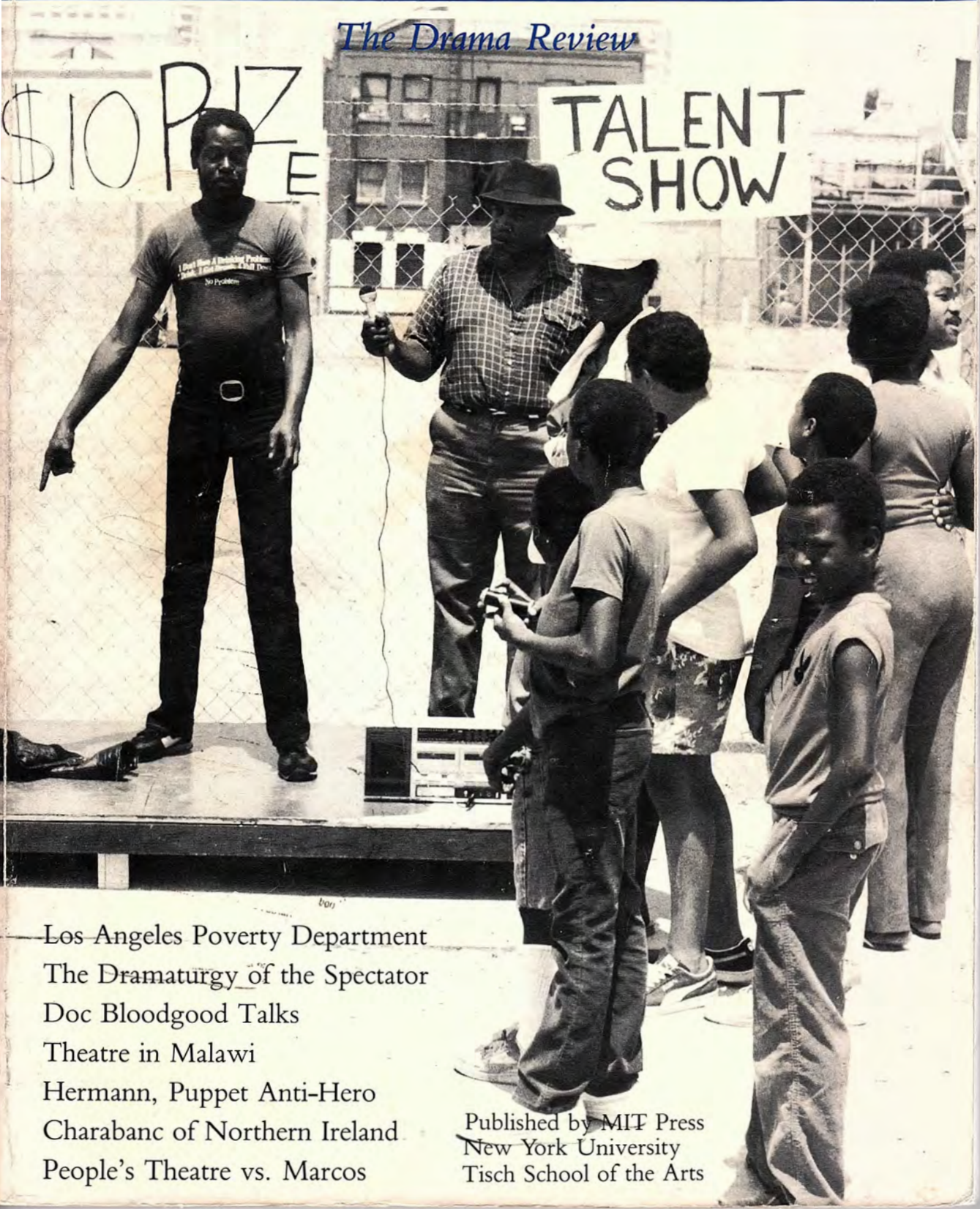
TDR

The Drama Review



Los Angeles Poverty Department
The Dramaturgy of the Spectator
Doc Bloodgood Talks
Theatre in Malawi
Hermann, Puppet Anti-Hero
Charabanc of Northern Ireland
People's Theatre vs. Marcos

Published by MIT Press
New York University
Tisch School of the Arts

Hands Across Skid Row

John Malpede's Performance Workshop for the Homeless of L.A.

Linda Frye Burnham

In a filthy, baggy, mismatched suit and broken glasses mended with tape, he climbed the platform and put his mouth to a giant megaphone aimed at Manhattan, the world's most expensive real estate. In a hesitant monotone he began reading something that sounded suspiciously like Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," but . . . different.

> Alight and foothearted I take to the open road.
> Healthy and free, the world before me,
> The long brown path beating me wherever I choose.
> Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am no good.
> Henceforth I whimper no more, no mas, no more, need nothing.
> Done with indoor, outdoor, side door, and rear door complaints, complaints, complaints.
> Strong and content I grovel the open road.
> All seem beautiful to me.
> I can repeat over and over to men and women, you have done such good to me that I would do the same for you.
> I will cut myself for you as I go.
> I will scatter myself among men and women as I go.
> I will toss a new gas and roughness among them.
> Whoever denies me, it shall not butcher me.
> Whoever accepts me, he or she shall be blistered and shall blister me.

So began *Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles,* John Malpede's contribution to New York's 1984 Art on the Beach Festival. Malpede is an artist who, like many others, was touched by the desperation of the thousands of homeless children, women, and men in America. But instead of going back to his East Village studio to work alone, honing his career, he went to California in 1984. There he began work on Skid Row, both as a paralegal specializing in homeless outreach and, starting in Oc-

1. John Malpede in his Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles *at the 1984 Art on the Beach series. (Photo by Robin Holland)*

tober 1985, as the creator/director of his own performance workshop for the transients who sleep on L.A.'s sidewalks and live on mission food. He spends at least 55 hours a week on Skid Row—that's 5th Street, sometimes called "The Nickel."

Life on the Nickel

"Sound off! Don't go off!" the flyers read. "Free street theater/performance workshop for Skid Row residents. Be in the workshop and develop your own creative material that will be performed in the neighborhood and broadcast on the radio."

"I was scared," says Malpede. He feared the workshop would be ignored but found he had "tapped into an energy that had been hanging there. Once the space was provided they flooded it with ideas" (Durland 1985:11).

What Malpede hoped to create was a space in which the homeless might be able to communicate. Malpede had become involved when he visited L.A. earlier that year, right before the 1984 Olympics, and saw L.A. police on horseback stopping, questioning, and harassing some of the 15,000 transients who congregate in a ten-block area in the heart of the city.

The *L.A. Times* quoted Capt. Billy Wedgworth, commander of the police department's central area: "We have increased the intensity of everything we do. We're trying to sanitize the area" (Roderick 1984:II, 1).

Malpede began researching homelessness in L.A., deciding to use the material in his performance work. He attended meetings of the County Board of Supervisors and introduced himself to the activists of H.O.T. (the Homeless Organizing Team) and the lawyers of H.L.T. (the Homeless Litigation Team), who were directing a two-pronged effort to ease the stringent conditions of California's "workfare" program and raise the monthly General Relief stipend. Instead of presenting the courts with complex legal briefs, the lawyers were using a revolutionary method to

2. Unidentified police officer and homeless man on L.A.'s Skid Row. (Photo by Alex Koster)

put forth their cases: testimony by street people describing the desperate conditions in downtown hotels, the rapes, the robberies, the impossibility of survival on a $228 monthly General Relief check. Gary Blasi, an attorney for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and a leading advocate for the homeless, calls this "bringing the ugly reality of the streets and alleys into the courtroom." "Life on the streets," he says, "is completely incomprehensible to most judges" (Clancy 1986:V, 1).

