

'Outcasts' hits home with Skid Row actors

OUTCASTS, an evening of three performances: "December," written and directed by Matthew Ghoulish, performed by Howard Farling and Gregory Hormel; "The Magician," written by John O'Keefe, directed by Lin Hixson, performed by Ghoulish; "South of the Clouds," performed by members of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, directed by John Malpede; presented by Pipeline, Inc., at the Boyd Street Theater, 301 S. Boyd St., downtown Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fri-Sat, through July 12. Tickets: \$8.50. Information: 629-2205.

By **Richard Stayton**
Herald theater critic

Forget the stereotypes. None of the shopping carts, empty wine bottles, ragged clothes, newspaper blankets or crusty bare feet are here. From Skid Row residents we expect insults, angry tirades, blunt obscenities. Instead we meet the unexpected: a gentle lady softly singing romantic tunes; articulate black gentlemen with the gift of rhyme; a Jew from the Bronx recalling a baseball game.

Although the evening's catch-all title, "Outcasts," suggests alienation, these homeless entertain us in a conversant, cabaret style. "South of the Clouds," they call their scenes, and for good reason. There's a touch of the light fantastic in their stories, a bit of the street hustler's hype, mixed with the savvy necessary to make it on the streets. All know the art of survival. It shows on the Boyd Street Theater stage every Friday and Saturday night, but if you scan the neighborhood surrounding the intersection of Wall and Boyd streets where the theater is located, you might see the same people speaking the same stories.

Each is a participant in the Los Angeles Poverty Department, an improvisational theater workshop founded by New York performance artist John Malpede. While working for the Inner City Law Center, Malpede negotiated grants from the California Arts Council and the National Endowment in order to become the agency's Artist in Residence. His LAPD workshops are for L.A.'s estimated 35,000 to 50,000 homeless who mostly live in the downtown area. Malpede says that he chose Los Angeles for this

work because "poor people from all over the country are sent down here and contained, creating almost an apartheid situation." Eighty-nine percent of the homeless population is male, over 50 percent is black. Consequently, according to Malpede, our Skid Row has become America's South Africa.

Usually Malpede's players perform in the streets, offering skits and poems on the lifestyles of the poor and unknown. But in this, LAPD's theater debut, Malpede seems to have chosen vignettes that avoid tales of violence and political commentary. "South of the Clouds," in fact, poignantly reveals the humanity in these downtown residents, without making them seem like victims. In the process, the cliches of the poor underprivileged from the "Hands Across America" hoopla are ignored like so much rotten hype.

The program's cast biographies ironically underscore the intriguing pasts of these "actors."

Frank Christian: "attended every reform school in Philadelphia and also has an M.A. from the University of Michigan."

Kevin Williams: "one of hundreds of disillusioned Navy brats roaming the country looking for people who do really good Bogart impressions."

William Aaron (Jim) Beame (a k a Nelkin, Brown, Stein, Goode): "attended a number of universities around the U.S., eventually receiving a B.A. in history and an M.A. in political science after completing his military service. After a stint in US QMC Pusan, Republic of Korea, he became a union organizer, sometime guest of mental institutions, part-time jock and insurance salesman. He is now an itinerant hobo."

These vast, secret pasts become a heartbeat throbbing just "South of the Clouds." These people are not from People magazine but from the pages of Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, Jack Kerouac. They're The Common Man.

"In the days immediately before the end of World War Two in North Bronx Central," begins Beame's tale, "12 miles north of Columbus Circle and just south of the clouds . . ." The tall, stringy Beame crouches like a baseball catcher, his cap turned



Los Angeles Poverty Department's cast of "Outcasts" include, from the left, Joe Clark, Kevin Williams, Frank Christian, Patricia Perkins, Jim Beame and Robert Clough.

backward on his head, and describes a baseball game from his past.

"I was a waitress at the Icehouse in Pasadena," says Patricia Perkins. "He was black, I wasn't." She describes her first heartbreak, singing romantic songs between her memories.

"Stick and move," says Christian, shadowboxing about the stage. "Matador and the bull." In rhyme and free verse he remembers boxing the "Philadelphia buzzsaw" for the Golden Gloves. "I had a change of heart in the middle of the ring," he remembers. "I looked into (my opponent's) eyes and saw Martin Luther King and his poor people campaign."

Kevin Williams enacts fantasies of being a drum majorette leading a marching band, then along with Joe Clark creates arguments that might have been overheard at a local bus stop. It's all simply, starkly staged. Malpede doesn't supply any of the high tech props that adorn mainstream performance art. He rejects slide shows, music, mannequins and sleek lighting. What Malpede wants is what his performers do on the streets every day of their lives: survive by their wits. What emerges is a striking insight behind the mythology of the dispossessed and homeless. These people can't be mere amateurs, can they?

But of course they are, using their own lives as text, and acting out of inner resources that overcome the stress, fear and violence of the streets. They're not actors, their work isn't

polished, it's often "flawed" — and it's alive, real, refreshing, absent of pretense.

In addition to "South of the Clouds," "Outcasts" also consists of two one-act plays: "December," written and directed by Matthew Ghoulish, and John O'Keefe's "The Magician," directed by Lin Hixson. The first playlet is about a rather obnoxious man freezing to death at an outdoor subway stop. It's overacted and commits every cliché of self-pity that the literally homeless deny.

"The Magician" has a stunning theatrical metaphor: An amateur magician plays card tricks for us, but he's playing with less than a full deck. Each card he displays has a drawing on it — an ear, a door, a keyhole — and with these he illustrates a story of his wife's illicit affair. It's a marvelous device that would make an impressive scene for auditions. Fortunately, Ghoulish proves to be a far better actor than writer, freezing a psychopath's idiot grin on his face. But it ends on a predictable and simplistic note that belongs more in a "Twilight Zone" segment than in experimental theater.

Despite their "amateur" status, "Outcasts" belongs to the real outcasts, those members of LAPD who simply tell their own stories in their own words. Leaving the Boyd Street sanctuary for the dark, menacing streets of downtown's Skid Row, they aren't talking about going to a coffee shop for an espresso. This company of actors can be overheard talking about where they'll be sleeping this night. More than one has reserved space on a sidewalk for his or her mattress.