

# FRONT & CENTER

■ LOS ANGELES



## Jailbirds and Garlic Bulbs

Los Angeles Poverty Department's *State of Incarceration* recreates the crowded conditions of an L.A. jail.

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**W**HAT'S IT LIKE BEING INCARCERATED IN LOS Angeles County's Men's Central Jail, the largest jail in the world, where it's so overcrowded you can't get even minimum medical care and 70–80 percent of your fellow prisoners are still awaiting trial? Find out by attending *State of Incarceration*, a long-running play by the **Los Angeles Poverty Department** (LAPD), which will play this June at the **Radar L.A.** festival. You'll sit on a mattress in a room crammed wall-to-wall with 60 bunk beds, and the person next to you will probably be an ex-con. He'll stand up and tell his story. You'll also be patrolled by guards, see beatings, hear the blues, eat prison food and endure ear-crippling noise and long, deadly silences.

The play, directed by John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers, is written and performed by the LAPD company, which has worked on L.A.'s Skid Row since 1985, making shows out of their own lived experiences of poverty, homelessness and incarceration. Before performances of *State of Incarceration*, there are lobby conversations with activists engaged in the cause of prison reform, including attorneys and social workers from the

ACLU's National Prison Project; pages of testimony from a recent U.S. Supreme Court case on California prison overcrowding line the theatre's walls.

But nothing brings it home like sitting on a bunk bed, bumping knees with your fellow jailbirds and having a flashlight shone in your eyes while someone in the next bunk composes a letter home to Mom. Near the end of the piece, the room is infused with the sharp smell of garlic as the cast maneuvers between bunks, crushing fresh bulbs between their palms to evoke the plant's cleansing properties. The garlic goes into "The Spread," a communal meal concocted by putting ramen noodles, hot water and everything else (chips, mayo, tuna) into a big clear trash bag and kneading it for 20 minutes.

At a recent performance at **Highways**, a performance and gallery in Santa Monica, Calif., audience members—half of them prison parolees—shared "The Spread" with the actors. It was good. As an LAPD actor told me many years ago: "We ain't playin'. You want the cosmetic version or the real deal?"

—Linda Frye Burnham