



Los Angeles Poverty Department, still from *Jupiter 35*, performance, at Highways, Santa Monica.

Courage in Adversity

LAPD at Highways

BY LITA BARRIE

In his '70s manifesto for more experimental forms of socially engaged art, Allan Kaprow made an intriguing distinction between "life-like art" (arising from life's vicissitudes) and "art-like art" (with a recognizable art-historical pedigree). But the demise of situationist ideals with the increased market orientation of '80s art trends demonstrates the extent to which blue chip "art-like art" is a reflection of today's conservative demand for art which serves as bullion.

In contrast to self-consciously "political art" (still a sub-genre of what Kaprow described as "art-like art") which uses pre-established artistic forms, LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department) evolved as an experimental theater which tries to reflect the experiential reality of homelessness. LAPD is truly innovative theatrical performance that exemplifies Kaprow's notion of "life-like art," since it encompasses the real-life scenarios of various street people in a mosaic of inter-connecting multiple voices instead of the usual conventional linear nar-

rative based on a voice-of-God perspective.

The underground performance troupe blurs the usual separation between art and life so convincingly that its scripts often seem to be ad-libbed. The rough-edged power of its performance style retains the raw energy of the struggle for survival on Skid Row. The effect is to implicate the audience in harsh realities of street life which are too often hidden from middle-class consciousness.

Under the direction of well-known performance artist John Malpede, LAPD grew out of workshops for homeless people. Their innovative performance style evolved from experiments of working without scripts, using improvisation to allow each member to have an input. In this way Malpede discovered what he describes as "a really natural connection between street energy and extreme theatrical techniques, cutting edge experimental stuff."

Jupiter 35, presented at High-

continued on page 16

continued from page 15

ways as an official program of the 1990 Los Angeles Festival, re-enacts the experiences of company member Leroy "Sunshine" Mills waking up in Los Angeles County Hospital after falling from a top floor window of a building on Skid Row.

The performance revolves around the question of how Sunshine fell from the window. As the central character, Sunshine is extraordinarily engaging, often humorous, sometimes pathetic and at other times an ironic social commentator. But it is, finally, his humanity in the midst of extreme adversity that allows the audience to empathize so strongly with his predicament.

While the audience is held in suspense over the uncertainty of the events surrounding Sunshine's fall, various interactions take place between him and hospital staff, police and Skid Row friends. Amid these rambling depictions there are several cameo performances. Elia Arce has a hilarious spot as the ingratiating Latino bride-to-be visiting her fiancé from whom she will accept anything, until his infidelities are revealed when she learns he has syphilis, provoking female venom to call the magic powers of the universe to the disposal of a woman scorned.

In another scenario, she recounts the experiences of a woman looking for a room on Skid Row and finding herself in lesbian quarters with blood-stained sheets, where she asserts her own sexual preferences in a comic diatribe, repeatedly yelling, "I do not like pussy; I like prick."

Finally, after bizarre surrealist scenes depicting Sunshine's anaesthetically induced nightmares while undergoing surgery, the real events surrounding his fall are revealed. In a horrifying re-enactment of child rape, the audience learns how he was thrown from the building after attempting to protect the child from the rapists. The appalling violence of the action in which the rapists pick him up and hurl him from the window is a powerfully disturbing indictment of the psychotic violence of a culture in which human life is regarded as cheaply as disposable garbage.

Sunshine emerges as the unlikely hero whose actions demonstrate that even in the most squalid adversity of life on the streets there can be a courage and nobility of which sickly, safe middle-class suburbia knows little. There is no art being fabricated here. Instead LAPD provides a direct view of real life in all its contradictions and complexities. ■

Jupiter 35 by Los Angeles Poverty Department through September 16 at Highways, 1651 19th St., Santa Monica.