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commando art squad
and a surrogate family
for inhabitants of
Skid Row.

Skid Row Theater: Daniel James,
John Malpede and Kevin Williams
rehearse an LAPD production.

TAKING IT FROM THE STREETS

The Los Angeles Poverty Department creates theater of the homeless

ACCORDING TO John Malpede, there are two perceptions of what it's like to be down and out in America. The prime-time, "cosmetic" version evokes wholesale pity for the poor and the homeless. But what he calls "the real deal" is a much grittier, more chaotic and less sentimental story. Actually, it is thousands of individual stories, each with its own distinctive plot.

Malpede has been helping homeless people tell their stories since 1984. That's when he abandoned his career as a performance artist in Manhattan's trendy East Village for a less fashionable address: Skid Row in Los Angeles. Bored, he says, with a life that

lacked "responsibilities, emotional involvements and concerns about others," he went to work at the Inner City Law Center as an advocate for the homeless. And he started up a collectively run performing group that brings transients, ex-mental patients and other Skid Row denizens together to create theater out of their own lives.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department — better-known, in playful mockery of L.A.'s finest, as LAPD — comes to Intersection Theatre next week with its new piece, *Jupiter 25*. To hear Malpede tell it, the troupe functions as both a commando art squad and a surrogate family.

"LAPD's goal has always been twofold," explained Malpede in a long-distance phone interview with the Bay Guardian. "We want to create a community in downtown L.A., because it's real bleak and dangerous here — your best friend is the guy who may take your shoes when you go to sleep. We try to create a situation with some trust in it. Our other goal is just to get the truth out to what we call Normalville."

So far LAPD has not had much impact on Normalville. But the group has captured national attention by involving more than 70 Skid Row residents in drama workshops, freeform talent shows and original plays. Last year it had a successful run of *No Stones for Studs Schwartz*, a co-scripted play about a Skid Row murder. And the

ongoing *LAPD Inspects America* project brings the group to homeless encampments around the state to do research and create on-the-spot performances.

These days LAPD has 20 members of various races and backgrounds. Some participants, like former boxer Frank Christian and unemployed steelworker Kevin Williams, recall better days before winding up broke on Skid Row. Others, like Robert Clough, are chronically unstable, unemployable and apt to drift away for months at a time. Still others are low-income artists who, as Malpede puts it, were "bored with the art world and looking for a community."

LAPD holds workshops in parks

and streets, social service agencies and shelters. All who come get a chance to perform. Those who stay involved get paid for performing (anywhere from \$5 to \$50), and some make connections that lead to a place to live, a job or welfare benefits they didn't know they were entitled to.

"A lot of our work goes into worrying about people's situations and helping them get along," acknowledges Malpede. "We try to just be there for them because many on Skid Row have been completely stranded by their friends and family. A lot of times their individual problems are more urgent than whatever show we're trying to do. The bottom line is the door's open, and it's hard to get thrown out the door once you're in."

Malpede insists, however, that LAPD is not a therapy group, nor is it a place to do "community art, which we all know means bad art." Though the performance style can be as rough-edged and volatile as the existence it portrays, LAPD's raw truthfulness has commanded respect. In his review of *Studs Schwartz*, L.A. Herald Examiner critic Richard Stayton wrote that LAPD is "after work that is much more ambitious than socially relevant therapeutic theater. There is nothing safely liberal or politically correct here. For sheer dramatic intensity, ferocity and danger, no other group of actors on a local stage can compare."

John Malpede finds such feedback

encouraging. "I think we're pretty experimental as art goes," he ventures. "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 like life on the Skid Row, where things are much more hallucinated and confusing and you tend to hear a bunch of conflicted stories simultaneously."

Jupiter 25, the troupe's latest effort, is based on the real-life misadventures of LAPD member Sunshine Mills. It portrays what happened to Mills when he was robbed, thrown out of a fourth-story window and carted off half-dead to the county hospital. Because he had no identification on him, the authorities assigned him the sci-fi name of Jupiter 25. "The show looks at Sunshine's life," notes Malpede, "but everyone else is bringing in their own memories of things that happened to them."

THIS WILL be LAPD's second trip to San Francisco, though you could easily have missed it the first time around. The group came up last February, when the San Francisco Art Institute bestowed the prestigious Adeline Kent Award on John Malpede. During its residency at SFAI, the group conducted workshops in the Tenderloin district, San Francisco's own Skid Row. From those experiences emerged *LAPD Inspects America: San Francisco*, which the group performed briefly at Intersection.

"What's happening in the Tenderloin is similar to what's happening in Los Angeles's Skid Row," says Malpede. "But our's is a bleaker situation. In the Tenderloin there are Vietnamese immigrants, there are stores and restaurants, it's more integrated into the geography of the city. In Skid Row you can't even see what the latest sneaker fashion is because there ain't no store windows there."

Though they found the Tenderloin hospitable, the reception was surprisingly mixed at the SF Art Institute.

"The people who ran the gallery were really supportive to us," recalls Malpede, "but there was a lot of hostility from the students. There were people up on the roof yelling, 'Nigger!' at our black members. It was pretty weird and very upsetting, but it turns out it was just part of our inspection of America."

Malpede thinks that most Americans have a problem comprehending the epic implications of homelessness and poverty in the U.S. "The actual people on the street are just the tip of the iceberg," he asserts. "It's a huge thing, and to a huge degree it's racial. It goes all the way back to schooling, to writing off whole geographic and demographic sections of the population. To change that around will probably involve changing everything in the society."

"People want to think it's just an employment problem but it ain't," he continues. "I know a lot of people who want to work, who have their high school diplomas but can't even read. People want to hear that everybody's going to be self-sufficient in the future, and they ain't going to be. Or if they are going to be it will take a massive reorganization of resources so that people don't get de-socialized as they grow up."

Meanwhile, Malpede spends most of his time on Skid Row, working with people who have fallen right through the safety net. Suggest the notion that he's sacrificing his own art career to help the needy souls on Skid Row, and he laughs. His motives, he contends, are purely selfish. "I'm doing this," says Malpede, "because I think it's good art. I was bored in the New York art world because it's very insular. Now I work with lawyers, with homeless people, I go to city council meetings and I'm plugged into a real wide range of human activity. Now there's a lot more to make art out of." ■