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SAN MARCOS – Rather than offering a passive theater experience, "A Spoonful of Hope" intends to stir things up.

It's an interactive event that will be staged by theater students in the Palomar College Performance Lab.

When the play begins, for example, audience members will be handed a paper bag and marker, then invited to write down their hopes for the future. Throughout the performance, actors will read aloud from the audience "hope bags."

Theater professor Michael Mufson launched the project with his own set of concerns and hopes.

During the presidential elections, he considered the ways America was divided by the threat of terrorism and war. His reaction led to an ongoing dialogue with his students and together, they created an interactive theater experience in which the play's characters and the audience will mix freely.

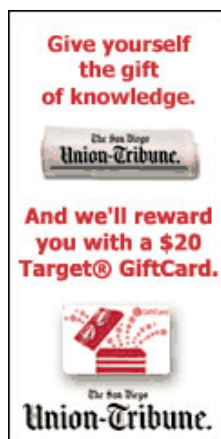
"You've heard of a 1960s 'happening,'" said Mufson. "This is a hope-n-ing."

One of Mufson's goals was to create an environment that offers people something they can't get from television or movies.

He said interactive theater can respond directly to the social and political events America is experiencing, and it can bring people together in ways that create a connection.

DATEBOOK**"A Spoonful of Hope"**

*4 p.m. Tuesday and
Wednesday; 9 p.m. May
13-14; Palomar College,
Performance Lab in
Room D-10, 1140 W.
Mission Road, San
Marcos; Donation; (760)*



"A Spoonful of Hope" is a vehicle that allows for surprises. There is prepared dialogue and set themes, but the actors also improvise and invite the audience to participate. Two characters represent Hope and Greed. The remainder of the students will portray types of social conditions including the Seeker, the Outsider, the Poor, the Apathetic Activist and the Aspiring Middle-class Family.

744-1150, Ext. 2453

The large Performance Lab room will be sectioned off with moveable picket fences to represent a variety of thematic stages. The first segment of the show is called "Once Upon a Time When Our Nation Was Still Innocent." An actor will greet audience members and invite them to hang their "hope bags" on one of the fences.

Then the Hope character will describe his power:

"Hope inspires us to set our compass toward good, toward change, into the frontiers of human endeavor. ... Hope also inspires a 14-year-old girl to strap explosives around her waist and calmly step onto a commuter bus in Jerusalem."

The play continues with a symbolic reenactment of 9/11. The character Greed will speak through a television "altar" and try to comfort the fearful and grieving. A variety of volatile social issues, from politics and religion to gay rights, will be voiced in a way that reflects America's divided opinions. Mufson is Jewish and his students, who range in age from 19 to 45, include an Iranian and people of Muslim and Christian faiths.

During months of rehearsals, their conversations allowed for an exchange of personal feelings and beliefs. They became collectively aware of the many ways upbringing, social and family pressure and personal struggles can affect one's attitude about the future.

A young Muslim student, for example, revealed her hesitation to be veiled because for her, the social definition of modesty didn't ring true. Mufson found himself interpreting how messianic tradition fits into Jewish thought.

Throughout the process of making "A Spoonful of Hope," the teacher became a student and the students learned to teach. Together, their hope is to inspire an audience. "I learned how much we all have in common," said Mufson. "I learned how well we can fit together. These hope bags are like a wishing well and this performance will have the natural power to make people's hopes come true."

■ Marcia Manna covers North County arts and entertainment for the Union-Tribune.

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