

RADAR L.A.  
FESTIVAL REVIEWSLife in  
penal  
system

Among the many worthy entries in the Radar L.A. festival, it's hard to imagine another with quite the raw, immersive punch of "State of Incarceration" at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. This latest work from Los Angeles Poverty Department doesn't just tell audiences what it means to be trapped in the California penal system. It dropkicks them into the experience, with inescapable force.

Developed collaboratively with the Poverty Department's Skid Row artists and in dialogue with organizers and recent parolees, "Incarceration" transpires as interactive ritual, from entry to release to reintegration. A dance studio upstairs at LATC is transformed into a wall-to-wall cellblock of bunk beds, where attendees settle among lounging inmates. They move to the center aisle for a droning invocation of the "mystery of incarceration," from ancient Egypt to the Twin Towers and back again, and an airtight 90 minutes of experiential truth is underway.



ANNE MAIKE MERTENS CalArts / Radar L.A.

**'STATE OF INCARCERATION':** The Los Angeles Poverty Department focuses on prison overcrowding.

In the selfless hands of directors John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers, the piece operates as verité and allegory, polemic and entreaty, usually at once. Certain cast members don caps and sunglasses to become correctional officers, circling the bunks with seemingly random, deliberately chilling assurance. The text moves from scabrous admissions to poetic allusions, with some unexpected laughs, uncomfortable silences and heart-stopping shifts, and the final communal meal is a masterstroke.

All credit, literally and figuratively, goes to the cast, whose artless investment and heartfelt passion is remarkable, humbling and beyond criticism. It would be wrong, in fact impossible, to single out any one player, because their conjoined honesty and absolute concentration is what makes "State

of Incarceration" a work of purposeful art as important as it is unforgettable.

— DAVID C. NICHOLS

**"State of Incarceration,"** Los Angeles Theatre Center, 4th Floor, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles. 5 p.m. Saturday. \$20. (213) 237-2800 or [www.radarla.org](http://www.radarla.org). Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

Creating a  
masterpiece

From time immemorial, poets have been cleaning the cobwebs off language to get us to see reality with fresh eyes. In "The Word Begins," Steve Connell and Sekou Andrews give us a modern urban update of the poet's quest for authentic speech, mixing hip-hop, spoken word, stand-up comedy and

a kind of secular evangelism in a theatrical package that isn't afraid to flaunt its utopian longings.

The show, which runs through Sunday at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (and can be seen later this month at Rogue Machine), is motivated by the desire to follow God's instructions: "Before you die — give me one masterpiece. Do not make me regret you." That struggle is a life's work, and Connell and Andrews map out the journeys of consciousness that led to their taking up of this divine challenge with their antic vocabularies and earnest playfulness.

The piece, developed and directed by Robert Egan, hits hardest when it stands up against the hypocrisy of a world in which "you can get away with killing as many people as you want/in the name of whatever it is you want/so long as you name whatever it is you want: 'Justice' or 'Liberation' or 'God.'" The ambition to inspire, however, doesn't always provoke the duo's most original writing, so it's something of a relief when the talk turns to "the ugly hard of loving" and the flawed aspect of everyday living gets acknowledged in the social justice crusade.

"The Word Begins" could use some condensing, but the performers have a natural chemistry. Connell has a clownish side and a direct fearlessness; Andrews has a lush voice and an easy lyricism. Their humor can get down and dirty, but their