Malpede, who had long been using storytelling in his performance art pieces, was enormously affected by the power of this testimony. As a result, his *Olympic Update* was not a rant against the rich or the police but rather a series of rambling, wacko-poetic speeches touching on the pain and bewilderment he saw among the people of Skid Row. His speeches were interspersed with actual recordings of street people testifying before officials about their lives. He went home to New York to perform the new piece but was determined to go back and settle in L.A.

When he did return in November 1984, he found H.O.T. setting up a Tent City on the square opposite City Hall. He was there during Christmas, while the population of the settlement swelled, and he was there when ten of its residents were arrested in a sit-in at a Board of Supervisors meeting. They said they couldn't leave because they had no place to go.

Malpede hung out at the Inner City Law Center (ICLC) at 6th and Gladys and watched a shantytown spring up on a nearby children's playground, next to the Catholic Worker's Soup Kitchen. He became friends with the 50 people who collected there over the next four or five months,

3.

from Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles

John Malpede

(MoTo appears over hill looking stately, dignified, wearing sportscoat, slacks, and tie. From a distance his clothing looks clean, but up close it's filthy. He's carrying a megaphone and a large ghetto-blaster wrapped in foil and a clear plastic garbage bag. He goes up the ramp to the giant megaphone. He puts down the megaphone and the blaster on the platform and begins to talk thru the giant megaphone. His style is oratorical, as if addressing a political convention. He begins by reading from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," which he alters as he reads.)

[. . .]

(Moto unwraps the ghetto-blaster, picks it up, and turns it on. It plays the "Olympic Fanfare" (made famous by ABC) and then "The Star-Spangled Banner." While the national anthem is playing, he wraps up the blaster and descends the ramp with it and the small (i.e., normal sized) megaphone. At the foot of the ramp the performer becomes MoTo's friend who hurriedly moves toward the audience. His hurried manner suggests a concern with the pacing of the entire presentation. At the end of "The Star-Spangled Banner" he turns off the tape and begins to talk to the audience in a low-key, conversational though presentational manner.)

FRIEND: MoTo and me, we just came from Los Angeles. And on behalf of the City of Los Angeles, home of the '84 Olympics and the homeless capital of America, MoTo and I have been asked by the L.A.O.O.C. (The Los Angeles Committee for the Organizing of Olympics) to travel this land during the Olympics and tell the people of our land with this Olympic Update Report. And they asked us to do this. And they paid for us to do this. They gave us bus tickets to travel America and come here. They gave us one-way bus tickets. They paid for them. And this is called Greyhound therapy.

We were in Los Angeles for the Olympics. What the Olympics were like, the Olympics were like the movie *Blue Thunder*. *Blue Thunder* was in Los Angeles. And just like in the movie there were super helicopters, like blue thunder, from the L.A.P.D. Skywatch watching down from the sky. There were Olympic helicopters everywhere. All over the city. The skinny ones—not the puffy helicopters that are round like balls, but the long ones like blue thunder, that look like giant grasshoppers and can see thru walls. They can point right at you, and they know how cold or hot you are. And they can find you and shoot you down just because you're warm, thinking the wrong thoughts. (And you thought there weren't any more of them because in *Blue Thunder* Roy Snyder shot them down with an old-fashioned bubble helicopter, and got the tape to the TV station that showed how they were going to look thru walls and go into your mind and read it even when you were sleeping.)

But now there are Olympic Helicopters and they fly over the city and sit on the sides of skyscrapers like the 17-year locusts—like when the 17-year locusts came and covered all the trees in Ohio. And now the Olympic helicopters, they sit on the sides of the buildings reading thoughts and looking for terrorists. And the L.A.P.D. they come down into Skid Row Park at 6th and Gladys, across the street from the Hospitality Kitchen and the Regal Hotel, and they make everyone lie down on the ground with their heads behind their hands. And they talk thru their walky-talkies to the Olympic Helicopters. And the Olympic Helicopters read the minds of the people lying on the ground, and they signal the L.A.P.D. and the L.A.P.D. take them away. They take them away and they put them in jail so that we can have the Olympics.

including their leader, Ted Hayes, who at first impressed Malpede as "a maniac in flowing robes." Hayes talked to Malpede about his vision of community. He saw the people on Skid Row as isolated in the extreme—from society and from each other. He wanted a place for them to live together where they could become resocialized. The place became widely known as "Justiceville." Even though the owner of the lot gave his permission for it to remain, Justiceville was eliminated by the city for "health violations." Malpede remembers staying up all night with Justiceville citizens, then watching the bulldozers flatten their homes the next day. "It was a blow to the solar plexus," he says (Burnham 1986a).

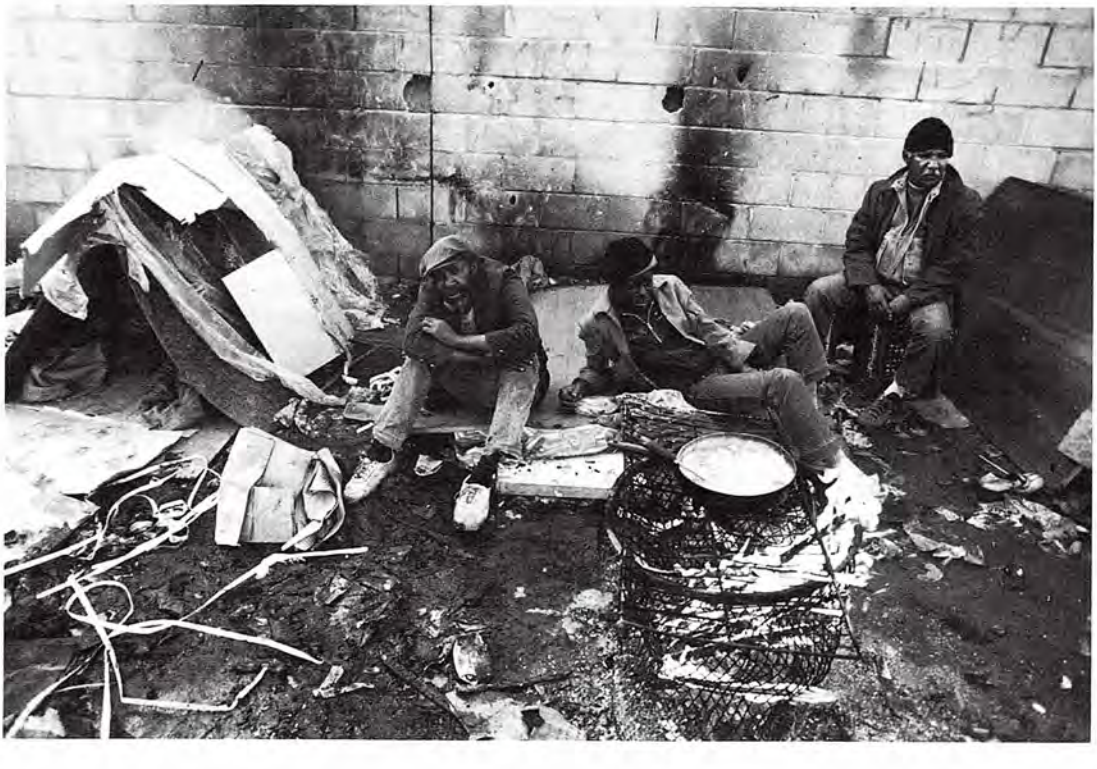
According to a Spring 1986 survey by the L.A. County Department of Mental Health (Decker 1986:II,1), the average age of a homeless person on Skid Row is 40, near Malpede's own age. More than half are black or Latino, and half are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Many suffer from severe mental illness. Few of the needy receive any care at all because of the lack of facilities—and often because of their inability to reach the few facilities there are.

