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offer much in the way of a
constructive social commentary.

"Jupiter 35"

CAPP STREET PROJECT

by Carol Lloyd

On September 6, 1988, Leroy "Sunshine" Mills woke up at Los Angeles County General Hospital with the name "Jupiter 35" written on his chart. Since then, though barely recovered, Sunshine has co-authored and begun touring *Jupiter 35*, an autobiographical play about

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his experience in the hospital. This feat would be unusual for any writer-performer, but the fact that Sunshine is also homeless makes it remarkable. As a member of Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), however, he is only one among many who have taken up serious performance art careers amid homelessness and poverty.

LAPD, a homeless theater troupe based in Los Angeles's skid row, has been creating theater about the homeless since 1985. John Malpede, a former New York performance artist, founded the group after leaving his art-centered life in Manhattan. Though the group still holds talent shows and workshops in homeless shelters, parks, and empty city lots, they also have performed in some of the country's most prestigious venues for experimental theater, including The Kitchen in New York, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), and Intersection For The Arts in San Francisco.

Both more sentimental and more offensive than most experimental performance work, *Jupiter 35* embraces tasteless behavior - ranging from blaring, grotesque caricature to inaudible, anti-theater realism - with gusto. Unselfconscious and often downright out of control, LAPD does not seem to be concerned with putting forth a cohesive aesthetic or a coherent political agenda, though ironically, there is plenty of politics in the subtext. Literally bouncing off the walls, ad-libbing lines and



LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department)

Photo: Daniel J. Martinez

changing the story on their fellow actors, these eccentric performers create a climate in which just about anything goes. Through sheer audacity, LAPD has successfully created their own performance style: brilliant mess.

Sunshine steals the limelight despite his limited movement and action. The mystery of his fall from a four-story window is slowly revealed by a ragged array of surreal dream sequences, paranoid fantasies, and chaotic flashbacks. But most of the play focuses on Sunshine's frustrating experiences with an impersonal medical system. He whines about wanting attention, and rants about the hospital's plot to keep him from his friends. He complains about everything from violence in the world to bad hospital food, yet his sharp comic timing and compulsive honesty allow him to get away with the most self-indulgent personal testimony.

One minute he confesses to the audience: "I hurt; I just hurt." The next moment he is trying to convince one of the medical assistants to buy him a gun so he can seek revenge on his enemies.

"Buy me a gun."

"I can't do that."

"O.K., don't buy me a gun.

Just lend me \$350. You know I'll pay you back."

"You can't go around killing people. It isn't right!"

"Hey man, grow up.

This is America."

LAPD has created a vehicle for much needed cross-class communication, a place where the poor and the disenfranchised can

tell their side of the story, and the middle class must sit and listen. But LAPD has also produced more tangible results: many LAPD members have found jobs, homes, and a community of friends to help them stave off urban loneliness. Moreover, LAPD's variety of activities - talent shows, workshops, classes, political protests, and performances - benefits both the poor and the middle class. Indeed, because LAPD implements what it espouses, the term "performance," which usually refers to theatrical representation, takes on an added meaning when it is applied to their work: fulfillment of a promise. That the group is making some of the nation's most exciting experimental theater is only a surprising, but natural, side effect.