



THERE'S NO OTHER theater company quite like the group that calls itself the LAPD — the half-humorous acronym of the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Founded in 1984 by former New York performance artist John Malpede, LAPD turns the notion of "L.A.'s finest" on its ear. This is theater of the homeless, by the homeless and for just about everybody.

The L.A.-based LAPD works out of Skid Rows everywhere. The group's usual practice is to go wherever the homeless congregate, hold talent shows, set up workshops and create a theater piece from the experiences of the homeless themselves — with local street people making up part of the cast.

That's what the company did on its prior trip here, a year ago, when it staged "LAPD Inspects America: San Francisco: Part I" (part of an ongoing series in cities all across the country) at the San Francisco Art Institute. This year, by contrast, LAPD has come to town with a play from home.

"Jupiter 35," which opened Wednesday at Intersection for the Arts, is the story of LeRoy "Sunshine" Mills, a street denizen and LAPD member who awoke one day last September in L.A. County General Hospital with multiple fractures throughout his body. He'd fallen — or been thrown — from a fourth-story window; the title of the play is the name some

staff member had put on his chart.

THE PLAY — written by Mills and the company, and staged by Malpede, Kevin Williams and Elia Arce — tells the story of Mills' slow recovery, intercut with vivid scenes from his dreams and paranoid hallucinations as his mind tries to reconstruct what actually happened to him.

Lying or sitting in his hospital bed at the center of the stage, the still-frail Mills is the focal point of the action — a shocking contrast to his more robust image in the brief video segment that opens the show. At one point on opening night, a wound opened in his reconstructed jaw; blood trickled down his neck until he was bandaged by other cast members.

This is raw theater, not so much in its content — though the story does contain muggings, crack and sexual child abuse — as in its form. Few if any of the cast are trained actors; characterizations range from wildly overplayed to barely audible, lines are dropped and all kinds of other things go awry.

But it works — in large part because of the sheer energy and conviction of all concerned. Half the time you're not even aware of what's in the script and what's being ad-libbed. It even seemed perfectly normal to hear actors yelling, "Hey, lights! Where's that blackout?" "Number three! Hit number three!" — before the lights went out for one of the blackout flashback scenes.

ALL OF the 10-person ensemble besides Mills play multiple roles, Malpede at times included — though he generally sits to one side observing the action. Sometimes they're a mob, lit only by the flash of cigarette lighters as they chase Mills (played by a stand-in) around the stage and up the aisles, from floor to floor of a deserted building.

They're also individuals: the doctors (Daniel James, Mychael Lee-Starr, Richard Lane) who battle over Mills' treatments; the nurses (Nancy Yeo, Ed Rodriguez) who care for him; the LAPD members (Arce, Williams, Carl Grave) who finally found out where he is (in his still dazed state he tells them he's in "the general's hospital") and visit him; and the sinister array of special agents that plague his dreams.

There are moments when the piece seems to bog down — chase scenes that go on too long, repetitive bits of dialogue — but there are brilliant bits of theater as well: the crash of a heavy object falling to the floor to begin the action; the wildly surreal hallucination that takes over in the midst of Mills' surgery; the layering of stories on top of each other; the still, clear honesty of Mills' performance.

There's a rare and genuine passion at the center of "Jupiter 35" that, for all its rough edges, makes the 90-minute show a riveting and rewarding experience.

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Friday, February 3, 1989 ★

THEATER REVIEW

'Jupiter 35'

Playwright: Sunshine Mills

Directors: John Malpede, Kevin Williams, Elia Arce

Cast: Mills, Arce, Daniel James, Mychael Lee-Starr, Nancy Yeo, Ed Rodriguez

Theater: LAPD at Intersection.