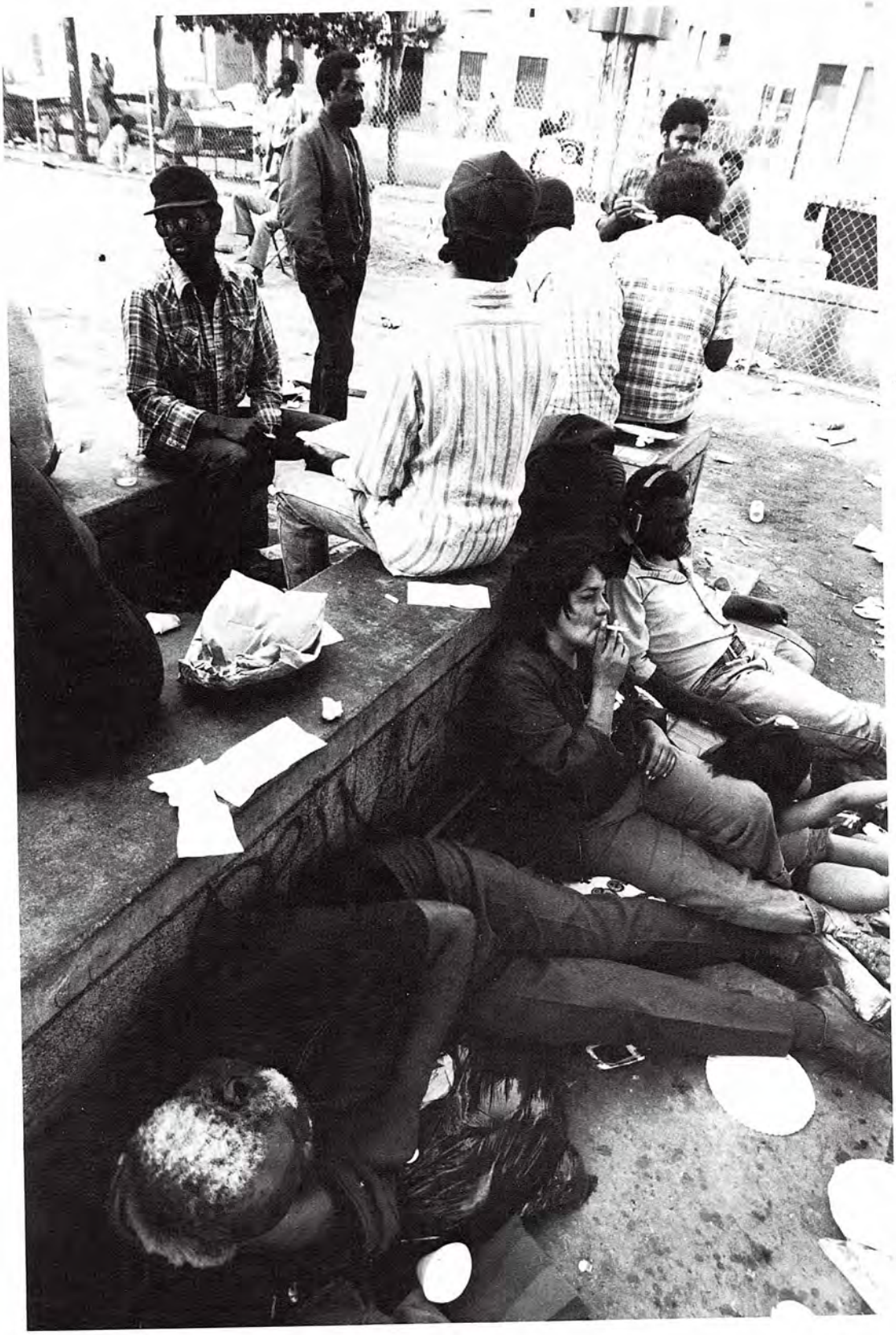
They sleep in cardboard boxes, all-night movie theatres, mission beds, and substandard flophouses, often staying awake all night for fear of attack. A quarter of them carry knives in plain view—big ones.

The survey revealed some of the isolation typical of these people. Sixty percent have never married, 25 percent are estranged from their families, and 40 percent told the researchers they had had no contact with friends within the last month.

In the greatest contrast with the average L.A. resident, 14 percent have suffered during their lives from schizophrenia, 35 times higher than the

4. & 5. Unidentified homeless people on L.A.'s Skid Row. (Photos by Alex Koster)





6. Some members of LAPD, the Los Angeles Poverty Department (left to right): Joe Clark, Kevin Williams, Frank Christian, Pat Perkins, Jim Brown, and Robert Clough. (Photo courtesy of Linda Frye Burnham)

overall county population, while another 11 percent have been diagnosed as manic-depressive, 18 times the average. The survey estimated that a third are severely and chronically mentally ill, with even more who are anxiety-impaired or suffering from personality disorders. Of these, only 4.4 percent received inpatient care during the six months prior to the survey. Sixty percent of those interviewed claimed to have had serious health problems within the last month.

The average day on Skid Row can be bleak. Less than a third of the people eat three meals; 24 percent live on one meal or less. For shelter they alternate between the street and the missions, averaging ten days on the pavement each month. One third were physically assaulted within the last year and another third were robbed. While a third of them are believed to be eligible for disability benefits, only 9 percent receive them, with another 9 percent receiving welfare. The application process was deemed "fraught with problems" by the researchers.

Malpede found a job as a paralegal with the Inner City Law Center (ICLC), the only free law center on Skid Row. The center, founded and directed by Nancy Mintie, grew out of a Catholic Worker facility and functions as a friendly neighborhood drop-in place. Some of its funding comes through an advocacy grant from the Liberty Hill Foundation, raised by John Malpede. In his day job at ICLC, Malpede and his partner, activist Carl Graue, spend all day on the street taking declarations from the homeless to be filed with H.L.T. lawsuits. Meanwhile, using his talents and experience in performance, plus an artist-in-residency grant from the California Arts Council, Malpede has established a performance workshop, now held every Wednesday night and Saturday afternoon.

A formidable effort. But as of this writing, September 1986, the news is very good. Thanks to the legal efforts of Malpede and his associates, General Relief has been raised from $228 to $247 a month, the first increase in five or six years. "Not a lot," says Malpede, "but at least it's more than the rent in a downtown hotel ($220–$240 a month). And it adds up to about 8.1 million dollars a year, every year. Hands Across America raised about $16 million, but this is literally a handful of people who did this" (Burnham 1986a).

Equally important to Malpede is the progress, both creative and spiritual, of the LAPD, the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a fluctuating group of about 15 people between the ages of 20 and 50 who have remained with the performance workshop since its beginning in October 1985.

While two or three still sleep on the street, the financial picture has improved for LAPD members. Some have steady work and four are considering getting a house together. Some do drift away into jail or mental hospitals or simply into the ozone, but others are showing an interest in listening and talking instead of ranting and raving, and two who might be called mentally disabled are on their way to getting Social Security disability benefits, a long and tortuous journey within the catch-22 of L.A.'s relief system: to get it you have to be sane enough to say you're crazy and make it through the application process.

