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State of Incarceration: California Prisons Examined in Performance Art

by Deanna Neil on January 31, 2011 10:45 AM



Audience and performers inhabit a prison simulation | Photo by Anne Maike Mertens

California prisons have faced over-crowding for the past 20 years. The U.S. Supreme Court is now discussing the constitutionality of these conditions. In 2009, a three-judge court issued a prison release order to compensate for the problem and if the Supreme Court upholds the ruling, roughly 44,000 inmates will be released over the next two years.

John Malpede, founder of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), and co-director of State of Incarceration, wanted to examine the personal and social costs of these incarceration statistics using his performance company. LAPD is the first performance group in the nation made up principally of homeless people, dedicated to building community on Skid Row, Los Angeles.

"The show is about how to survive spiritually in a degrading environment," said Malpede. "No matter what nasty things have been done to you, you have to let go of the rage and the resentment in order to move on with your life."

The evening began with an installation of slides, maps and statistics about prison. There were also recorded readings of the 185-page 9th district ruling, which Michael Bien, the lead council with Rosen, Bien and Galvan, LLP on California prison overcrowding cases, said was a "very important document describing the suffering and conditions in the prison system."

Bien's bearded face set the stage via Skype, floating on a sheet in the middle of the giant, garage-like setting of Highways Performance Space and Gallery in Santa Monica. "It was horrifying," Bien said when discussing the visual evidence. "Every available space was filled with human bodies."

After the educational introduction, the diverse audience was ushered under black curtains and into a room stacked with 60, prison-style bunk beds. At first, the setting unfortunately evoked vague feelings of summer camp, but was ultimately effective. The audience sat interspersed with the twenty actors on the uncomfortable beds. The "action" (of which there was not very much), happened all around. Two cameras re-projected the scene on a wall.

Through a series of vignettes, the audience was then taken through the collective story of the prison experience, from the bus ride in to the first job out. Sometimes there were songs, other times there were dialogues. Cast members, dressed in white t-shirts and jeans morphed into "C.O.s" (Corrections Officers) and would angrily stare down the room or walk around patrolling. Malpede later explained that the "reflexive dialogues" between the C.O.s and the prisoners were borne out of the idea that a closed environment precluded the release of the past, and caused layers of "reflexive unreality."

There were moments of humor, as a litany of "your mama" jokes thrown across the room, or discomfort, as when an inmate was asked to stop masturbating. The performance by Anthony Taylor, who delivered a monologue while doing jumping jacks and another describing his experience "in the hole" were particularly moving. "I walk, I see, I look, I think...I cry," he said. "I sleep." The strange smells that wafted through the space throughout the evening also came to make sense when presented with "the spread," a prison delicacy. (Warning: not for the faint of heart or vegetarians.)



Photo by Anne Maike Mertnes

What stood out most in the piece were the long silences, emphasizing the slow fan clinking in the ceiling or a C.O. circling with his jangling keys. "Time rises and falls like the ocean," one character said. Indeed, time was stretched for the production, perhaps a little too much. It could easily have lost a half-an-hour and retained its message.

What pierced through the evening were the words of Michael Bien. He had been asked earlier, via Skype, how the release of 44,000 prisoners would affect public safety. The murmurs of the audience had seemed to echo this concern. Bien said there was proof that public safety would be unaffected. "The prison system itself is crimeogenic," he explained. "We are responsible, too, for this mess." We voted for our representatives, we voted for the 3-strikes law, Jessica's law, Marcy's law. The sentences are too long, he said. "People need to be more educated about the criminal justice system."

Malpede echoed this sentiment. "The more isolated we become, the more we're only behind our iPods or behind our windshields, the more fearful we become, the less connected we are to other people, the more we are afraid of other people, the more we incarcerate other people, the more impoverished we become in every way."

While the performance proved to be an "experience" of prison life, more than entertainment, it's breath really came from knowing that many of the cast members had actually gone through the system. For those who have never been to prison or do not frequent Skid Row, the setting offered an up-close interaction (nearly tripping on each other) with people who not only live there, but have something to say about it. The moments where eye-contact was made or personal stories were told, stood out as the most powerful, and the show begged for more. But after the show, cast and audience continued to chat, sitting around on the blue-blanketed prison beds. Whatever the flaws of the production, that made it all worth it.

"State of Incarceration" continues this weekend at <http://www.highwaysperformance.org/> with two more shows: Friday, February 4 at 8:30 p.m. and Saturday, February 5 at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 general admission and \$15 for members/students/seniors