

## AT NEOFEST

## Raw and Beautiful

Charles Wilmoth

The diversity of Sushi's Sixth Annual Neofest would seem to be exemplified by last weekend's two performances. The beautiful power of dance was articulated in local choreographer Patricia Sandback's five-pieces *New, Used and Improved Dances*. The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) demonstrated the raw power of street theatre in their wild production of *LAPD Inspects America: San Diego*.

Sandback's work maintained an unerring emphasis on dance, i.e., the body's power of expression, pure and simple. This focus was given its worth by the assembled troupe of female dancers, especially in the first two pieces.

"Gallery Dance #3" finds a young woman (Alison Cutri) pacing about on the bare stage. We are immediately taken into her private world, physically and emotionally. For the next 12 minutes or so we then are privileged to watch, without being voyeurs, the working out of her internal turmoil.

"Of Desire" is a superb piece of choreography. Four robust women dance out a beautifully orchestrated series of abstract synchronizations that have a dazzling mathematical precision. Intwoven throughout are subtle individual variations that remind one of the aesthetics of some form of natural, organic growth. The result is energizing, celebratory and sheer pleasure to the eye.

This economical approach of pristine presentation is characteristic of all but the final work, "Gallery Dance #2," which is simply great fun. It is a parody of every dance cliché, set to classical Bach, with the entire piece infused with a marvelous manic madness.

All the ancillary elements are truly enhancing without overshadowing. Original, ambient, minimalist music by local composer Jon Szanto is just the right stuff. Costumes by lesbian designer Wendy Sue Biegeleisen are smart and perfectly suited to each piece. The lighting design by R. Craig Wolf likewise provides creatively subtle augmentation.

LOS ANGELES  
POVERTY  
DEPARTMENT

HARRISON

In sharp contrast to the elementally refined style of Sandback's choreography and staging is the loud, chaotic and sometimes jarring world of skid row theatre troupe LAPD. This street theatre, in the tradition of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, challenges nearly every conventional notion of theatre. The challenge here is to experience the life of the homeless.

This is political theatre, not in the sense of being polemical, but in the sense of consciousness-raising through direct contact. The force of LAPD is in the integrity of their commitment, as one character says, to having the world adapt to them rather than vice versa.

So we are spared the condescension of liberal preaching and whitewashing. What we get is pretty much the real thing: prostitutes, psychiatric patients, pimps and pushers. We learn, for example, what it's like for a straight woman trying to live at a lesbian-run YWCA. Or how easily "faggot" can be hatefully hurled in a street fight. And how everyone loves the incorrigible troublemaker and crazy drag queen Robert, supremely played by director John Malpede.

At least half the cast was recruited only this week from streetside talent shows. In most cases there was little to distinguish these performers from the regulars of the ongoing guerrilla collective.

The loose structure of the performance is an account, of sorts, of LAPD's five-week stint in San Francisco for a series of workshops and performances (wherein some wonderfully funny jabs are made at the "artsy" art world). The Sushi performance space was transformed into a graffiti'd and littered den where beer bottles were broken in trash cans, pizza was fought over and cigarette butts were put out on the floor. The lighting and sound were equally primitive.

But, is it art? Well, I can't rightly say. As I walked home from the reception held afterwards at the SRO Lounge and was approached by a street person, I dropped my usual deaf indifference and gladly gave him a cigarette. How long the personal and the political will remain fused for me I can't say either. But Sushi, Inc. certainly has earned my respect for presenting the bold and committed work of director Malpede and his friends of the LAPD.

Neofest continues through May 28; call 235-8466 for further information. ▼