Workshop: Erecting Monuments in the Heart

My first experience with LAPD came in February 1986 when I attended a workshop at LAMP (L.A. Men's Place, a facility for mentally ill men). LAMP is a tiny, shabby storefront, little more than a spot where ambulatory schizophrenics can hang out and feel safe during the day. At night they bed down in cardboard, huddled up against the building as if it were home.

Malpede's group usually works at the ICLC, but there was a meeting there that night, so LAMP took the group in. Since the workshop is always open to anybody, this meant LAMP clients were welcome. As I was introduced to the LAPD members, I noticed a disheveled young man, wrapped in some passionate, furious world of his own, stalking around the edges of the group shouting, whispering, singing, and reciting his world view. The workshop was unperturbed. "I'm overwhelmed by their ability to tolerate different kinds of people," Malpede told me later. "They'll listen to people who talk extremely slowly, lose track, etc. It's a humanizing fact of life on Skid Row."

While I shook hands with Sunshine, Tania, Frank, George, Joe, Marlon, and Chris, Mark, the roaming commentator, provided an undertone of dislocated irony for the proceedings.

"It's only been a day!" he yelled as people shed their coats and talked excitedly with Linda Sibio, LAPD's assistant director, about her efforts to find them a regular rehearsal space. Sibio is a wild-eyed young woman on a motorcycle who also works for performance artist Rachel Rosenthal and appears with The Actor's Gang, a local theatre group. She is an energizing, driving force in LAPD but gets in tussles with the men when they display attitudes she thinks are sexist or uncooperative. Currently she runs the workshop's talent shows every Saturday at Thieves Corner (the corner of 5th and Wall), a job that takes muscle and moxie. "Last week I saw a murder across the street from the talent show," she told me. "It's real serious down there."

Sunshine, a handsome, 30-ish man who looked unusually drowsy, recruited people for a later reading of his play. I was introduced to him, and he immediately cast me as a 50-year-old black wino.

We listened to an audio tape of Joe and Frank appearing with Malpede on a Pacifica station radio show. Malpede did his "creating a community" speech, followed by the two workshop members singing their song "We Will Rob You" (to the tune of Queen's "We Will Rock You": "Take all

your money/ run down the street/ spend all your money/ with the people we meet/ We will we will rob you"). The song tells the story of being robbed of money and clothes outside a check cashing place, then being arrested for indecent exposure.

Frank's voice told of his experience with LAPD as "a place to sharpen your tools." He talked of his background in street-corner rap singing in the '60s in Philadelphia. Growing up in juvenile homes and jails prepared him to survive on the "mean streets." He became the "Poet Lariat" (sic) of his neighborhood by telling stories on street corners about movies he had seen. His rapping became more sophisticated and is now the rich, rocking, dirty "Bad Boy's Badass Song," with images of Fat Daddy "dressed like a jitterbug" and black culture "taken by the Beats in their goatees and tams."

When the tape was finished, Marlon, an older man with a truly weathered face, produced a poem he had been "writing all my life." "I erected a monument in my heart," he said, "to a friend I lost in the '60s," apparently to drugs. While the poem displayed no particular poetic skill, the pathos of the situation and the sincerity of the speaker carried the moment.

George, a young man who often accompanies Malpede on his daily rounds, told stories of his 108-year-old grandmother. The stories shape and change each time he tells them—because he can neither read nor write.

After a noisy break, during which Mark announced, *"I was there in '59 when they dropped the big comic book!"* we regrouped for Sunshine's play. Sibio and I found ourselves miming the surreptitious lighting of a joint while waiting in the dinner line at the mission. After that a scene by Joe about "falling in love on Skid Row" featured Tania, dressed in a Gucci sweatsuit. (She announced she was engaged to Sunshine, who woke up right away.) In the scene, Tania had lots of boyfriends who had schemes to make money, including cheating on welfare. There were heartbreaks and salvations. It was followed by a spontaneous critique during which I questioned the motivation of one of the characters who was "saved by Jesus." The group explained to me the phenomenon of becoming "Bible-

7. Los Angeles Poverty Department's Saturday Night Talent Show on Skid Row, Summer 1986 (left to right): Kevin Williams, Jim Brown, contestant, Frank Christian (with mike), and other contestants and spectators. (Photo by Alex Koster)

struck" while hanging around the missions, a condition far beyond redemption and closer to insanity.

After the plays had been read and avidly critiqued (with minimal direction from Malpede), we settled into a discussion about the purpose of the workshop. "I'm not here just to write plays!" Frank said, "I'm not here to waste time and have friends. I want to make social change!"

"Rosewater Foundation, may I help you?" offered Mark. *"Go ahead and kill yourself. $250."*

Joe talked about a party that George had thrown the other day. "It was about celebrating that we have a community. We're so isolated that we're isolated from ourselves. It was about what's here on Skid Row."

"The crash of '29 came early!"

Frank: "I see this group as people with different philosophical ideas. We could come together like they did in the 19th century to smash slavery. We could take the things we don't like and smash them down."

"When we turn on that TV we better be damn sure we know what we're doing!"

Malpede: "We could be building some bonds together to make meaningful statements, like for changes. Stick together and not drift away."

"We're a pre-teen world!"

The workshop finished up with a rendition of "Out on My Own," a song that has almost become the LAPD theme song:

> Out on my own
> Livin' alone
> Nowhere to go
> I really want to grow
> The County was there
> They gave me the air
> It opened up my door
> Now I can go for more
> I knew it wouldn't be easy
> I knew it would be hard
> I kept on stickin' to my guns
> I'll make it to the stars

Looking over my notes from that workshop, I wondered if I hadn't stumbled on a script from *Cagney and Lacey* or some other issue-oriented TV show where the characters talk about values all the time. But Malpede assured me that they often talk about community, that that attitude is an offshoot of Justiceville and really is the prevailing climate of the LAPD.

In Performance: South of the Clouds

Because they have no permanent playing space, LAPD performances of skits, monologs, and songs have taken place on street corners, in mission lines (where performers have been asked to clean up the language), at parties, in art lofts and art spaces, and in local downtown theatres, usually with Malpede as organizer or director, not as performer.

Most rewarding for the group so far was *South of the Clouds,* part of a weekly performance series held throughout July 1986 at the Boyd Street Theatre in the heart of Skid Row.[1] Directed by Malpede, the piece was a series of monologs by the group's members, based on an acting exercise

in which Malpede asked them to recall an action that makes them feel good when they do it (partly, he says, to help them recognize that they can produce that good feeling when they want to). Finding and doing the actions produced writing that delved into interesting conflicts for each actor, illuminating the interior life of damaged but hopeful and talented individuals.

"My criterion for people being in that show," Malpede said, "was the people who had gone beyond themselves, who had found that kind of conflict, or that kind of subtext. They'd gone beyond themselves and discovered something new in the workshop around that material.

"What I was saying about socialization relates to the monologs in *South of the Clouds*," he went on. "At the point we did that show, not everybody was capable of ensemble work, and with monologs everybody went away with a little piece of something they could do, a self-affirma-

8.

A Change of Heart

A Monolog by Frank Christian

(A middle-aged man in red trunks, black boxing shoes and gloves skips onto the stage shadow-boxing. He kicks his legs out after knee-bending several times. He bobs and weaves his head from side to side as he shuffles to a nearby wall. When he gets about four feet from the wall, he begins to punch it with the eight-ounce boxing gloves he is wearing.

