

CATHERINE GUDIS

The Other LAPD

Homeless and formerly incarcerated people making art on LA's Skid Row

Based in Los Angeles's Skid Row and comprised largely of the area's formerly homeless, the Los Angeles Poverty Department creates performances from the writings, stories, and experiences of its participants. The mission of LAPD (yes, their acronym is purposeful) is to connect the experiences of its participants to the social forces that shape the lives and communities of people living in poverty. For thirty years, LAPD's creative body of work has included theatrical productions, street parades, a museum and archive, and educational programming—all aimed at the problem of “poverty,” a word that too often elides what is actually a constellation of some of the most intractable social problems of this era: institutionalized racism, the criminal justice system, the failed drug wars, crises in mental healthcare, and the forces of capital, which separate people from basic rights of citizenship. Yet what LAPD achieves is ultimately at human scale. The group brings back into view those who are most often forgotten (the disenfranchised, the impoverished, the mentally ill); the players make you *feel* what you might never otherwise know, even if you've lived it (audiences are often Skid Row residents); and the performances create ruptures in master narratives in order to supersede the social divisions between us, to allow understanding and even regeneration. In the words of its founder and director, John Malpede, LAPD allows “ripples of thought” to permeate the hard edifice of capital.¹

State of Incarceration is an LAPD production that taps the inside knowledge of core company members, including Kevin Michael Key, Riccarlo Porter, Anthony Taylor, and Ronnie Walker, and roomfuls of other participants, some from parolee reentry programs in the area. Virtually all Skid Row citizens can claim firsthand knowledge of the criminal justice system. It's hard to escape the system once you've hit Skid Row, given its long history of aggressive policing, criminalization of poverty that renders illegal the daily actions of homeless people—actions such as sleeping on sidewalks and

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carting one's belongings—and ticketing for minor infractions, such as jaywalking, with \$100 fines or more that go to warrant and then arrest when unpaid.² One of every five people released from incarceration back into Los Angeles go directly to the streets, many taking their “gate money” (money given upon release from incarceration and reentry into society) to Skid Row when they leave state prison or county jail.³

With no paucity of experience to work with, LAPD's process is as important as the performances themselves, particularly in aiding street-level truth and reconciliation. In workshops, the group collects data about our carceral state, recounts and improvises counter-narratives, derives new insights, and perhaps even finds a new and more egalitarian way of understanding how to comprehend the complex social reality of disenfranchisement. In its process and performance, *State of Incarceration* offers an effective historical accounting and cataloging of the pieces of personal experience that are rarely part of the publicly accessible record, but which comprise the experiences of significant populations

and are essential to any collective reckoning with mass incarceration and the cycles of poverty and violence at its base. The performance creates a space for formerly imprisoned people to share experiences as well as strategies of survival, and it “creates a moment of exchange and reflection on how they and we, the people of California, can recover from living in a state of incarceration.”⁴

When performed, *State of Incarceration* (2010–present) lines cellblock bunk beds wall-to-wall for audience members to sit on, mimicking California's overcrowded jails and prisons. It begins with the “History of Incarceration” song, a spiritual performed by the entire cast, whose combined voices forge a sense of the communal, across historical time and space, as the song connects the prison-bus journey to slave routes and chains. “This history is like used-up water to me; it flows in my veins, in my blood, in my community,” they sing. Similarly poetic are monologues expressive of interior lives born out of the memories of LAPD performers, two of whom landed back in prison between productions of *State of Incarceration* (one for stealing toothpaste).⁵



Doing jumping jacks in one's cell becomes liberation ("rhythm moves my spirit . . . lost in freedom"). A prisoner intones his upcoming fate—"thirty days in the hole" (solitary confinement) with "four walls, no TV, no books, only me," and repeats a chant that includes, "I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I cry . . . time rises and falls like the ocean . . . I exist."

At the performance's end, the players ritualistically clean "one wall at a time," "one brick at a time," "washing down for the addicted, weak, and sick," enacting a baptism of forgiveness and release. Finally, they prepare for communion, using "the spread," another prison ritual. Ramen, Cheetos, and plenty of garlic are base for the communal meal, added bit by bit to a giant garbage bag opened on the

floor. Audience members are invited to share the "spread," as actors put plates of food into our hands. Thus, we too take communion, joined together with both those acting as prisoners and guards, and perhaps together we feel some of the responsibility of living in a state that is supported so fundamentally by the policing and incarceration of our most vulnerable members.

Taken in its entirety, *States of Incarceration* is a litany of the rituals of incarceration, from the ride on the bus—termed the Slave Ship in the performance—to the state prison, to therapy and passing the time, to release and the Kafkaesque struggle to remain out of the control of the criminal justice system. What follows is a short excerpt that illuminates a few of the struggles the newly released face.



Excerpts from *State of Incarceration* by the Los Angeles Poverty Department

Performance directed by John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers

RONNIE: Relapse + JIMMIE: Johnny Mack (two texts intercut)

RONNIE: I am being released from prison soon. I have no money and nowhere to go, and on my release my addiction will start fighting for control of my thoughts.

