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*Humanizing the Lower Depths*

# Acting for Your Life on LA's Skid Row

by LOUIS PROYECT

James McEnteer's "[Acting Like it Matters: John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department](#)" is a complex study of an acting company made up mostly of L.A.'s Skid Row residents. With the company serving as the book's hub, there are spokes radiating outwards to the political and social structures that put this remarkable story into context. If William Blake saw the World in a Grain of Sand, James McEnteer sees the broader problems of gentrification, police state harassment of the poor, CIA complicity with illegal drug trafficking, and the crisis of the health system as topics worthy of dramatizing by those who are its victims, the dwellers of one of the United States' most infamous "left out" neighborhoods, but a place that despite its sorry appearance was a real estate investor's dream.

As a New Yorker, I could not help but notice the resonances with my own city where the poor and the homeless confront the same daunting odds. McEnteer mentions in passing that Henrietta Brouwers, the companion and artistic partner of John Malpede, studied under Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director who founded the Theater of the Oppressed. As it turns out, Boal was a permanent fixture of the Brecht Forum in New York until his death. It was there that he operated "a rehearsal theater designed for people who want to learn ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives" in the same way that Malpede's LAPD functioned in Los Angeles. Just six years after Boal's passing, the Brecht Forum shut down because it could no longer afford to pay the exorbitant rents that the real estate market dictated.

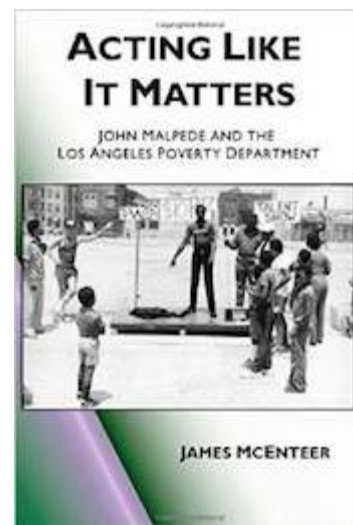
I also took note of McEnteer's reporting on how the Los Angeles police department operated under the "broken windows" philosophy of top cop William Bratton that led to the bullying and harassment of Skid Row denizens. Summons for jaywalking

and other minor offenses were intended to make life unbearable for the homeless in a calculated bid to get them to move elsewhere and allow prime real estate to be gobbled up and used for condominiums and upscale restaurants. Bratton served under Los Angeles's "progressive" Latino mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who was lampooned in one of Malpede's sharply satirical plays. In a Nation Magazine article dated May 17, 2001, Marc Cooper referred to him as the "boyishly handsome" mayoral candidate whose "civilian oversight of the LAPD makes his campaign platform the most progressive in modern city history". This plus his commitment to the poor should recommend him to the city's voters, Cooper advised. After Bill DeBlasio, another mayoral candidate approved gushingly by the Nation, was elected, the first thing he did was make Bratton the chief of police in New York, where he would continue the "broken windows" program that he first tried out here.

As someone born in 1945 and who was in the front lines of the radical movement of the 1960s, John Malpede would find such liberal puffery detestable. His primary influences would guarantee that. Firstly, there was the Catholic Worker Movement that inspired him to identify with society's outcasts. Secondly, there was his tenure in the Bread and Puppet Theater, a group that used enormous puppets to get across radical politics. And finally the example of Simone Weil inspired him. This mystic and political activist died in 1943 at the age of 34 after having fought in the Spanish Civil War and spending a year working in an auto factory in order to understand the problems that workers faced.

After leaving the group, Malpede became a very successful performance artist that prompted journalists to group him with Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray and others who would go on to lucrative careers in television and in Hollywood movies. Unlike them, Malpede had one and only one moral imperative: to provide a voice for society's outcasts.

In 1984 Malpede moved from New York to Los Angeles in order to research the problems of the homeless, who were the victims of Mayor Tom Bradley's (another "great" progressive) campaign to "clean up" the downtown for the Olympic Games.



If Putin found it necessary to kill stray dogs in order to prettify Sochi, one supposes that Bradley was operating under the same logic. After all, the Olympics might be a big boost to a city or a nation's treasury, so the logic of the marketplace would dictate sacrificing the marginal for the greater good.

The more he researched, the more he was drawn into the population that most middle-class people would prefer to ignore. After raising some modest funds, he opened an office to begin recruiting Skid Row's residents for a theater that would tackle their problems and those of society as a whole. As you can imagine, given the psychological wreckage and drug problems of those who he would be directing, this was not an easy task. McEnteer writes about Jim Beame, a talented but mentally ill member of Malpede's company who rified about baseball and other things that struck his fancy in a performance piece and as such was described as the company's "star" by *People* magazine:

But there was no Hollywood happy ending for Jim Beame. True, his association with LAPD appeared to calm him down somewhat. He had become more subdued and less overtly angry. But still, in his anger he hallucinated whoever he was with into his parents or his ex-wife, who was trying to control him. He had been kicked out of virtually all the shelters on Skid Row for his loud, abusive behavior. He interrupted long recitations of baseball or basketball statistics only to make lewd comments to any women who happened to be present. Conversation with him was impossible. By the time he joined LAPD he had been on the streets for six years, living in a vacant lot near Chinatown, eating out of the trash.

