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Skid row converses with the rest of the neighborhood in Los Angeles Poverty Department's 'Utopia/Dystopia.'

By Zachary Pincus-Roth, Special to The Times
December 2, 2007

ABOVE the discarded potato chip bags, Styrofoam cups, orange rinds and scores of people who line San Julian Street between 5th and 6th streets on a Saturday afternoon, Lorinda Hawkins and Henriette Brouwers are sword-fighting with vacuum cleaners.

"I never agreed to abandon the appeal!" yells Hawkins, holding up her black Bissell PowerForce.

The rehearsal, taking place at the James M. Wood Community Center in a room normally used for Narcotics Anonymous, reenacts a real-life legal battle involving Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jan Perry and civil rights attorney Carol Sobel over whether the homeless in skid row should be allowed to sleep on the streets.

The boundaries between theater and real life are always blurry for Los Angeles Poverty Department, whose latest play, "Utopia/Dystopia," goes up at REDCAT Thursday through next Sunday. The group, founded by artistic director John Malpede in 1985, has examined issues in communities from Houston to the Netherlands but mainly Los Angeles' downtown skid row, the area from approximately 3rd to 7th streets and Main to Alameda.

Leading up to the show, LAPD has presented several "Glimpses of Utopia" forums in which community leaders and artists give presentations on the ways they've been improving skid row. And on from 4 to 4:15 p.m. Nov. 16, LAPD created a chain of people dotted through downtown, performing movement-based interpretations of what utopia means to them.

"More and more I've been looking at things like a project, with a lot of different manifestations," said Malpede, as opposed to just a single play, with similar themes popping up in each event. He likened "Utopia/Dystopia" to LAPD's 2004 project that re-created Robert Kennedy's 1968 "poverty tour" through Kentucky.

Malpede talks about cities and art in similar ways. "Utopia/Dystopia" turns skid row into a theatrical installation, of sorts, combining voice and movement, performance and real life -- a cacophonous celebration of the mix, or "mezcla," as Malpede puts it, of life in the neighborhood.

"Art is about surprise and confusing the categories, and opening up to things that you thought you had figured out," he said. "But now it's a lot bigger than that."

The upcoming play pulls together a series of scenes, songs and monologues that grew out of the group's research and improvisational workshops with its performers, most of whom live in skid row. The work expresses skepticism toward downtown real estate development and some government policies, such as the Safer City Initiative, which brought 50 additional police officers to skid row beginning in September 2006.

Almost all of the characters are pulled from real life, including downtown real estate developer Tom Gilmore and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and are portrayed by a mix of skid row residents and professional actors.

"It has the most affordable housing in the city, it has the biggest recovery community in the city, and some of that has come about because of more enlightened aspects of public policy," Malpede said of skid row. "But a lot of the spin has been to disregard all that and to demonize the neighborhood and the people who live there."

"For me, the notion of urban is that it's unpredictable, it's the intentions of the collective unconscious, it's not just design, design, design," he added.

The show also includes personal stories. Kevin Michael Key, a former skid row drug addict who goes by "Kevinmichael" in recovery circles, performs a monologue about his addiction counselor, a popular community figure known as "Redd."

"Redd has helped more folk get sober, for free, than all them Safer Cities cops," Key, a skid row activist, intoned at the rehearsal, which takes place in the room he once attended his Cocaine Anonymous meetings.

"Utopia/Dystopia" marks LAPD's second time performing at REDCAT. Mark Murphy, REDCAT executive director, first presented one of the group's shows when he worked at On the Boards in Seattle

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