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Public safety was the theme. Los Angeles Poverty Department made this show so much more.

By MARGARET GRAY APR 11, 2019 | 10:20 AM

REVIEW ARTS & CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT



Lee Maupin, a company member with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, performs his part of "I Fly! Or How to Keep the Devil Down in the Hole" at REDCAT. (Steve Gunther)

Director and performer John Malpede founded Los Angeles Poverty Department in 1985. The name of his organization may suggest a Johnson-era government agency, but “the other LAPD,” as it sometimes calls itself, is really a performance group composed of, and intended for, people who live and work on skid row. Among other projects, LAPD has been producing the annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists for 10 years.

Staging the event is no walk in Gladys Park. While setting up for last year’s festival in October, the tech crew couldn’t plug in amps because an intimidating, 7-foot-tall man, who did not welcome negotiation, was using the outlet to charge his cellphone. Meanwhile, on a park bench, one woman accused another of stealing her shoes. The police got involved, threatening to break up the festival, to snuff out the flickering spark of community pride before it could catch hold.

How these situations were ultimately handled — gently, respectfully, with teamwork, patience and a sense of humor — were among the stories Los Angeles Poverty Department shared in its newest show, “I Fly! Or How to Keep the Devil Down the Hole,” performed three times last weekend at REDCAT.

“I Fly!” was a collection of songs, dances, spoken-word poetry, reenacted reminiscences and skits loosely related to the topic of public safety and presented with convivial warmth by a personable cast. The show didn’t have the most coherent script, or the most sophisticated stagecraft. Between infectious musical numbers — a band, the LA Playmakers, along with the Skid Row Drummers rocked the house — the show proceeded through what often felt like variety acts assembled in no particular order, without the context (such as performers’ names) that certain theatergoers have grown to expect.

These audience members may have felt, at least initially, like strangers at a gathering of old and dear friends who make no effort to explain inside jokes.

But then, miraculously, we somehow felt like part of a family. Performers took center stage one by one to present their contributions: a drum-circle rap by Walter Fears, a poem by the glamorous Natasha Smith, an empowerment exercise led by recovered addict Ray Smith, the surprisingly limber dance moves of 60-year-old Lee Maupin, the charismatic personal monologues of Christina Collier and Stephanie Bell.

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John Malpede, center, director and founder of Los Angeles Poverty Department, lines up with other cast members in "I Fly! Or How to Keep the Devil Down in the Hole." (Steve Gunther)

It helped that Malpede, along with his colleagues and fellow performers Henriette Brouwers and Tom Grode, let us in on a few of the efforts that Los Angeles Poverty Department has undertaken on behalf of skid row. While many charitable organizations focus on warehousing and policing homeless populations, LAPD attempts to remind them of their unique humanity, to empower them to take collective responsibility for their neighborhood and one another's health and safety.

One outcome of the many meetings they organized between City Hall and skid row inhabitants — hours of "butting heads and eating chicken," as somebody joked in "I Fly!" — was the ReFresh Spot, an outdoor hygiene center with showers and laundry facilities staffed by skid row residents.

Most people consider hygiene, along with shelter and food, an essential provision for human dignity. "I Fly!" argued, persuasively, that art is one of those basics too — that eating and sleeping in comfort have little meaning without the opportunities for creativity and self-expression that the theater can provide. On opening night, a man named Jessie took the mic to share a story of enduring beatings in prison. But he was smiling. "I'm on the damn stage, y'all," he said.