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Great Ballz of Fire

04.29.16



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *What Fuels Development*, 2016. Performance view, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, March 2016. Photo: Monica Nouwens.

IT'S HAPPY HOUR IN AMERICA. A day's work done, the gainfully, under- and self-employed rush home by way of a well-earned pint. On South Main Street in Los Angeles, from a sidewalk cluttered with chalkboards, a dozen upscale haunts beckon the thirsty. 452 South Main is not among them.

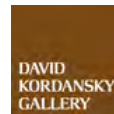
That address, the once and future home of a food truck turned brick-and-mortar hopeful known as Great Balls, has stood empty for four lucrative years. The blank storefront has its neighbors to thank. In 2013, residents of the New Genesis Apartments, the low-income and recovery housing complex for which 452 is ground-level retail, balked righteously at the liquor license issued on their doorstep. Their building is owned and managed by Skid Row Housing Trust, a community bulwark which, they argue, should stick to addiction-recovery services, and leave alcoholic serveries to the profiteers.

On March 25th, I lined up not downtown, but in historic Pasadena; not for the opening of Great Balls, but of Great Ballz. It was the debut performance of *What Fuels Development?*, the centerpiece of a retrospective at the Armory Arts Center for John Malpede and the Skid Row-based performance troupe Los Angeles Poverty Department, or LAPD. Nine plastic tables crowded a round, faux-wood stage beneath lozenge-colored lamps. The maître d' handed each guest a menu as we took our seats, soon to savor the irony of dishes like The Urban Pioneer (squirrel meatballs), Gentry-Fried Chicken (it's free-range), and drinks like Redundant IPA and Open Container. No liquor served here either though—only an impassioned dramatization of the true-life fight to keep Great Balls dry, a specific episode to counter the abstract surety of gentrification. On one side of the gallery, under a row of banners sewn in gold lamé with the puffy faces of Skid Row luminaries, was a lectern; on the other was a conference table, mics and placards, where zoning commissioners Brown, Acevedo, and Martorell would hear the arguments both for, but mostly against, the restaurant's alcohol permit.

Per LAPD's mission, current or former tenants of Skid Row played almost every role, on both sides of the issue—playing themselves, or people like them, or people opposed. "It's the center of Gallery Row, and Art Walk," said a "twelve-year resident of downtown" (not Skid Row, note), voiced by a Skid Row local. But an art gallery closes at 6, so, in the interest of safety, the neighborhood council insisted on a late-serving restaurant. You've heard about business, said one New Genesis resident, after listing the block's extant bars. "Now, Commissioners—what about *me*? I live here." The restaurant owners don't. "And I have to live with their mess." He's worked for years on the Skid Row cleanup crew, and blames the littered street on its fickle customers, not its citizens.



links





Los Angeles Poverty Department, *What Fuels Development*, 2016. Performance view, Pasadena Armory Arts Center, March 2016. Photo: Monica Nouwens.

Suddenly the cast surrounded us and, kicking in unison, rotated the stage—a giant lazy Susan—90 degrees. Our perspective shifted, jostled, like we'd had a few, fast-forwarded through months of local bureaucratic process, tumbled through a litany of names and acronyms and hearings—between the main audience with the Area Planning Commission/Central (APC/C) and internal SRHT board deliberations, Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) meetings and speculative handshake deals in hallways and back rooms.

Spin to a scene at a cafe table cluttered with empties, where DLANC members, development rep-for-hire Elizabeth Peterson, and Clint Peralta, cofounder and public face of Great Balls, discussed the fate of the New Genesis like some debauched Weimar landlords in a Grosz painting. True, SRHT struggled to get seventy-nine new very-low-income units added to an above-market-value Main Street—Skid Row side or no. “But we’re housing the homeless!” insisted one politician. “You can house them,” said another. “But you don’t have to *showcase* them!” Yet the Armory is that showcase. The cast in their imaginary council dock murmured genuine assent, called out heartfelt support—“That’s right.” “Tell the truth!”—for their real-life friends and neighbors.

For the stuffer, pitiless, victors’ version of history, see a string of editorials from *LA Downtown News*—three in two years—plus one from the *Los Angeles Times*, enskying the “progress” of the “Historic Core.” And by the way—why meatballs? “Because meatballs are universal,” Great Balls on Tires has actually claimed. Turns out the LAPD’s satire isn’t far from the inane ball-boosting rhetoric of supporters, or from downtown’s childish (not to say Freudian) fixation on having meatballs, and having them their way. Jane Jacobs urged mixed-use, including restaurants and bars, but Main Street’s zealous developers ignore other features of healthy neighborhoods: gradual change, a sense of common past, and—that old number—diversity. Alas, in LA’s pyrrhic imagination, success always has a bar.

In March 2013, the APC/C granted Skid Row residents’ appeal. But in June the next year, the Commission reinstated GB’s right to booze. For those who call New Genesis home, the events portrayed in *What Fuels Development?* (the answer, by the way, is money) mark only a brief reprieve between a slap in the face and a kick in the... I’ll say mouth. Let downtowners eat their balls. Let them have their Red, White & Brew. (And yet, as of this writing, Malpede and co. have taken the fight to the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control; a public hearing is pending.) Regardless, the Skid Row community, through the artwork of LAPD, has won something that will likely outlast a trendy meatball stand: a moment of collective history, the legend of that spring day in 2013 when their voices made a difference. A final slow turn of the stage, all the way, 360 degrees. Another view. In March 2016, at the Armory, their appeal was granted once more. The residents clapped for joy. The LAPD cast surrounded the Great Ballz restaurant floor, joined hands, and took a bow.

— Travis Diehl

Performances of What Fuels Development by the Los Angeles Poverty Department took place on March 25th and 26th and April 1st through 3rd. The group’s retrospective, “Do you want the cosmetic version or the real deal?: Los Angeles Poverty Department, 1985–2016” is on view at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena through May 15th.

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