Tale of Two Productions: From Ragtag to Riches

By Tom Stringer

Could any two theatrical productions be more dissimilar than Neil Simon's Broadway Bound (at the Ahmanson through July 5) 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 wise-cracks 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"—guerrilla 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: homelife (or lack of it) and the search for a theatrical expression that accurately reflects that life.

In Broadway Bound, while the characters 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 unrestrainable 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 Bocedkaris 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 shakily structured, 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 temperamental 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 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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Tale of Two Productions: From Ragtag to Riches

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 Impostor America" (at the Boulevard Street Theater through May 7)? The fact that both are playing downtown venues, at first, is the only similarity. One is a nostalgic, sentimentally casted family comedy filled with warm, well-orchestrated moments intended to warm our hearts. The other, produced by a theater group by the name of Skid Row Performers, is a screaming, raucous "parody"—call it 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: themselves, their world and the search for accurate expression that accurately reflects that life.

In "Broadway Bound," while the characters are more conscious of their lives to succeed than to express themselves, Simon's own vapid formula allows even the action, reminding us that this is a musical 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 pleasantly naive kid who eventually out of the army. Charming, naive, go-getting, unassuming, he's more interested in doing the new girl in his life than writing comedy. Fortunately, his older brother, Sully, a neurotic gambler of huge proportions, has just moved to an audition with CBS. The two of them have until the following morning to write a first-rate comedy sketch.

Their mother, Kate, a severe woman who makes Eugene good-hearted, has had the habit of collecting dead flowers and putting them in the bed. Their husbant, Jack, who's been coming on late from work and then promptly being fired. For the daughter, Kate may be interested in her in the role of dressing house and not on particular evening, as Jack may find out, but she's also thrilled for the girl. She wants to know what's been going on between him and another woman at a certain lunch spot in the city.

The play's conception is a quiet, last-night conversation between Eugene and his mother about the night's dinner spent with George Rial. It's touching, it badly calculated scene. We're charmed by Eugene's interest in his mother's past, even as the writer in him must be gathering material. And we're moved by Kate's warm openess, her deep love, her sensitivity.

"LAPD Impostor America" is every bit the generation of a quick and shedding sense of humor. We believe he's in the midst now as an elderly, self-deprecating comedy writer. But as a young man in his early twenties, he's not so strong and secure. He has his shortcomings. Emotionally, he's about fifty-five, the obvious after effects of an enormous weight play. In this scene, Rapp's reading may be as much of him as the writer's intention. But if so, it's rather self-congratulatory.

Cecile Sterley, with her round, dark eyes and bony presence, brings a refreshingly new touch to Eugene's mother. She's an odd, intriguing character. "Comedy has to have a point," she says, and while Sterley herself, by nature of her body of work, obviously agrees. But it's other:

Admissions have been discarded. "Everything is political," he tells his rich daughter, Blanche. "The food on my plate is political. The $5,000 coming to you isn't political. What I have to show the boys is the pretense public entity, that I'm not being conned. Simon's letter to the editor, in a tone and entertaining as it is out to be, ultimately leaves us longing for more, for something that would have raised.

On the other hand, there's no"doubt about the political nature of LAPD Impostor America. Our need to see a movie in the theatre is as much as a White House dance is a back stage garage car. This is high risk fare that calls attention to a part of society we usually ignore: people from the streets. People without funds. There are dangers here. Cliched confrontations. Two men square up over a piece of change, and the others try to put on a sticky show. And while the rest of the production is equally manipulative, the only satirist comes in Malpele's astonishing performance as an unattractive fellow (Robert's rich ego)."