Going Where Others Can’t

By Terry Ross

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We can quibble over what to call it—play or performance piece, realistic or not, important or not—but certain things are certain. The actors, homeless and otherwise, of director John Malpede’s 3-year-old performing troupe agree on—perhaps only one—thing. They gather together to put on a show.

And the show must, and will, go on, whether the audience is made up of art critics or avant-gardists, students or teachers, poor or rich, journalists or do-gooders.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department doesn’t do political theater in the traditional sense. Although composed partly of people who have lived on the streets or in temporary shelters, LAPD doesn’t hang across a message. Homelessness is painful and not infrequently dangerous, these actors say often, and the people who have homes don’t care. But homelessness is also a state of mind. They add. It’s a free choice, and has its own peculiar logic and code of conduct. Its routine of welfare checks, cagey moves, drugs and alcohol, its binges of blissful irresponsibility.

In act after act the LAPD turns “straight” values upside-down without replacing them with any others. In one scene a man laughs having witnessed, as a child, his father beating his retarded mother. His response to the unbearable pain of this memory, however, is not gentleness but more violence: He imagines strangling his father or smashing his head with a rock. And late in the performance, when one character complains bitterly of the callousness and cruelty she has experienced at the hands of her fellow homeless people, a hardened-souled old veteran street scammer is more than happy to give her a dose of reality: “We ain’t good people, girl.”

But a comparison between two soliloquies illustrates that LAPD can go where ordinary theater groups can’t. Near the beginning of last Thursday’s performance, Williams delivered what he called “Robert’s monologue” described above, the story of having seen his father beat his mother. It’s a gripping, terrifying piece of acting. Later, however, Michael Andrew Lee gives a different kind of speech: a babbling, rambling, nerve-racked story of being chased and stabbed on the street. The mere fact of Lee’s difficulty in talking about the incident becomes the point, and the whole point. The man’s on a stage, but he’s not acting. The natural power of this ad-libbed speech, in the context of what is otherwise a play, however improvised, is irresistible. Creating such vivid moments is what the stage is all about.

So let’s call it theater.