

MARCH 19, 1988 / 9

## ART, LIFE AND THE EDGE

*Life is more important than art, that's what makes art so important.*

—James Baldwin

## San Francisco / Mark Durant

Saturday, March 5, Boedekkar Park in the Tenderloin, San Francisco. The sun is fighting racing fog to warm the local residents who sleep, gossip and/or bring their children to play in this city plot that passes for a park. Life cascades onto the streets. Sometimes it just sits and rots, other times it takes the purest forms of celebratory spirit. Here the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) has organized a talent show. Leaning on a cane, a woman named Vicky Jordan is singing into a microphone Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love." She is singing about dignity and love of oneself. Thirty seconds into her unaccompanied rendition, almost everyone in the park jumps up, rushing to get closer. Singing along with her, some people are screaming in support, others are crying. When she finishes, she is lifted off the platform and hugged by her friends and neighbors. Later, by measured crowd response she wins first prize. Immediately after this talent show, theater workshops were to be held at a local community center to encourage poor and homeless people to become involved in a performance, inspired by their own talents and stories, which will be presented in the Emmanuel Walter Gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI).

LAPD was founded in 1985 by performance artists John Malpede, who is the 1988 recipient of the SFAI Adeline Kent Award. LAPD grew out of Malpede's desire to become reconnected to life after he found that the rarified art world of New York did not provide enough emotional sustenance for him to make significant work. The people Malpede now works with are from skid row in Los Angeles. Beginning with talent shows like the one here in San Francisco, Malpede slowly formed a theater troupe that is like no other. "Most of the people that I now make art with have been socialized in institutions: foster homes,



John Malpede and D. J. Smith of Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) at a talent show in Boedekkar Park, San Francisco. Photo: Colin Naphine.

mental hospitals, jails. Institutions at the margins of society. They don't know how to act right. Behavior that would not be tolerated in any other group work situation is put up with and over time worked through in this group. As a result there have been amazing changes in some members' ability to function and to interact with and care about other people." In fact, of the dozen or so regular members of LAPD none are homeless any longer. The relationship between Malpede and the other members began as a sort of mutual need. He needed them to feel reconnected to humanity; they needed him to help give direction in their lives. But now the differences have begun to melt away. Although he remains the director, it is quite obvious that all the members exert a powerful influence on the dynamic of the group.

*No Stone for Studs Schwartz* is an anarchic theater piece based loosely on the events surrounding a series of homeless people's murders on skid row and the reminisces of one of the LAPD members, Jim Beame. To stage it, the gallery has

been treated to resemble a cross between a high school gymnasium, a battling cage and a boxing ring. Three stacks of bleachers surround a canvas mat on which is painted a map that acts as an outline for the story.

To simply describe the story line would not illuminate anything. To a certain extent this is amateur theater. What is illuminating is the electricity in the air as the actors fall in and out of character and spontaneously go off on tangents until other members vocally or physically restrain them. The actors not on stage are constantly commenting on the performance of those who are, apt to shout sarcastically, "Try to be a little less engaged," or "Stick to the script," or "These people paid \$5 to get in here." The play moves geographically from Viet Nam to the Golan Heights to Belize without announcement. The roles cross gender, race and class lines. Studs is a Jewish schizophrenic; his father is played by Frank Christian, a middle-aged black man. Whatever originally made these people "outsiders" in real life now makes them important participants in this new

world they are creating for themselves.

Robert Clough's performance is riveting because of the sense of the reality of his psychological explosiveness. He is, and plays, a transvestite; he wants to be sexy, and he does not want to be poked fun at. Jim Beame plays Studs, an extremely handsome con man; Malpede plays Studs's alter ego, a kind of sarcastic guardian angel; Elia Arce is Studs's girlfriend; Kevin Williams (also assistant director of LAPD) plays various roles from boxing referee to an ex-district attorney on the heels of Studs and Frank Christian as boxer and Studs's father. Other players include Carl Bunker, Daniel James, Jazzmin, Knightphyrhe, Sunshine Mills, Pat Perkins, Marlon Peyton and Ed Rodriguez.

Outside the performing space in the gallery are reams of testimony collected by Malpede, who is also an advocate for the homeless. These stories, short synopses of circumstances, are more than just a collection of hard-luck stories; they betray the inhumanity of the bureaucracy. The handwritten explanations of how one finds oneself in a vicious situation of unsafe and unsanitary welfare hotels, of the difficulty of acquiring and keeping a refrigerator box to live in, are heart-breaking. But acknowledging that is just liberal guilt; the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and altruism is meaningless without action.

Do not attend a LAPD performance expecting any sad, weepy, safe and polite commentary on poverty. LAPD is alive and angry, smart and not about to be patronized. At that same talent show in the Tenderloin, a long-haired, bearded young man, looking a little delirious, alternately wore a "President Lines" hat and an empty Wild Irish Rose case on his head. Thinking he might be trouble I avoided his gaze. Finally he approached me and handed me a leaflet, a lunch menu for a local restaurant. "It's a good place to eat, tell them 'the highway hobo of the northern empire' sent you. I get a free meal for everyone I send over." He thanked me and walked away, and I realized he wasn't the one who had trouble. □