

Tale of Two Productions: From Ragtag to Riches

The Reader
April 29, 1988

By Tom Stringer

Could any two theatrical productions be more dissimilar than Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound* (at the Ahmanson through July 3) and the Los Angeles Poverty Department's *LAPD Inspects America* (at the Boyd Street Theater through May 7)?

The fact that both are playing downtown seems, at first, to be the only similarity. One is a nostalgic, meticulously crafted family comedy filled with wisecracks and well-orchestrated moments intended to warm our hearts. The other, improvised in a basement theater by a troupe of Skid Row performers, is a screaming, ragtag "project"—guerilla theater that threatens at every moment to spin violently out of control. Only at the heart of things do we find that these two productions have something in common. They share a concern: home-life (or lack of it) and the search for a theatrical expression that accurately reflects that life.

In *Broadway Bound*, while the char-

acters are more conscious of their desire to succeed than to express themselves, Simon's own telltale smile hovers over the action, reminding us that this is *his* memory play and he does intend to get it right. It's a scrapbook of a young writer's family life in Brooklyn during the late 1940s. The narrator, Eugene, is a pleasant kid who's newly out of the army. Charming, easy-going, unnaturally witty, he's more interested in dating the new girl in his life than writing comedy. Unfortunately, his older brother, Stan, a nervous instigator of things, has just lined up an audition with CBS. The two of them have until the following morning to write their first comedy sketch.

Their mother, Kate, a severe woman who's as joyless as Eugene is good-natured, has her hands full with an elderly father, Ben, who's begun wetting the bedsheets, and a husband, Jack, who's been coming home late from work and suspiciously heading right for the shower. Kate may be resigned to her lifelong role of cleaning house but on this

particular evening, as Jack soon finds out, she's also pitiless in her desire for the truth. She wants to know what's been going on between him and another woman at a certain lunch spot in the city.



LAPD Inspects America

If, on the other hand, there's any doubt about the political nature of *LAPD Inspects America*, one need look no further than the group's presence in the theater. Look at the orange dress clinging to the lead character, Robert. Or the high heels and copper wig on director-performer John Malpede. Listen to the bottles smashing into a backstage garbage can. This is high risk theater that calls attention to a part of our society we usually ignore: people from the streets. People without funds. There's danger here. Odd confrontations. Two men squabble over a pizza while the others try to put on a talent show. And while the rest of the production is equally unpredictable, the only artistry comes in Malpede's astonishing performance as an unrestrained drifter (Robert's alter ego).

Malpede is the founder of the group, a performance artist who grew weary of the New York art scene and came out here in 1985 to begin working with the Inner City Law Center. Through his casework with the homeless and through a series of talent shows he's held on Skid Row, Malpede has assembled a volatile crowd of "actors, drifters, artists, writers, lovers, singers, and fighters" who don't so much perform as express themselves.

The subject of *LAPD Inspects America* is the group's recent visit to San Francisco where they performed at the Art Institute in North Beach. In a series of disjointed scenes, we watch them run a talent show in Boedekkar Park, search for workshop space in the Tenderloin, deliver off-the-wall monologues about their lives, improvise a ballet to Michael Jackson's *I Just Can't Stop Loving You*, and wrangle with an obnoxious Art Institute teacher who doesn't much care for their uncontrolled antics in the cafeteria.

The shaky story structure, the wild carrying-on, the odd amateur performances, the tenuous directorial hold on the show—it all reflects the crisis mode of these people's lives. When Malpede steps out of his role as the tempestuous Robert towards the end of the show, we see for the first time the fantastic underpinnings of the production: the one who's been disrupting things the most is the one who's been holding it all together. Malpede's performance, as well as his overall conception for this ensemble, cuts brutally through artistic pretensions. He doesn't suggest much in the way of artful substitutes, but he does offer an unparalleled experience with an uneasy reality that's seldom depicted anywhere else. □

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LAPD Inspects America



Broadway Bound

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The play's centerpiece is a quiet, late-night conversation between Eugene and his mother about the night she shared with George Raft. It's a touching, if highly calculated scene. We're charmed by Eugene's interest in

his mother's past, even as the writer in him surely must be gathering material. And we're moved by Kate's rare openness, her deeply felt nostalgia.

William Ragsdale's Eugene is energetic and in possession of a quick and abiding sense of humor. We believe he's in our midst now as an older, successful comedy writer. But as a young man in his early twenties, he's too strong and secure. He has no shortcomings. Emotionally he's about fifty-five, the obvious alter ego of an enormously successful playwright. In this sense, Ragsdale's reading may be in keeping with the writer's intent. But if so, it's awfully self-congratulatory.

Carole Shelley, with her round dark eyes and hair streaked with gray, provides an effectively melancholy Kate. Salem Ludwig's Ben is quiet and strong, lingering in one's mind as the most significant character. "Comedy has to have a point," he insists, and while Simon himself, by virtue of his body of work, obviously agrees. Ben's other

admonitions have been discarded. "Everything is political," he scolds his rich daughter, Blanche. "The food on my plate is political. The \$4,000 coat on your back is political." When he later tells the boys that he prefers political satire, that in itself becomes a joke.

Simon's bittersweet tale, as warm and entertaining as it sets out to be, ultimately leaves one longing for more, for something Ben would have enjoyed.

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