



David J. Martinez

The homeless theatre company LAPD in a performance of *Jupiter 35*, based on a crime victim's experience in Los Angeles County General Hospital.

## L.A.'S JAGGED EDGES

By Misha Berson

Skid Row in Los Angeles is a bleak, treacherous neighborhood populated by a large portion of L.A.'s 50,000 homeless men and women. It's also the headquarters of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (a.k.a. LAPD), a performance troupe that mirrors the gritty, chaotic reality of the chronically down and out.

LAPD's shows serve as a kind of collective autobiography of life on the streets. Its 1987 piece *No Stone for Studs Schwartz* concerned a series of unsolved Skid Row murders and starred a 53-year-old schizophrenic vagrant named Jim Beam. *LAPD Inspects America*, an in-progress, on-the-road pastiche of skits and monologues, changes to reflect the mood of each homeless community it plays in. And the latest LAPD show, *Jupiter 35*, is a true-life drama of rape, crack dealing and attempted murder performed by a cast that includes a crime victim still recovering from his wounds.

Watching one of LAPD's raucous, partly improvised performances, it's hard to know where life ends and art begins. Like the self-named Jim Beam, most of the performers have lived (or are still living) in welfare hotels or out on the streets. Some are prone to recurrent bouts of mental illness, spells of drug and alcohol addiction, or sudden outbursts of violence. Few have ever held down a job, and not everyone can read.

But despite these obstacles the

group has hung together for five years, bringing its performance pieces to small theatres, galleries, artists' lofts and vacant lots around Los Angeles. They've also worked with art venues and community organizations in San Diego, San Francisco and New York, winning critical respect for a performance style that doesn't soften the jagged edges of being poor, confused, angry and homeless in America.

LAPD was founded in 1985 by John Malpede. A New York performance artist bored with a life that he says lacked "responsibilities, emotional involvements and concerns about others," Malpede moved to Los Angeles and took a



Jon Wine

LAPD founder John Malpede: "It's like real life, where you have to draw your own conclusions."

job on Skid Row as a legal advocate for the homeless. Noting the absence of community arts programs, he began holding free workshops and talent shows in parks and shelters. More than 70 people participated, and some of the more enthusiastic formed an ongoing theatre troupe.

LAPD now has a core company of about 14 members, a racially mixed aggregation of men and women, street dwellers and trained artists. A couple other dozen people drift in and out, sometimes disappearing for months at a time. For veteran members like Kevin Williams, LAPD provides a crucial support system as well as a creative outlet. "It's the place I can flip back to after I've flipped out," he says. "These are the only people in Los Angeles I know I can trust."

"We try to be there for people because many on Skid Row have been completely stranded by their friends and family," confirms Malpede. "But our bottom line is to make good art together, and part of that is devising a strategy flexible enough to cover anything that happens—like someone getting kicked out of their hotel or having to go into detox. A lot of things come up that are more important than making art, but they're what make the art important."

Rather than evoke the pitiful images most people associate with homelessness, LAPD's shows are humorous, profane, harrowing and at times rambling depictions of people surviving on the edge. The idea, says actress-filmmaker Elia

Arce, a company member, is to "show people in 'Normalville' what we call 'the real deal' about life on Skid Row, not the cosmetic version. The homeless aren't just a bunch of bums who don't want to work, and they aren't just poor people who'll be fine if we give them jobs and food. The reality is much more complicated."

LAPD members don't try to sort out the complex contradictions of urban poverty: They just want to portray them honestly. For Malpede, a veteran of Bread and Puppet Theatre, the Living Theatre, and the performance duo Dead Dog and Lonely Horse, that means eschewing naturalism, working instead in an improvisatory, open-ended format that feels closer to the jarring rhythms of street life. It means men sometimes playing women, actors interrupting one another if dialogue gets too slow or confusing and, in the case of *Studs Schwartz*, changing the show's ending every night to reflect the mood of the actors.

"The stuff coming out of LAPD is affected a lot by the past 20 years of experimental theatre and performance art," declares Malpede. "We have a unique performing style with a lot of energy, a lot of humor, a lot of emotional stuff all mixed in together. It's sort of like real life, where you have to draw your own conclusions. And it's definitely like life on Skid Row, where things are confusing, and you tend to hear a bunch of conflicted stories simultaneously. People often hallucinate, or they just lie."

According to Malpede, homelessness is just one facet of a much larger problem: an entrenched underclass that has been systematically de-socialized. "It goes all the way back to schooling, to writing off whole geographic and demographic sections of the population," he remarks. "To change that around will probably involve changing everything in the society. That's why we don't put out pat answers, because we're talking here about lives, and lives take years and years to change. It completely misrepresents the problem if we act like we're do-gooder artists who can go in and straighten everything out."

But interest in LAPD is growing, and Malpede has left his legal aid

job to give the company more attention. Grants have begun trickling in from government and private sources, along with invitations to do workshops and residencies outside of California. From Oct. 23 to Nov. 5 LAPD will be in residence at the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia. Projects in New Orleans, Tucson and Chicago are also in the offing.

Wherever they go, the members of LAPD quickly make a beeline for the local equivalent of L.A.'s Skid Row. Linking up with social service organizations, they conduct open talent shows and encourage street people to get up and sing a song or tell a story. Material generated from a day on the street can wind up in LAPD's theatrical show that same night.

More and more people from "Normalville" are attending their shows. But the homeless, says Kevin Williams, are still the group's most important—and most critical—audience. "A street audience will boo anything," he contends. "They're very unforgiving. They want to see something that's about what's happening on the streets, something about the immediacy of their own lives. For them it has to have that rawness, that ability to grab you right here, right now. Otherwise, what's the point of watching or listening?"

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year. The Arena production, which concluded the theatre's 1988-89 season in June, was directed by Douglas Wager, choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge and designed by Zack Brown.

**REBIRTH OF A SALESMAN** Despite its title, there is no family picnic in Donald Margulies's *The Loman Family Picnic*. But if there had been, it would have rained. Nothing ever turns out quite right for the clan in Margulies's black comedy. The father works overtime, the mother worries, the two boys do well in school, but happiness seems to elude them no matter how hard they try.

Margulies's *Picnic*—playing through July 2 at the Manhattan Theatre Club—is part autobiography, part meditation on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Margulies grew up in Brooklyn, one of two sons of a salesman. When he first read Miller's classic drama in grade school in the '60s, he experienced a flash of recognition. "Even at that age I knew that these were truths for my own people," Margulies says.

It was 20 years later that Margulies decided to write a semi-autobiographical play, and his family's resemblance to Miller's Lomans proved problematic. He didn't want to simply retell *Salesman* in contemporary terms, but at the same time he couldn't ignore the influence that the play had on a whole generation of American families. "I decided to acknowledge *Salesman* as a part of the culture in which my characters exist, and Willy Loman as an accepted part of the American mythology,"

**LOONEY TUNE** Claire de Loone (Kathleen Mahony-Bennett) and Ozzie (Gordon Paddison) get "Carried Away" with a song and dance among the prehistoric exhibitions of New York's Museum of Natural History in Arena Stage's recent revival of *On the Town*. The musical, written by Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, and originally choreographed by Jerome Robbins, is 45 years old this