

NEW REVIEW GO STATE OF INCARCERATION



Photo by Anne Maike Mertens

Scared Straight! has nothing on this often compelling piece of political theater from the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a scathing indictment of the California penal system. The production, by co-directors John Malpede and Henriette Brouwers, starts out unpromisingly enough, with the presentation of a rather tedious Skype video-call from attorney Michael Bien, one member of the legal team that is involved with suing the State for prison overcrowding and inhumane conditions. While this sequence drags, it undeniably provides the expository Parabasis-skewering prison conditions and laws such as "Three Strikes," which have helped to bloat the incarcerated population to farcical levels. The scene also sets the stage for the far more powerful second part, in which the theater curtain is pulled and we find ourselves in the center of a prison dormitory. In some shows, one may feel like one is in prison; in this one, that intent is deliberately visceral: Metal bunk beds line the walls and center of the theater and audience members are crammed into the room, often sharing bunk beds with the actors playing the inmates. The directors interspersed disturbing silences between a series of monologues and starkly delivered poems that illustrate the despair and hopelessness of prison life. In one such silence, convicts recline on their beds, and the guards patrol every inch of the room. During this sequence, the charged quiet belies the undercurrents of seething rage, and the piece approaches the claustrophobia, sorrow, and anger of being in prison. Although it's true that sitting on a nice bunk bed surrounded by a pleasant assortment of theater people and NPR listeners is by no means comparable to being in The Hole at Pelican Bay, Malpede and Brouwers' taut production is evocative and edgy, enhanced by the ensemble's passionate and committed performances. LAPD at Highways performance Space, 1651 18th Street, Santa Monica; Fri.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; thru Feb. 5. (310) 315-1549. (Paul Birchall)