"His behavior was intolerable," said Malpede. "The only reason he continued in the theater group is because we have a policy of tolerating the intolerable." One rainy night, Malpede brought Jim home to his apartment. He contacted a pro bono lawyer to help Jim try to reinstate his disability insurance. Reagan had required all recipients of national disability pay to recertify in order to keep their benefits. Like many other severely disabled people, Jim had failed to recertify and ended up on the streets.

Nine months later, in July 1988, Jim's lawyer called Malpede to tell him had won Jim's case. All he had to do was sign a paper saying he was schizophrenic and he would receive \$761 a month in benefits, plus \$30,000 in back pay for the months since his wrongful termination. But Jim would not "That's signing my death warrant," he told Malpede. "I'll be blackballed from law school, from teaching, from

real estate...” Malpede cajoled, threatened and begged, but Jim refused and eventually drifted away.

If Jim Beame’s disability was chemical in nature, most of the other players were dealing with chemical issues as well but of external origin, namely the crack epidemic that had devastated so many people in California’s poorer and predominantly minority neighborhoods. When Malpede arrived, crack cocaine had become an epidemic largely induced by the CIA’s shady deals with Nicaraguan drug dealers who were connected to the contra support network run by Oliver North and other war criminals.

McEnteer provides informed background on the network, paying credit to Gary Webb, the San Jose newspaper reporter who was blackballed for telling the truth about the origins of the crack cocaine epidemic. After he was no longer able to work as an investigative reporter, he took his life. Like James McEnteer, Webb was a contributor to CounterPunch over the years.

It was the Gary Webb Dark Alliance series of articles that inspired LAPD’s very first theater piece. Titled “Agents & Assets”, it casts Skid Row performers—some of whom were crack addicts—in a recreation of the House Committee investigation of trafficking in the Los Angeles area. The second act of the play involved the audience and invited experts in the field of drug addiction to discuss the role of the state in victimizing those who are most vulnerable: the unemployed, the mentally ill, veterans with PTSD, and those who were unfortunate enough to be on the wrong side of what Du Bois called the “color line”.

The play is LAPD’s most enduring work, shown until this day at various locations in the USA and overseas. A 2005 write-up in the *Los Angeles Times*, a paper totally committed to the gentrification of Skid Row, paid tribute to the show’s longevity. Cast as the CIA’s chief investigator Fred Hitz, Rick Mantley was a natural choice as the *Times* reported: “Mantley, a balding African American who stands about 5 feet 8, first won the central role because he’d been a reliable performer in previous shows, and because — despite his own admitted cocaine troubles in the old days — he has a memory sharp enough to handle a five-page monologue thick with the argot of government.”

If you want to understand the problems facing L.A.’s Skid Row, McEnteer’s book is essential. But to supplement it, I would also recommend a film. It would not,

however, be “The Soloist”, the film that starred Jamie Fox as a tormented homeless violinist that was notable for its sappy sentimentality. Instead I would recommend the 2010 documentary “[Lost Angels: Skid Row is my Home](#)” that can be seen for free on Hulu .

Writer and co-producer Christine Triano was formerly the editor of Alternet, one of the Internet’s higher profile progressive websites. Departing from the predominantly pro-Democratic Party slant of Alternet, Triano had no use for Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa who was spearheading a drive to throw the homeless out of downtown L.A. as part of a gentrification effort that would transform Single Room Occupancy Hotels into lofts for hedge fund managers and web developers. Like Malpede, Triano was committed to humanizing those who Maxim Gorky referred to as “the lower depths”.

And finally, I would recommend Marc Singer’s “[Dark Days](#)”, a 2000 documentary about the homeless living in the tunnels beneath New York’s railway stations that was remarkable for the director’s willingness to spend long hours in these—speaking literally—“lower depths”. Like Triano’s film, it can be seen for free on YouTube. Just by coincidence, I saw a screening of Singer’s latest film this morning that will be shown as part of the Human Rights Film Festival that begins on June 11<sup>th</sup> in New York. Titled “3 1/2 Minutes”, it is about the trial of Michael Dunn, a white man who shot and killed a seventeen year old Black named Jordan Davis for playing rap music too loudly on a car radio. It is about as stunning an indictment of Florida’s “stand your ground” law as can be imagined.

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