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FEATURES

## The Other LAPD

Our realest theater yet reveals skid row's humanity in 'UTOPIA/dystopia' at REDCAT

~ By PAMELA MILLER-MACIAS ~



Photo by Maura Lanahan

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A few years back, a guy named John, a graying guy with a wide-open Muppet-mouth smile, stood alone on a stage in Santa Monica, telling a story. It was the story of an artist living in the East Village in the Eighties, an actor disillusioned by “the art world getting too removed from the real world.” He split for L.A., hurled himself into the real. Landed on skid row.

John’s L.A. arrival coincided with a turning point for Downtown, the Reagan era with its Ronald ethos that “if you weren’t rich, it was because you didn’t deserve to be.” That actor-president’s pull-your-own-damn-self-up policies forced a slew of mental health facility closings, and required disabled people to re-certify to keep their SSI benefits – though most didn’t, or rather, couldn’t. Then came crack. “Thousands of people burned their bridges in whatever neighborhood they were from,” says John, “and ended up coming downtown to skid row.”

<p><b>INNERVIEW</b></p>	<p>In the decades since, John Malpede’s story has been the story of the L.A. Poverty Department, LAPD*; a theater group for</p>
<p><b>HOUSE OF DIEHL</b></p>	<p>people living on skid row. Looking back, he’s called it</p>
<p><b>EDITORIAL</b></p>	<p>“harebrained,” but John’s vision wasn’t tangled at all. He wanted</p>
<p><b>YOUNGEST IN CHARGE</b></p>	<p>to use theater to give audiences the reality of life on the streets (its current work, UTOPIA/ dystopia, dramatizes the downsides of gentrification). And he wanted to create a community on skid row.</p>
<p><b>SNAPSHOTS</b></p>	<p>“Suffering people.</p>
<p><b>Scenes from the Life of a Striking Scribe</b></p>	<p>We’re not talking about homeless people, addicts, refugees. Not reducible like that.</p>
<p><b>WARES</b></p>	<p>They’re all normal people.</p>
<p><b>In Case of Liturgical Dance Emergency...</b></p>	<p>Universes.</p>
<p>That life-saving gear you didn’t know you needed is sitting, cheap, at Danny’s Warehouse</p>	<p>Like everybody else. And here in America right now Normal often means disenfranchised.”</p>
<p><b>FOODSTUFF</b></p>	<p>-John Malpede</p>
<p><b>Hamjipark: Pork Proud and Sizzlin'</b> Koreatown's top purveyor of pig offers sizable portions and lively environs</p>	<p>If “community” seems a strange word to describe this notorious desperate-opolis, you haven’t met enough of the folks there who call it home: Actors, activists, mothers, musicians, and orators with that natural charisma which Barack rehearsed years to achieve. There are women and men whom you’ve most likely only encountered before as nuisances, stereotypes or stats, those whose lives John has touched, and who have touched his, over the years. Many he has found, then lost.</p>
<p><b>The Hot Corner</b> 2nd Street and Main Street</p>	<p>There was sliver of a guy who called himself Jim Beam. “We tolerated Jim because we have a policy of tolerating the intolerable,” John says. Incurable, verbally abusive, Jim suffered from schizophrenia, lost his SSI benefits, got kicked out of nearly all the shelters, and ended up living with John for the better part of two years, minus the time Jim disappeared “to the Catskills,” he says, “to wash dishes for the summer.” Eventually Jim disappeared and never came back. There was self-described singer/actress/dancer/ model Lyn Tars, who was often harassed in the notorious skid row hotel where she lived, until she was found dead in her room. Sonya Mims, who, after landing an apartment of her own in Highland Park, was in line for a kidney transplant. Sonya made it to age 40, but never neared the head of the line.</p>
<p><b>CALENDAR</b></p>	<p>&gt;&gt; “There are case managers, there are hotel managers, there are business owners, there are security guards throughout this community who are surviving one day at a time. Helping other</p>
<p><b>'Imperfect Union'</b> — works by <b>Shepard Fairey</b></p>	

addicts. My recovery counselor, his name is Redd. Redd, he's been sober about 10 years. Prior to that, he lived for about 20 years in a cardboard condo on

5th and Crocker. Redd knows everybody. Everybody knows him as a clean and sober member of this community. And I watched him and I followed in his footsteps and Redd has helped hundreds of people. Every day. He's a living example of recovery in this community. And he's not alone. There are multitudes of people like that. And it don't cost anything."

