

Times Community News / Glendale News-Press / Marquee

Art Review: The art and activism of Skid Row



The Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena is host to "Do you want the cosmetic version or the real deal?," a 30-year survey of the community art, performance and activism of Skid Row-based theater company Los Angeles Poverty Department. (Photo by Jeff McLean)

By **Lynne Heffley**

MARCH 25, 2016, 4:54 PM

Negative headlines reflect one reality about the Los Angeles area known as Skid Row. The other reality is Skid Row the community, where people are able to access services for issues they struggle with, where they live, work — and create art.

It is that second reality that visitors will find at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena in the exhibition, "Do you want the cosmetic version or the real deal?," a 30-year survey of the community art, performance, and activism of Skid Row-based theater company Los Angeles Poverty Department ([LAPD](#)).

Running through May 15, this extensive multimedia exhibition, first curated at the Queens Museum in New York, stretches across the walls and through several spaces in the Armory's large Caldwell Gallery. It encompasses video of LAPD rehearsals and performances, oral histories, written material and visual art, archival photos, news reports, talent show fliers, archival photos and installations.

The exhibition's theatrical centerpiece, LAPD's latest installation/performance work, "What Fuels Development?" is set to premiere Friday, March 25, with additional performances on Saturday, March 26, and April 1 through 3. Performed by LAPD members on a revolving platform where the audience is seated, the work explores the affects of encroaching gentrification on the residents of Skid Row.



Co-commissioned by Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia in partnership with the Armory, the Minneapolis-based Pangea World Theatre and the National Performance Network, "What Fuels Development?" and the overall exhibition were funded through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council Creative California Communities, and NPN, with additional funding for the Armory from the NEA and the Los Angeles County Art Commission. The new theater piece is based on the real-life controversy of a liquor license application made after the transformation of a Skid Row-area hotel into a mixed-use/mixed-income property with a restaurant.

"It upset a lot of people on Skid Row," said LAPD founder John Malpede. "The housing had been for people coming out of homelessness, many of whom were in recovery, some who were still struggling with addictions." After a formal appeal by residents, the full bar license was denied. "The neighborhood has continued to survive largely due to the efforts of people who live there, who have resisted different kinds of encroachments," Malpede said.

"We hear so much today about artists working in diverse, socially engaged practices," said Irene Tsatsos, the Armory's Gallery Director and Chief Curator, "but there's a long tradition of this kind of work. John Malpede founded LAPD 31 years ago and he has been on the ground in Skid Row working and building community as an artist and — with others — on a creative practice that is very resonant and remains very relevant."

For an art gallery, she said, "it's interesting to have this piece that operates in multiple universes. It reads within the context of the exhibition as an installation, yet it really is a theatrical element. It's a big piece."



Skid Row is a designated zone bordered north and south by 3rd and 7th Streets, respectively, and by Alameda Street on the east and Main Street on the west. The approximately 50 blocks encompass a concentration of social services, shelters, and low-income housing. LAPD — whose members are residents or former residents of Skid Row — has created its multidisciplinary work around the criminalization of homelessness, addiction and recovery, city policies, and housing and related issues affecting residents.

"I think a lot of the initial response to homelessness was that it was something that was going to be solved and go away," Malpede said. "Now, all these years later, it's clear that housing is what's needed, and that issue is gaining resonance throughout all levels of society."

The Armory exhibition begins with a timeline conveying the history of Skid Row, beginning with the 1891 founding of the Union Mission. It marks the birth of other services and recovery programs, the enactment of ordinances and laws affecting the area's residents, and LAPD projects, performances and visual arts programming.

Video stations throughout the gallery air excerpts of LAPD works that have been performed in L.A., in cities across the country, and abroad. A sampling:

"Red Beard/Red Beard," which originated in a hotel on Skid Row in 2000 and went to Paris in 2008, is "a recreation and duet "with the 1965 Akira Kurosawa film, "Red Beard," set among the impoverished in feudal Japan.

"I saw it in Mexico in Japanese with Spanish titles when I was just learning Spanish," Malpede said, "but I could tell right away that it was a) profound and b) that LAPDers could profoundly understand and interpret it."

"Agents and Assets," a performance residency that has traveled as far afield as Bolivia, takes its text verbatim from a transcript of a House Permanent Select Committee in Intelligence hearing held after newspaper articles by investigative journalist Gary Webb suggested CIA involvement in the trafficking of crack cocaine in L.A.



"State of Incarceration" is an installation with prison bunks staged in a darkened room with a projection of LAPD cast members relating real-life experiences and reciting in unison a haunting chronology of imprisonment in cultures throughout history.

Malpede, a recipient of numerous awards and fellowships (a \$225,000-plus Doris Duke Performing Artist Award among them), has taught at UCLA, New York University's Tisch School Of The Arts, and the Amsterdam School for Advanced Research in Theater and Dance, and has collaborated with creative artists of all stripes. In 2015, he oversaw the opening of the Skid Row History Museum and Archive, a new home base for the LAPD.

The harbinger of his long commitment to the Skid Row community occurred in New York, in the early 1980s, when Malpede, then a performance artist, began to explore through his art the reasons for increasing numbers of homeless people in the city. In Los Angeles for the 1984 Olympics, Malpede witnessed sweeps of Skid Row and attended Board of Supervisors hearings where people testified "about conditions at hotels that homeless people were being sent to," and he volunteered as an advocate for Skid Row residents at what became the Inner City Law Center in L.A. He was subsequently hired to fill an outreach paralegal position there.

Malpede began leading performance workshops for residents during off hours at the law clinic. "I didn't know if this was something that would gain any interest at all, but in fact a lot of people showed up immediately and wanted to participate," he said, but the dedication of people living and working in the community convinced him "that this was what I wanted to do with my life."

LAPD was founded, Malpede said, "to create more ties among people in the community, and to talk about the needs of the community from the point of view from the people who knew best what they were." LAPD's work has always crossed creative boundaries, he noted, functioning "in the visual arts world on a certain margin" [and] in the theater world. And we work with a lot of social service providers, activists and all that. We have a lot of strong connections in different areas.

"So, it's a lot of wonderful people floating around," Malpede said. "That's what makes it possible to do it." And it is the people "who are involved in the project on all levels — but especially the people [in LAPD]" — that make him feel that he is connected to something important. "I think that's a big issue for artists, because often times you can wonder, why am I doing this? Is it just for me? For a good review?" With LAPD, Malpede said, "Every day is a new good reason why."

--

What: "What Fuels Development?" performance

Where: Armory Center for the Arts, Caldwell Gallery, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena.

When: 8:30 p.m. March 25 and 26 (sold out) and April 1 through 3.

Tickets: Free, but reservations required.

--

What: "Do you want the cosmetic version or the real deal?" exhibition.

When: Ends May 15. Gallery hours: Noon to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday

Gallery admission: \$5 suggested donation; free for seniors, students, Armory members.

More info: (626) 792-5101, www.armoryarts.org.

--

LYNNE HEFFLEY writes about theater and the arts for Marquee.

--

ALSO:

[Dining Review: Trattoria Allegria picks up speed on the basis of its founders' earlier success](#)

[Review: Art Club keeps its eye on West Coast tradition](#)

[Music Review: Drinkin' a toast to 25 years of honky-tonk](#)

Copyright © 2016, Glendale News-Press