

## Malpede piece shows street smarts

By Anne Marie Welsh  
Arts Critic

Everything about last night's performance by the Los Angeles Poverty Department reflected the edgy vitality of the performers. Mostly they are homeless people gathered from the streets and shelters of Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego.

John Malpede directed and performed in this San Diego installment of "LAPD Inspects America," an evolving piece of documentary drama that had just one show as part of Sushi gallery's Neofest. Malpede presents the sort of risk-filled theater that many artists talk about, but few create.

One of last night's performers, for instance, was a beautiful natural dancer. He walked in off the street well past intermission, looking as if he lived in the parking lot next to Sushi. He was still on time to do his thing, however, which involved leading a dance class for white girls.

Malpede structures his play, if that's what it is, around the character of Robert Clough, a bisexual transvestite at the breaking point. The plot involves LAPD auditioning talent to create this show. Robert, a founding member of the troupe, keeps ranting, raging and

### Dance review

breaking down.

Reality for LAPD, as for Robert, means bottles smashed into trashcans and half-eaten slices of pizza littering the floor. The actors smoke and jive. And one of them, quite by accident, stomped on the toe of a patron.

In the show, they all think they can control Robert. Nobody can. So in the end, even his friends have to throw him out.

Dressed in a floral nylon dress and curly wig, Malpede struts anxiously about in a wide-eyed, turned-on virtuoso performance as Robert. Probably schizophrenic, he's both scary and lovable, this drifter who tests our notions of sanity by insisting on being treated like a human being. Malpede of course is also testing our notions of theater.

Satiric episodes come from the group's experience at the San Francisco Art Institute and at an art space where the well-meaning director takes one look at Robert and cancels her deal with the rest.

Other bits are talent-show skits — a good impression of "The Honymooners" with a guy who calls himself Felix the Cat as Ed Norton

and Daniel James as Ralph Kramden, that sort of thing.

The monologues were generally chilling. Elia Arce told of being held incommunicado within American society. Lenora Loretta Hills ranted passionately about the harrowing conditions at women's shelters in San Diego. This is no third-hand stuff. Hills is tall, slender, straight, and but for a missing tooth looks like a Nubian Vogue model; she lives in the downtown shelters, though.

There's some excellent conventional talent in this group, although that's beside the point. Kevin Williams is the solid right-hand-man type. Beautiful, angry Arce touches the heart as a sensitive Hispanic "alien." Jenny Bass seems an experienced actress about right for the Aquarian roles in "Hair" and James can do just about anything.

One leaves this raw and wonderful show wishing it were longer, so successfully has Malpede tapped the energy that keeps his subjects going. No preachy moments stopped the momentum. And so, of course, you left appalled that we are the only Western democracy to still tolerate hunger and homelessness. Maybe by inspecting America, LAPD will change it.