After several minutes he turns, bobs, and weaves to a brick column and throws punches in rapid succession. He then dances to the center stage bouncing from one foot to the other with both hands raised. He is imitating a fighter who is being announced by the referee; not an ordinary club fighter, but a champion.

He comes to the center of the ring and touches the imaginary gloves of his imaginary opponent. He throws four stiff jabs at the invisible opponent; the last one hits the brick column with a bang. At this point he sticks his tongue out at this viewless adversary, stalks back to his corner, and taunts him as he sits on his stool. We see him taking instruction from his trainer. He responds to his coach by shaking his head and pointing his thumb at the other corner, shouting verbal abuse at the other fighter.

As the bell rings for round two, he runs over to the fighter's corner and hits him with 27 punches, just as he gets off the stool he is sitting on. All of a sudden things change. He starts to hold on. We see his head snapping back several times from a number of punches. He grabs for his opponent to hold on, but is beatened down to the canvas from against the ring ropes. He sits there with his mouth opened in agony and humiliation. After several minutes, he rises, comes to the center of the stage, and begins to speak.)

CHRIS COLT: That was 18 years ago, but it seems like yesterday. Place, Trenton, New Jersey. 1968 Golden Gloves Championships. Me, Chris Colt versus Gypsie Joe Harris, the Philadelphia Buzz Saw. *(He throws a right hand and bobs when he says, "me, Chris Colt," and puts his balled fists on his waist sides.)* In the first round, I was feeling good, like a Pall Mall should, solid? We came out, touched gloves, and circled each other feinting, but without throwing any punches at all.

I throw two lefts and a right to his shaven head. The punches landed but slide off his greasy bald head.

He kept moving in throwing zipping lefts and rights to the body and my head. I caught most of the punches on his elbows and arms, spinned Gypsie around, threw two left hooks and a right

tion. I'd like to see the group work toward ensemble work, because if they could do that, they could function in society, maybe. It's close to the way interaction works. A monolog doesn't require active interaction."

It had been five months since I attended the workshop when I saw *South of the Clouds*. While I recognized some faces, I was struck by the polish and creativity of the group—and amused by their bios in the program.

Frank Christian was listed as having "attended every reform school in Philadelphia and also has an M.A. from the University of Michigan." For the acting exercise, he had chosen a routine from his days as a boxer. While he moved around the stage with the grace of a dancer, bobbing and weaving, jabbing and punching at the air, he recalled the night he lost the will to fight and looked into his opponent's eyes and saw "Martin Luther King and his Poor People's Campaign."

hand. Gypsie's knees buckled, but he kept coming in, throwing round-house lefts and rights, missing me by a mile.

I stuck my tongue out at him. I hit Joe Harris with four left jabs and laughed at him as I went back to my corner. I threatened Gypsie from my stool and I told my trainer Gypsie was one piece of cake.

As the bell rang for the next round I ran to the corner of Gypsie and hit him with a barrage of punches. Then disaster struck. I began to hold on. The crowd said, "What's happening to Colt? You hurt or somethin', man?"

Gypsie noticed too, and hit me with all kinds of punches as I covered up. Finally, I sagged to the canvas from a punch combination.

Why? Why did I stop fighting? Huh? I had a change of heart, that's why. For four weekends, I was helping Martin Luther King's group with the Poor People's Campaign in Resurrection City, Washington, D.C. Those people were putting their bodies on the line, man, can you dig it? Huh!!

They came from everywhere to D.C. Some by hitchhiking with their transistor radios blasting to Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." People young and old; most left, some right, some black, some white. Father Groppi from Milwaukee and his sidekick, Sweet Willie Wine, and many others. The march, dedicated now to the recently slain King, Medgar Evers, Viola Liuzzo, the Italian Filly with Balls, a Chicago housewife who went down south for others' civil rights and got wasted, man. Damn!

The Kennedy boys! Scottsboro boys! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

I ain't lost my heart, man! I can still fight, but I'm fightin' a different way now. Like the two white dudes from Harvard and Yale. They dedicated their lives to human rights, when they were young. Now they live in fatherless black homes among the rats and roaches. I lost my bigotry when I saw them trying to get love from the little black children that they didn't get from their parents.

You see, man, while their parents were jet-setting around the world, they were in private institutions all alone. One of 'em said he was sexually abused there, man. They were in prison, too; but they had more food and clothes than me.

For the first time, solid, I saw Whitey as a victim and right then and there, solid, I dedicated myself to the whole human race, to prove I's mystical. Can you dig it? Hoo!!

Now my body's on the line too, Dudes, and I'm still fightin'. But there is one thing I won't fight no mo' for; I won't fight no mo' for trophies that rust.

9. Frank Christian in his solo piece "A Change of Heart," directed by John Malpede and performed as part of South of the Clouds, *a segment of* Outcasts, *an evening of theatre pieces presented at the Boyd Street Theatre in L.A., 20 June–12 July 1986. (Photo by Gail Garretsen)*

10. Jim Brown performs his "Afternoon Seance: Bronx River Parkway" for the Boyd Street Theatre production of South of the Clouds *(1986). (Photo by Gail Garretsen)*

Jim Brown "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, sometimes guest of mental institutions, part-time jock, and insurance salesman. He is now an itinerant hobo." Brown recreated a sandlot baseball game from his youth "between the White Plains Road Wops and the Jerome Avenue Jews" that spun out in all directions to create a picture of "growing up in white-ethnic urban-America." He performed it with considerable force, wielding an imaginary bat and circling the bases, sometimes regressing into racial ranting, sometimes forgetting his lines and having them tossed to him from offstage. Over the four weeks of the show, Brown, pushed by Malpede to learn his lines, pulled his act together and simultaneously created solid changes in his off-stage life. Malpede feels Brown is one LAPD member who has made remarkable progress.

Robert Clough chose washing and wringing clothes as the feel-good activity to use for his monolog, which was transformed into revenge against his father for abusing his mother. Clough talked out his memories as he mimed wringing the wet clothes. After the first performance, Clough disappeared and his piece was performed by another member, along with explanations about Clough's whereabouts according to the latest rumor: "He's in San Francisco having cosmetic surgery." The truth finally surfaced: Clough *was* in San Francisco, detained in a mental health facility after a fight in a Tenderloin hotel where he broke all the windows. Malpede conceded he may never know why Clough departed the

show, and Clough is so delusional when he's off his medication that he may show up again and not remember where he went.

The flamboyant Pat Perkins, the only white woman in the show, used blues singing to give an account of a youthful infatuation with a black musician, her admiration for his music, and her eventual loss of his love to another woman.

In one of the evening's most moving pieces, Joe Clark and Kevin Williams enacted a scene that had really happened to one of them while preparing the show: a drunk at a bus stop had mistaken Williams for his son and Williams had used the opportunity to play out a scene between himself and the father who had abandoned him as a child, playing into the old drunk's fantasies.

Not Just Playin'

The workshop has a certain notoriety in Los Angeles, particularly because homelessness and performance art are both currently in the media spotlight. There have been writeups about the group in the *L.A. Herald Examiner,* the *L.A. Reader,* the *L.A. Weekly, High Performance,* the *Wall Street Journal,* and the *Village Voice* (see references). Most reviews have been favorable, but usually they focus on the social phenomenon of the workshop, rather than on the work itself. These press notices have made some celebrities and opened some doors. Frank Christian told Malpede that when he applied for a security job, he was hired because his future employers recognized him from the papers as an LAPD member. On several occasions members have been saved by their celebrity from being rousted by the cops, which is a real payoff in their lives. As for attitudes on the street, Malpede says, "I think people are getting to be respected and well-known for what they're doing. Since we've gotten all this stuff in the press, they're taking us more seriously. Before that they thought we were just playin'."

