntary and collaborative process.
- Committing to the continued hiring of Latinx, African American, SWANA, Peoples of the Global Majority and bilingual local artists.

To learn more about our organizational transformation, please visit our Health Equity webpage at theunusualsuspects.org/healthequity

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**Art by Nylah**
Melissa Denton, **US Executive Director**, stepped down on February 4, 2022 after 15 years with The Unusual Suspects. We are infinitely grateful for her dedication, leadership, and love for the organization and those we serve, and wish her all the best in her next chapter!

Melissa led the organization in developing seven ongoing program models over the past decade, more than doubling **US's** budget and staff size, tripling the number of annual participants, and co-founding the Arts for Healing and Justice Network.

“The best part of my time with The Unusual Suspects was the joy of working with an amazing group of exceptionally talented, creative and dynamic artists, educators, mentors, and board members. To all my immediate colleagues who work within the arts and social justice space, I cannot thank you enough for your dedication and commitment to this work, and for making such a success of it all, through both easy and challenging times. And I will forever be indebted to the support of our donors, friends, and stakeholders who have walked with us on this path. Your commitment to our mission is sincerely appreciated.

The road ahead for The Unusual Suspects is bright. We will continue to innovate our programs to best serve our young people and invest in access to arts education programs for all, where each child has the tools and support they need to fully meet their potential to become the next community advocate, designer, entrepreneur, or even Executive Director for **US!** Our communities are stronger when all voices are heard and respected.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company. I'm excited for the future of the organization and will continue to support the work as an audience member, volunteer, and donor!”

**MELISSA DENTON**

**US Executive Director 2016-2022**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SEARCH

Melissa Denton stepped down as Executive Director (ED) on February 4, 2022, and Joel Arquillos will be our Interim Executive Director for 6-8 months. US has engaged Envision Consulting to guide the search for our next leader. This search will include collaboration and feedback from staff, Teaching Artists, and the Board of Directors, and we look forward to sharing more about our next ED in fall 2022.

CURRICULUM THINK TANK

Our Curriculum Think Tank has begun updating our YTRP and VAST curriculum in spring 2022 to incorporate social justice standards and be more adaptive to the needs of our student participants. The think tank includes a curriculum design consultant as well as program staff members and teaching artists. This exciting update will help US curricula become more sustainable, flexible, and equity focused for years to come!

HYBRID PROGRAMS

As schools continue their transition fully back to in-person instruction, US plans to continue to adapt and provide both in-person and online programming. Steps will continue to be taken to ensure the safety of our participants and Teaching Artists, while providing vital access to arts education programming.

STAFFING

In 2022, our staff will continue to grow and adapt as we go through our exciting organizational transformation. This includes the addition of a full time Teaching Artist position, as well as more collaboration between Teaching Artists, Staff, and Board Members.
It is thanks to the dedication of our hundreds of generous donors that we are able to provide all of our programming free of charge to the communities we serve. Each and every gift counts to make this important work possible. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for your support!
OUR ENSEMBLE

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David Borsari
Albert G. Chou
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Teaching Artists
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Marlene Beltran Cuauhtin
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Monique Sypkens

Staff
Melissa Denton - Executive Director
Michael Halpin - Operations Manager
Camella Coopilton - Program Director
Terrell Green - Program Director
Jake Arky - Program Manager
Mario Hernandez - Program Manager
Gloria De Léon - Program Associate
Hedi Jalon - Director of Development & Communications
Joyce LaBriola - Director of Development & Communications
Nick Williams - Grants Manager
Alexa Nieblas - Communications Coordinator
Madison Kalvert - Development Coordinator
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