Kevin Michael Key is standing in a small room on the second floor of the James Wood Community Center, rehearsing his UTOPIA/dystopia lines. (Performances run at REDCAT from December 6 through 9.)

One of those rare individuals who can alternately pull off dapper and street, Kevin Michael is attractive, a middle-aged dude with a penchant for caps. There's usually a Bluetooth blinking atop his right ear and a Palm Pilot clipped to a hip. He was a lawyer until he got tight with crack, a homeless addict until he found God, activism and acting. Not in that order.

These days, Kevin Michael is living in a room at the Ballington with his own private bathroom and a garden courtyard out back. He's got a job, a car, a church, three kids, nine grandkids, five great-grandkids and a girl he's sweet on in Compton.

"I tried getting sober in other places," says Kevin Michael. "It didn't work. I was in and out of the recovery rooms for 17 years, and I was active in my addiction for over 40 years. I've been down on skid row, clean and sober for over five years. It wasn't until

I got here that I was able to get sober." For Kevin Michael, you can be clean according to the dictates spelled out on paper in the recovery programs, but you're not truly clean until you can be clean in 3-D. "Treatment happens in the treatment rooms," he likes to say. "Recovery happens on the streets."

Tony Parker is a bass player with enviable dreads. Another UTOPIA/dystopia cast member, Tony found himself on the streets more than a decade ago, deep into depression over the breakup of his marriage. "I was mentally shot, destroyed. I had a breakdown. I was 34 years old." For three years, Tony spent his days on the streets and nights rotating the Missions. "There was a period in my life when I was through. I didn't want to live. I tried in all manner of ways to destroy myself. This group saved me. It brought me back to me." Tony dexterously plays three roles in this show – Mayor V., Chief B., and BID's Hal Bastian, too. He's recording with another guitarist, working with other theater companies, and he just found a gospel group that's coaxed him to sing. "I'm a ham," he says, beaming. "A hot dog without the mustard."

Another LAPD long-timer is Charles Jackson, whose sweet smile and sunny attitude belie more than a few bad years. Over than a decade ago, Chas, unemployed, came across a flyer and the word “actor” caught his eye. He’s been one ever since.

Like all of LAPD’s work, in one way or another, UTOPIA/dystopia dramatizes the disparity between the perception and reality of life on the streets. A 2000 production, Agents and Assets, re-enacted a House of Representatives Committee hearing held in response to newspaper journalist Gary Webb’s investigative series alleging that the CIA stoked an L.A. drug ring to light the crack epidemic. “What was really important about this show,” says John, “is that it gives an opportunity to people living in the middle of this drug-infested city to say, ‘What a minute! Time out! How did this happen!?’” Works like Agents and Assets allow denizens, says John, “to point fingers right back at the people who have been pointing finger after finger after finger at them!”

>> So mythic is skid row that the media likes to drop by. Reporters parachute in from time to time to meet their lurid-moments quota. Typical is a recent feature in Good magazine that hits the traditional shock-optimism beats. After the Good reporter lavishes a few words of description on a “skeletal woman ... examining the area around an abscess on her ankle, presumably checking for a working vein,” he recites some establishment propaganda, like “crime is down 30 percent” – the claim of a police commander who goes on to brag that his area once had “1,850 people living in boxes,” while it’s now “down to 750.”

To people who live on these streets, the decrease isn’t an answer so much as a question: Where did they go?