At this writing, LAPD has more dates at the Boyd Street Theatre coming up (21 Nov. 1986–2 Jan. 1987), as well as *Condo Thieves Corner,* an outdoor installation project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (25 and 26 Oct. 1986). For this show they plan to set up a huge cardboard stage for performances by themselves and others from Skid Row and the L.A. artist community.

Among the most satisfying results of all this activity is the request that LAPD serve as the advisory board for the Inner City Law Center, providing information and feedback about the center's interaction with the community and the needs of people on the street. One of the first things the group brought to the center's attention was the need for some kind of protection around the check cashing centers on the first and fifteenth of the month, when relief checks are issued. "It's really dangerous down there," says Malpede. "It's easy to tell who's vulnerable, and the vulnerable get hit." Especially with the cocaine epidemic burning its way across America's cities, the atmosphere is becoming so violent in central L.A. that murder is always in the air.

Art at the Pressure Point

John Malpede, 41, artist, white, New Yorker. His job at ICLC is the "first real job" he's ever had, "with a regular paycheck and insurance and everything." He lives about two miles from my studio, where I inter-

viewed him in August 1986. His roommate is a social worker at LAMP; they live on a hill in a funky clapboard house that has been burgled twice. Between my place and his lies Skid Row, which he keeps referring to as "down there," as though it were a sump, a vortex, or black hole pulling L.A. down at its center. Though his house has no yard, at least he can walk out in his bathrobe and get the paper in the morning, a welcome change from living in New York's East Village, "surrounded by concrete, no matter what."

Malpede went to graduate school at Columbia University, not in art or theatre, but in philosophy. Much of his theatrical experience was in street theatre, working with the Bread and Puppet Theatre and with his own groups under the auspices of city grants. They were "sent to the inner city like cultural kamikazes" to perform in parks, on the street, at Coney Island. He took workshops and classes in dance, voice, and contact improvisation.

11.

Afternoon Seance: Bronx River Parkway

A Monolog by Jim Brown

Afternoon seance. Bronx River Parkway. Bronx River Park. Sandlot baseball, pre-junior high school. Real Americana. As umpire an ex-cop who worked for the Police Athletic League, retired because of an injury, Italo-American, who also coached the other team—The White Plains Road Wops, the Dagos, the Guinnys, vs. us: the Jerome Avenue Jews, the Kikes, the Mochis. He's gonna umpire from behind the pitcher, rather than like normal people, from behind the catcher. In typical ass-backward Guinny fashion. North Bronx, heart of urban America's fastest and most competitive city. Bronx as Iowa. Twelve and a half miles from Columbus Circle, same as living in Dubuque, Des Moines, Clinton, Iowa. Playing catcher. Typical sandlot baseball. Many errors. Mucho and macho runs scored. My team bitching as if they were feeling a witch's tit in freezing North Bronx weather.

Bronx River Park. Bronx North. In the days immediately preceding the end of World War II. Fiorello H. La Guardia Mayor of The City of New York. F.D.R. President. In those naive days before oral sex a la France, Goldfarb's imported pornography (supplied by Frank Squillanti's North Bronx pornography cellar). Avid consumers included the Bronx County D.A.'s office, the Manhattan, New York County, D.A.'s office, the Mayor's office, the largest accounting office in the world, and presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

At bat five times. Hit the ball once. A base hit. The umpire three times in a row called runners safe at home plate when every player on the field knew the runners were out. My team decided that they wanted me to bait the umpire, as one of us usually did, which sometimes caused a big rumble, face-to-face fist fight. I refused which bugged the shit out of both teams. The umpire, in true Broad of Dis-Education, Police Athletic League fashion thought that he would get me to react to such nonsense. My teammates, I use the word advisedly, were unusually docile waiting for a confrontation. They never got the scenario.

Score tied at 16–16 going into the ninth inning. Bronx Park North and south of the clouds. In the days before the realization that Harry's Homo Heaven, Amazon Annie's and Liza and Lizzy the Lez'es running wild were real. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn grew up in rural and semi-rural America, vicinity of Hannibal, Missouri, in the quarter of a century immediately preceding

While working briefly with dancer Barbara Dilley at the Naropa Institute in Colorado (1975) he met a group from New York called Central Notion Company, and when he returned to New York he worked off and on with them. Through improvisation with the company he and performance artist Bill Gordh discovered the personae of Dead Dog and Lonely Horse, a man/dog (Gordh) and man/horse (Malpede) who palled around, improvising on the street and in any interesting location they could find, and eventually opened something of a detective agency in Manhattan. Audience members could make appointments with them and witness a performance by hanging out with them in the office or on the street. I met them about this time (1978) when they came to perform in L.A. The pairing was a remarkable collaboration in terms of exploring unknown performance realms, and Lonely Horse's soulful boniness seemed to fit Malpede's long, tall frame and his hesitant, big-eyed, companionable generosity.

the irrepressible conflict: The Civil War, 1861–1865. Seventy-five percent of the population rural and agricultural. Studds Schwartz and Vinnie Pistocchi, North Bronx Central. Seventy-five percent of America Urban in the months immediately preceding the end of World War II. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants. WASPS. Puke. Schwartz and Pistocchi: third generation Southern and Eastern European immigrants. The salt of urban America. America's forgotten non-Catholic, white ethnics. Spat upon despised and above all feared. Jews too competitive. Italians don't want to play against a stacked deck. North Bronx Central calling. "Hello operator, I haven't been in the Bronx in a long time. Is there still an exchange Oldenville Seven? There is? OK. Thank you, operator." Calling Oldenville Seven. Seven. Seven point seven. Seven million Italians, seven point seven million Jews arrived in the years after the great Civil War, or as my southern friends, who I met in the service, would say, "the War Between the States."

Playing baseball. Last of the ninth. We've been playing for four hours, it's getting dark. It's drizzling and getting cold. Score still tied. Two outs. Our second baseman, Monty Horowitz, lines a double. He's on second base. I'm up. The first pitch is way outside. Wait. That goddamn Guinny umpire called it a ball anyway. I can't believe it. A boff fangool. Kush mere und tuckas a rinde. OK. Here comes the second pitch. It's way outside again. Strike two! The Guinny bastard. I get it. I better hit the next pitch or he's gonna call me out and call the game on account of darkness. I'm cold, shivering. OK, pitch the ball wop. Pitch the ball. I've been trying to hit it over the right field wall all day. Look at 'em. Look. The right fielder. He's eatin' a big Guinny grinder out there. Look. The center fielder and the left fielder are eating them too. Big Guinny grinders. You know provolone cheese, Genoa salami, and peppers. Now the umpire's sharing one with the third baseman. I can't believe it. Let's go. Pitch the ball wop. Here it comes. Bam. Batting right handed I hit the ball off the freakin' fence. There goes Monty Horowitz. He's rounded third. "Slide Monty Horowitz. Slide." That's it! We win it. We the Jerome Avenue Jews, the Litvaks, beat them the wops, the Sicilianos.

Nude swimming in Van Cortlandt park. Mirrors under girls' dresses to see if they wore pink panties. If they wore pink panties them girls were for real. If they didn't wear pink panties, then maybe they were a little on the strange side. Growing up in white-ethnic urban-America.

