According to founder John Malpede, LAPD functions as both a 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.
According to John Malpede, there are two perceptions of what it’s like to be down and out in America. The first, the “cosmetic” version evokes wholesale pity for the poor and the homeless. But what he calls “the real deal” is a much grimmer, 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, by a life that lacked “responsibilities, emotional involvement and concern 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 troupes, ex-convicts and other Skid Row retirees—the so-called “Troupes” together to create theater out of their own lives.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department—better-known, in playful mockery of L.A., as L.A.P.D.—came to intersection Theatre and work with its new place, Jupiter 25. To hear Malpede tell it, the Troupes functions as both a community art squad and a surrogate family.

"LAPD's goal is to do things two-fold," explained Malpede in a long-distance phone interview with the Bay Guardian. "We want to make a community in downtown L.A., because it's a real bleak and dangerous area. And we feel that it's the place where they have the skid row problem, and we also want to do something about it."

So far, LAPD has made a huge impact on Skid Row. But the group has captured national attention by involving more than 70 Skid Row residents in performance workshops, free public talent shows and original plays. Last year, it won a successful run of "Stealth" for "Stealth," a co-commissioned play by Skid Row writer. And the Los Angeles Poverty Department Impact Award project brings the group to homeless encampments around the state to do research and create on-the-spot performances.

These days LAPD has 26 members of various races and backgrounds. Some participants, like former boxer Frank Capel, and unemployed steel worker Kevin Williams, recall being days before windy up broke on Skid Row. Others, like Robert Cough, 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 "born with the art world and looking for community." LAPD holds workshops in parks and streets, social service agencies and shelters. All who have a chance to perform. Those who may involve get paid for performing anywhere from $35 to $50, and some make connections that last 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 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 notes, however, that LAPD is not a therapy group, but its place to do "community art, which we all know means bad art." Though the performance style can be rough-edged and volatile, the existence it points. LAPD's truthfulness has commanded respect. In his review of "Stealth," L.A. Herald Examiner critic Richard Stofsky wrote that LAPD's "bitter work that is much more ambitious than locally relevant and dramatic." There is nothing fairly liberal or politically correct here. For their color: intensity, freakish and dangerous. No other group of artists on a local scene can compare.

"To hear the people who ran the gallery were really supportive of 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 wind and very up, but it turns out it was just part of our inspection of America.'"

"The people who run the gallery were really supportive of 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 wind and very up, 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 streets are just the tip of the iceberg," he asserts. "It's a huge thing, and it's a huge deal. It's a tragedy. It goes all the way back to school, 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're going to be. If they're 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 through the safety net. Suggests the action 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. "It's doing this," says Malpede, "because I think it's a good art. I was born 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."

"Stealth," which opens to the public at the Skid Row Theatre from Saturday, runs through May 16. For more information, call (213) 502-1600.