Here’s what Mayor V. and Chief B. don’t tell the day-trippers who don’t ask. The heroically-named Safer Cities Initiative, cooked up to reassure downtown developers, spent about \$6 million over the past year on a task force of 50 officers to cover just those blocks between 4th and 7th, Spring and San Pedro. In that time, the force busied itself writing more than 12,000 citations, mostly for pedestrian violations, knowing full well that fining broke folks gets you nothing more than an excuse to break out the cuffs.

Meanwhile, the force seems suspiciously unwilling to shut down known dealers’ operations at the Lorraine, a hotel that sits directly across the street from Central Division, and unconcerned about its reputation for brutality in the community; a rep that doesn’t get helped much when word gets around about Faith Hernandez dying after being manhandled during an arrest.

Roughly half of the 1,300 arrests on skid row in the past year were drug related, but that problem too has a different spin in City Hall than on the streets.

Seven years ago, California voters passed Prop. 36 so that nonviolent possession gets you treatment, not a cell. Addiction is, after all, a disease. But if the Force says someone with a rock intended to sell, they can slap him with a felony, subvert Prop. 36, and maybe get him off the streets – and out of their hair – for good. Write press release: Praise selves for “reducing homelessness, fighting crime.”

Hollywood goes to Utah. Skid row goes to jail.

>> A few years back, John collaborated on a documentary about The Real Deal LAPD. At one point in the film, a young man, seemingly randomly roaming the streets, steps in front of the camera. He looks straight into the lens, eyes wide, pleading, “I’m 32 years old, and ... I have nothing. I made a lot of bad mistakes in my life. Please ... if you have a problem, get some help. Don’t come to Los Angeles. Don’t. ’Cause you will get swallowed up and thrown away.”

>> A few weeks later, after a Saturday afternoon rehearsal, John and the actors walk out of the James Wood Center, where the free weekend movie is barely visible on the screen because of the sunlight streaming in. A tall, dark familiar dude named David, most likely homeless, rolls up from out of nowhere, and stands more than close, challenging, for no apparent reason. Ever soft-spoken, John is unfazed. The exchange goes something like this:

David: What’s this about? What are you trying to do? John: You see things changing around here? We’re talking about how to change things in a way that benefits the people here. David: This has been in the works for a long time. The people with money have been planning this for a long time. What do you think you can do? John: We can say something. David: But what’s that going to do?

David’s got a point.

The Wood Center can fire up the free movies, and protest groups like L.A. Community Action Network can stage marches, and LAPD can act its ass off, and blah and blah and blah is all it is, because ultimately Villaraigosa, Bernard Parks, Jan Perry and Rocky Delgadillo have all the power while Eli Broad and Tom Gilmore and the like have the all the bread, and together they will build what they want where they want to, when and how they want to. And if the path of least resistance is to lock up some junkies, then call the PD, because who’s really going to give a fuck? Who that matters, that is.

But picture this. Just minutes before, in a small room on the second floor, Ibrahim Saba was rehearsing his role as a drug counselor, whose lines go like this: “Remember when you were a kid and you’d spin in circles, to make yourself dizzy? It’s human nature.” Ibrahim’s speech turns to addiction, equates developers’

	<p>greed with the cravings of a junkie, picks up momentum. “ ... and you want more! And more! And more!” He spreads his arms and starts spinning. And then something happens.</p> <p>One by one, the other men in the room stand up, spreading their arms, spinning, chanting ... “More, more, more!” Riccarlo: “More, more, more!” Kevin Michael: “More, more, more!” Ibrahim. And John. And Chas. They are spinning and chanting. No inhibitions. Caught up in the moment. Spontaneous. Men. Little boys. Actors. Artists. Beaming, chanting, dancing and, at last, dizzy, falling down. Giddy. Gleeful. Pure.</p> <p>And in that moment, it’s utterly clear what John and LAPD can do. ★</p> <p><i>Pamela Miller-Macias spared the actors her Chris Rock Impression.</i></p> <p>12-07</p>
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