JIMMIE: I committed a crime that, you know, I'm not proud of. I got out of the penitentiary and the government don't have too many places where a fellow like me can get a job.

RONNIE: All of my good ideas will go straight out of the window if my addiction wins over my thinking. However I have too much pride to leave jail and go straight to a program. How could I even think of embarrassing myself like that?

JIMMIE: They tell you to be honest on an application. I can guarantee you that the moment I walk out of that door, they throw my application in the garbage.

But on the other hand I don't have a problem with getting high in jail—only when I'm on the streets. But I need money and clothes and the only way to get that is to sell dope.

JIMMIE: Years ago, when you got out of prison you could get on welfare. Nowadays, you can't go on welfare, unless for three months, or sometimes you even can't get on welfare. So, you are out on the street, in a shelter, or you are back to what you were doing. You know what I'm saying? No way out of it.

RONNIE: Nobody is going to hire me because of my record. So I am going to have to find a way to stay out of jail, take care of myself and stay off drugs.

JIMMIE: Because like I was saying, the government does not have a lot of places where a guy like me could go. It is totally up to you to get out of the situation.



RONNIE: And the reality is: I hit downtown at 6 PM, and by 9 PM I was high with my girlfriend.

DEBORAH & LINDA as WORKER: My First Job

DEBORAH: The first chance I had to get a job, I had to go down to the office and get a print out of my record. I had to do it that day—or no job. I had one dollar to my name. When I got there, they told me the record was free.

WORKER: If it don't take longer than 10 minutes to print out, it's free. After that it cost \$5 a minute.

DEBORAH: I didn't say anything, just nodded. I didn't care. I wasn't gonna let anything stop me from getting that job. I wasn't gonna put the brakes on myself.

WORKER: I asked you, do you want to have me print it? After 10 minutes it cost \$5 a minute. You understand?

DEBORAH: If it came out too long, then I'd deal with that, somehow. But I wasn't gonna give up, get hopeless. Walk away. No way.

WORKER: "Yes? You want me to print it?" That girl didn't have a dollar to her name.

DEBORAH: I stood there while it was printing and every guilty thought came back into my head. How I was guilty of this, and that and some more this and that. How they were gonna find things out. How I'd messed up, messed up, couldn't help but mess up. How they hated me, knew I was stupid, knew I would mess up and always keep messing up. The longer I waited the more hopeless my situation was.

WORKER: The whole time it was printing she stood there scared to death I was gonna ask her to pay something she couldn't.

DEBORAH: What was I waitin for? You know they're not gonna give it to me. I'm not gonna get the paper. What is wrong with me thinking I was gonna get that job? Get real. What the hell you waiting around for? Just to be humiliated. You like that. Being humiliated. You like that. That's what feels good to you. Feels right. You like it, otherwise you'd get

the hell out of here right now. You wouldn't have come here in the first place.

WORKER: I came back with the print out. It came out to eleven minutes. "All right Miss Anderson, here you are." Eleven minutes, but I just gave it to her and didn't say anything. Didn't ask her to pay.

DEBORAH: While I was waiting for those papers, it all came back to me. I was nearly overwhelmed by the stigma, the stamp of being a criminal—a convict. I was overwhelmed by the fear. **B**

Notes

Photographs from a performance of *State of Incarceration* courtesy of the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

- ¹ Malpede uses this phrase in connection with a discussion of Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 poverty tour through Eastern Kentucky. Lynda Frye Burnham, "When Kennedy Came to Kentucky," *American Theatre* (July/August 2004), 33.
- ² "Homelessness is not a Criminal Activity," public education statement developed by the Los Angeles Community Action

Network, November 2003, accessed 13 October 2009, www.congress.org; John Thomason, "Can a 'Homeless Bill of Rights' End the Criminalization of LA's Most Vulnerable Residents," *The Nation*, 13 October 2014, accessed 1 December 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/can-homeless-bill-rights-end-criminalization-las-most-vulnerable-residents/>.

- ³ Robert Greene, "From Jail to Skid Row, Where 'All Healing Needs Are Met,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 4 February 2016, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-starks-los-angeles-homeless-20160203-story.html>; Abby Newell and Cindy Chang, "Ex-Inmates Want L.A. County to Stop Dumping Mentally Ill Inmates in Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 2015, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-jail-skid-row-releases-20150928-story.html>.
- ⁴ "Radar L.A.: *State of Incarceration*," *LA Stage Times*, 10 June 2011, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://thisstage.la/2011/06/radar-l-a-state-of-incarceration/>. Also see "State of Incarceration" project descriptions at Los Angeles Poverty Department's website, accessed 1 June 2016, <http://lapovertydept.org/projects/state-of-incarceration/>.
- ⁵ Conversation with LAPD members Walter Fears and Henriëtte Brouwers, 2 February 2014.