12. LAPD member Pat Perkins in her solo piece performed in South of the Clouds *(1986). (Photo by Gail Garretsen)*

Malpede hit the performance art circuit alone in 1980, working in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities at art spaces like the Kitchen and LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions). He has received artist's grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York and California Arts Councils, plus two residencies at the Blue Mountain Colony in New York, where he had the space to develop his ideas. Performances often took a talk show or monolog format and examined the nature of performing, the passing of information, and, more and more, the plight of America's outcasts.

By the time Malpede came around to *Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles,* he was completely radicalized. Performing in the character of the dissociated and suspicious poetic genius MoTo, and switching to the character of MoTo's street friend who told stories about him, he created a stream of consciousness about the condition of living on the street, outside of society. Malpede's colleagues in performance art were flocking to the clubs and making art about TV and the media, but Malpede saw a social role for art. "It's really sad," he told Jacki Apple in the *L.A. Weekly,* "when the main focus of the art world is television. It just shows how removed from reality we've all become" (1986:21).

He chose Los Angeles for his project because the situation with the ICLC doesn't exist in New York, but also, as he told the *Village Voice,* "I don't think I could have done this work in New York, not because the work can't be done there—it can—but because I couldn't have allowed myself to do this instead of trying to get in the BAM Next Wave series" (Solomon 1986:12).

13. Dead Dog (Bill Gordh) on Lonely Horse (John Malpede) performing on the "landfill" in downtown Manhattan (1977). (Photo by Richard Schechner)

14. Dead Dog (Bill Gordh) and Lonely Horse (John Malpede) at the Ear Inn in New York City (1978 or '79). (Photo by Marty Heitner)

15.

from Olympic Update: Homelessness in Los Angeles

John Malpede

(Ascends platform as MoTo, who again addresses audience thru giant megaphone.)
MOTO: Peter Ueberroth, president of the L.A.O.O.C., Peter Ueberroth said to me, "This is going to be the greatest Olympic games of all time. But to have the greatest Olympic games we must sanitize the city. We must put up pastel banners all over the city. We must make the city smile. But to do this we need you, MoTo. We cannot do this without you MoTo." And I said to Peter Ueberroth, I said, "Peter, your shit stinks like everyone else. Your shit stinks like everyone else. Your shit, it stinks like everyone else!" And he said to me, "MoTo, yes it's true, my shit stinks like all the rest. It stinks like all the rest only worse, MoTo. Only worse. Only you know that MoTo. Only you know how it stinks only worse. You don't have to smell it but you do, MoTo. You don't have to carry it around and smell it but you do. You don't have to carry it around and smell it but you do. You doo-doo. Doo. You doo-doo you." And Peter Youandboth, he put his arm around me and he drew me close to his side and he handed me a bag of the most nasty and blackest shit I'd ever seen. Black and knotted shit. Knotty twisted shit in a baggy shit, swimming in its own drips. Its own hardness and its own drips. All knotted in a baggy. And Peter Tubbermouth, he said to me, "MoTo, I'm counting on you. All of America is counting on you. You must take this blackest of shits and you must carry it thruout this great land of ours. You must carry it across this country from California to New York, as the Olympic torch is being passed from hand to hand and carried from New York to California. You must take it in your hand and you must hold it high. You must take this shit in hand and hold it high. This Olympian task, this Herculean task, I entrust to you and you alone, MoTo. To you and you alone. And I took the bag from him and said, "Peter, you are full of shit." I took it and I said, "Peter, you are full of shit." I took it and I said, "Peter, you are full of shit!" And he cried.
(MoTo descends platform. Performer becomes MoTo's Friend.)
FRIEND: All over America everybody wants to talk to MoTo. We go downtown. The seats are soft and green carpeted. Everything is cool like the walls. People talk. We wait for MoTo's turn to talk. *(Friend punches in tape excerpt of [L.A.] County Supervisor Edelman's [July 1984] Hearings on the Homeless.)*
ELLA GRAHAM: My name is Ella Graham.
EDELMAN: G-r-a-h-m?
ELLA GRAHAM: G-r-a-h-a-m. I have a place to stay but I'm still homeless. I've been on Skid Row in Los Angeles for a year and a half. I been assaulted twice. Both times the attacker had knives. I had my room broken into, my food stamps stolen. I called the police and they said if I didn't see the person who'd broken in there was nothing they could do except take the report. I have to carry a pair of scissors everywhere I go for protection. And the police tell me not to leave my room after dark because it's so dangerous where I live. I pay $220 a month for rent for a room ten by ten. And I have to share the toilet and the shower with 79 other rooms, even with prostitutes gays and anything else. The toilet rooms are always filthy and the shower is so nasty I feel dirtier after I get out of the shower than when I got in, because they've got feces on the walls and all like that. And when I complain to the manager she says if I don't like it to get out. So I have a place to stay, but I'm still homeless.
EDELMAN: Tell us where this building is that you live.
GRAHAM: I live at 816 East 6th Street in room 107. I lived in room 107 since last March.
EDELMAN: O.K. Thank you. Let me ask. . . .
GRAHAM: It's the Regal Hotel.

EDELMAN: The Regal?
GRAHAM: Regal.
EDELMAN: It doesn't sound too regal.
GRAHAM: It isn't. *(She giggles.)* It's anything but Regal.
(Friend stops tape.)
FRIEND: People talk. We wait for MoTo's turn to talk. We wait so long for MoTo to talk. Sometimes MoTo has to wait so long. So long.

[. . .]

FRIEND: They make MoTo wait so long. It's not fair. They make him wait so long, he gets upset. MoTo gets upset. Sometimes then I read him his favorite letter from this year and it smooths him. It smooths him. *(Friend takes rumpled paper from his pocket and reads it. He reads it to MoTo on platform, as if MoTo were standing poised to speak.)*
FRIEND *(reading letter)*:
Dear George,

Forgive me for not calling you MoTo, but when you and my Mother were married and we were all living in Pontiac, we kids always called you George. In truth I feel like calling you Dad, because that best expresses what you mean to me.

You have no idea what it means to me to have found you again after all those years when we didn't know whether you were alive or dead. So many times during those years I wanted to tell you how unfair I thought the family had been to you about my mother's death. But, I never thought I would get the chance to do so.

I can truly say that being with you was the most meaningful experience of my life. I will cherish it always. I wish I could have convinced you to come back to live with me and my family. Please know, George, the door is always open.

I've enclosed a small check which I hope you'll accept. And Dad, please be careful of it.

I love you, Dad,

Larry

(Friend ascends platform, and becomes MoTo. MoTo talks.)
MOTO: Mr. Chairman, my name is MoTo. The cars go by, I see them. They stop at the corner. They roll up their windows. They lock their doors. I seem them. Their mouths say, "they're homeless because they want to be homeless." I see them. I don't hear them. I see them say that people are homeless because they want to be homeless. That people are homeless because they choose to be homeless.

Mr. Chairman, people are not homeless because they choose to be homeless. They are homeless for many reasons of mind and money, but they are not homeless because they choose to be homeless.

If no one chooses to be homeless, then anyone could be homeless. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
(Descends platform and again becomes Friend.)
FRIEND: And now MoTo and I, MoTo must get his rest.

