

Banking on Isla Vista

An Arts Renaissance Is Underway in the Student Party Ghetto



PHOTOS BY PAUL WELLMAN

Catherine Cole (left) came up with the idea for *I.V. Live*, a show that presents a variety of live performance art, including music, theater, and improv. Actor/playwright/grad student Judy Bauerlein (right) helps with the booking. Below, students line up for a double bill of *City of God* and *Scarface* at the I.V. Theater.

by D.J. Palladino

Last fall the people who formed the fledgling *I.V. Live Theater* experiment were a little worried. On the same Friday night, in direct competition with their stage attractions, a group of former Film Studies students had booked the nearby Isla Vista Theater with an almost irresistible double bill: *The Big Lebowski* and *Tron*. For a Friday-night happening, it was tempting enough to any closet surrealist's taste, but the film club had also managed to land Jeff Bridges, in person, to comment on the star roles he played as the Dude and Clu, respectively, in these films. Faced with such competition, who would turn out for a spot of improv in a converted classroom?

"We were sure it was bad news," said Catherine Cole, the Dramatic Arts professor who'd recently stirred up students into offering theater nights as a possible alternative to booze ingestion at Del Playa parties. "But not only did the Bridges show do well, we got a full house too. And there was an energy on the streets—there was a feeling that something was happening in this part of I.V. for a change, from the theater all the way to Freebirds."

That the experiment was repeatable was borne out last Friday night when 400 people turned out to see a double bill of *City of God* and *Scarface* for \$4. The entertainment lasted until 2 a.m., at what is now being called "The Magic Lantern"—the I.V. Theater's name in its 1960s glory days. The nicest irony, of course, is that Cole's *I.V. Live* variety show takes place in that arch-icon of the 1960s Isla Vista, the former Bank of America, built on the site of the bank that burned for our sins. "I always wanted to rename the Embarcadero Building the Phoenix Theater," said Cole, who is otherwise less flippant about creating a new culture for the underrepresented sober members of the college town. The group's shows combine monologues, live poetry, off-kilter bands, and a continuing experiment in long-form improv called "Whole Cloth." "We've averaged about 200 people each night," said Cole.

Culture Comes to I.V.

Cole's interest in importing culture to Sin City came almost by chance, but reflects a lifetime of related activities. Raised in Detroit, Cole spent a summer in Tallahassee, Florida, with the Urban Bushwomen, a New York-based dance troupe that travels the country creating community

bridges through the arts. Cole's tenure here began seven years ago but was interrupted by the birth of her son and an illness that turned out to be a serious sarcoma. After 14 surgeries and major chemotherapy, Cole lost a leg, amputated above the knee. This experience she documented movingly in two plays, *Out on a Limb* and *Five Foot Feet*.

Named to an Academic Senate post, she was asked to identify an aspect or problem in undergraduate culture that people weren't talking about. "I really didn't know at first what to think," she said, confessing a fear she'd have to tackle the queasy quagmire of general-education requirements. Suddenly she realized that Isla Vista offered an opportunity to bring her urban experience to bear on an issue most professors had written off a long time ago: So-called life in the student ghetto.

Cole got sudden and dramatic aid from physics professor Harry Nelson, whom she likes to call a "closet humanist." Besides that, however, certain events combined to make I.V. a burning topic. "A confluence of bad publicity including the *Rolling Stone* article about porn filmmakers recruiting parties, which *Dateline* picked up. And, of course, there was the David Attias incident last year, as well as the increasing Halloween coverage," she said.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Henry Yang had taken on the student city as a cause, too. "Turns out he walks Del Playa like a beat on weekend nights," said Cole. "He tries to be a regular at parties," she said. And, while Cole is first to mention the positive side of the Isla Vista experience for students who need a measure of autonomy to learn grown-up behavior, she thinks that I.V. is not really what it used to

be. "Just last week there was an arrest with a gun involved. The community has become dysfunctional."

"Yet clearly not everybody in I.V. is interested in binge-drinking," laughed Cole.

Cole's experience with the Urban Bushwomen inspired her theater-in-the-old-Bank-of-America solution. She found student interest very high because many would-be theater groups could not locate venues for their performance ideas. She ingeniously employed grad students in the role of booking agents for the Embarcadero site. (Actor/playwright Judy Bauerlein gets course credit and cash for the giant job, currently; Christy Julin books the films at Magic Lantern) In the past they have booked a number of bands, poets, and performance pieces, and also have hopes of putting together spoken art evenings like poetry slams. One of the most satisfying aspects of her experience was the support she has obtained—with ease—from the university itself, which thus far has funded everything. "I go in saying I need money for something and Vice Chancellor Gene Lucas says, 'I'll get it for you,'" said Cole, who also praises Chancellor Yang's direct involvement.

This Friday, the university will back up its interest in the future of I.V. by hosting a planning meeting in the San Rafael dorm. Here interested architects, planners, and designers will be asked to submit fantasy plans to help build on this burgeoning relationship, with an idea already in place to remove the so-called "eucalyptus curtain" between campus and suburb. The public is welcome and should contact Cole at cole@dancedrama.ucsb.edu for more information.

After the Jeff Bridges harmonic convergence, Cole approached Janet Walker in the Film Department to see if they could book something regular in I.V. Theater too. "Her response was immediate, suggesting two former students who were happy to come on board," she said. Already, six weeks of exciting double features are promised—for a schedule, go to www.magiclanternfilms.org. Nobody believes that the city will turn from party HQ to bastion of the arts in a few weeks, but Cole was turned on by the magic she saw there last week. She is also making a giant banner to hang on her Phoenix Theater experiment, with a design found in a recent College of Creative Studies art exhibit, entitled "We Love I.V."

"Maybe we can change the minds of some professors who believe that Isla Vista is a cesspool and that students like it that way," said Cole. "I'll be happy if we can at least disrupt that stereotype about UCSB students." ■