16. John Malpede performing No Frills: A Generic Performance *on 9 December 1982 at Franklin Furnace in New York. (Photo by Benita Abrams)*

His workshop participants are glad he did, and are fully aware of the changes the workshop has wrought in their lives. Joe Clark observes that the work with the LAPD "can increase your self-esteem incredibly, and it fills the need to describe and make sense of your world." They are aware of Malpede's commitment and recognize him as a part of Skid Row. Joe notes: "The workshop couldn't happen if John were just an artist coming down to Skid Row a couple times a week like the strangers who show up on Christmas, give you a meal, and never care about you again" (Solomon 1986:12).

In some ways, Malpede *is* one of them. Skid Row is embedded in the center of the downtown art community, which ranges from Broadway to the border of East L.A. Many artists live on Main Street, on Wall, on San Pedro above the pawn shops and "art" theatres, and often swap stories with the denizens of the inner city. In private moments, those struggling for recognition in painting and performance art betray fears that they will wind up on the streets pushing shopping carts full of junk till the end of their days. When you're 40 and you've never had "a real job," maybe the one thing that separates you from the totally destitute is the spiritual enrichment of a life in art.

Malpede is a handsome, friendly person whose manner is somehow both vague and direct. His mind seems to run at several different speeds at the same time, and conversation can drop off in the middle of a sentence as if he is listening to something else, maybe a different drummer. Yet he is one of the few people I know who seems to genuinely enjoy making eye contact with people.

When we talked in August, his California Arts Council grant as artist-in-residence had just been renewed for another year and I asked him how he felt about that.

MALPEDE: It seems like we're right in the middle of doing it. It seems like it's not at an ending point. It's not a lifelong thing. I am going to do it only as long as it's interesting. It's not always fun. Day to day it's not fun. Sometimes I am killing myself. That's why I don't want to do the talent shows on Saturdays. I want eventually to pass this whole thing along to the people in the workshop.

BURNHAM: Are you getting more cynical and depressed? Are you more hopeful about life in general?

MALPEDE: All of the above. It's hard not to be cynical sometimes. It's also really nice to be in a place where you feel like you can really make a difference. It's nice to get paid for something that is at a real pressure point. You really feel like you can do something. I also feel that, in terms of my art, *Olympic Update* was an overtly political thing, but it was in a context that didn't really have any oomph. The context my art is in now, it's able to have much more impact in the arena it's concerned with. That was a sort of unknowing intent of mine all along.

BURNHAM: How do you feel this relates to your art? Are you talking specifically about directing this show, or do you see social community organizing as the same as performance art?

MALPEDE: No, I don't. I'm too East Coast for that. I think that when you write a script or something, that's art, and when you create social change, that's something else. That's just an East Coast way of looking at life. But I think there is a place in which those things intersect, like the

outdoor installation idea. That's an idea that has more of an intersection, maybe. Also, *South of the Clouds,* that came out of an acting exercise, so that seems like art to me. That was definitely art.

BURNHAM: What do you think their essential view is of what's going on in the workshop? Is it really communication or are they hoping to gain skills they can use to make a living? What do they think they're doing?

MALPEDE: Some of them have professional ambitions. There's a lot of community concern about communication, but there are also some ambitions, which are unrealistic. How many people do their first performances in a real theatre and then get it written about in all the papers in town and all that? So they think, well, if this happens this month, then by next month—

BURNHAM: *Miami Vice!*

MALPEDE: —at least I should be earning my living as a performance artist by next year. They don't realize that there are only about ten or twelve people around who do that. Nevertheless, the people have a lot to communicate and there is a lot of talent there, not necessarily the kind that can be packaged in Hollywood.

BURNHAM: Do you think they view it as therapy?

MALPEDE: No, and I don't either. I regard it only as art. But it is therapeutic. It creates a better life, a more social, better life. And that's another thing that's been really amazing, with Jim Brown in particular, the baseball player in the show. He used to get thrown out of everywhere. He still gets in a lot of trouble, but he used to get thrown out of LAMP all the time because he was so obsessive and crazy that he would make everybody else crazy. He'd just incite people to riot. And you couldn't really talk to him. He could only talk obsessively about a few things. Molly Lowery, who runs LAMP, was saying to me the other day that it's amazing the difference in him since the show. He's really, really different. The last couple of days he's been hanging out with another guy who used to be a writer for *Sanford and Sons* and *The Jeffersons,* a very intellectual guy, and Jim is, too. He hasn't been able to engage in conversations with people—two-way, give-and-take. And now he's beginning to do that. I'm really pretty impressed by the power of art, I have to say.

BURNHAM: Are you still as involved with the group on an individual basis? You were lending them money and going out with them to events. Is that still happening? Did you get your heart broken, as predicted?

MALPEDE: A number of times. Sometimes it feels like a house of mirrors down there—you don't know what's true and you'll never know. It depends on how you hold it. Basically I don't give things away looking for them to come back, because then I'd be setting myself up to be bummed out.

BURNHAM: There must be some people who look upon you as some kind of patsy.

MALPEDE: What's interesting is it's a whole reverse psychology. For a lot of people, if you get somebody to give you money, then they're a chump, right? They do it because they think they're doing you a favor, and you make them feel like they're doing you a favor, but in fact you're

17. Imogene Comming in an April 1986 Thieves Corner show, Everybody Gets a Ticket, *by LAPD member Clinton Fields. In background (left to right): Kevin Williams, Leon Richardson, Pat Perkins, John Malpede, Tommy Miles, and Sunshine Mills. (Photo by Gail Garretsen)*

regarding them as a chump because they gave you something. It's like everything gets twisted.

BURNHAM: Is there anything that's changed about your life as an artist?

MALPEDE: The points where it gets most interesting to me are when it seems like I'm changing. And I'm definitely continuing to do that. At this moment I'm more aware of the constant side of me. But about two weeks ago, I was really moved by—I forget the particular circumstances, but it was really me changing. That is the most interesting, when I'm not just finding out about other people's lives.

Notes

1. *South of the Clouds* was part of a group of theatre pieces billed together as *Outcasts*. Also included were *December* by Matthew Ghoulish and *The Magician* by John O'Keefe.

References

Apple, Jacki
1986 "Where the Sidewalk Ends," *L.A. Weekly*, 4–10 July:21.

Bebb, Bruce
1986 "*Outcasts:* Good Intentions as Theater," *Los Angeles Reader*, 27 June:11.

Burnham, Linda Frye
1986a Interview with John Malpede, August 1986.

1986b "Los Angeles Poverty Department," *High Performance* 9, no. 3:76.

Clancy, Frank
1986 "Lawyers Team Up to Fight for the Homeless," *L.A. Times*, 18 September, sec. V:1.

Decker, Cathleen
1986 "Skid Row—Living on a Dead-End," *L.A. Times,* 2 May, sec. II:1.

Durland, Steve
1985 "Hot Shorts," *High Performance* 8, no. 4:11–12.

Fox, Mary Jo
1986 "Outcasts," *L.A. Weekly,* 27 June–3 July:59.

Hughes, Kathleen A.
1986 "Street People Find a Home in the Theater," *The Wall Street Journal,* 22 July:28.

Lynn, Maude
1986 "Theater is Their Home," *L.A. Weekly,* 20–26 June:30.

Roderick, Kevin
1984 "Horse Patrols Ride Herd on Transients," *L.A. Times,* 21 July, sec. II:1.

Solomon, Alisa
1986 "Unaccommodated Men—And Women," *The Village Voice,* 20 May:12.

Stayton, Richard
1986 "'Outcasts' hits home with Skid Row actors," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner,* 27 June:36.

Linda Frye Burnham, *a TDR contributing editor, founded* High Performance *in 1978 and served as editor until 1985. She continues to write for* HP *and is a staff critic for* Artforum.