

PERFORMANCE
ART

Going Where Others Can't

By Terry Ross

Los Angeles Poverty Department
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WE CAN QUIBBLE over what to call it—theater or performance piece, politics or art, jive talk or social statement—but one thing is certain. The actors, homeless

REVIEW

and otherwise, of director John Malpede's 5-year-old performing troupe agree on one—and 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 bang 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 it has its own peculiar non-logic and code of conduct, its routine of welfare checks, cadged meals, drugs and alcohol, its binges of blissful irresponsibility.

In skit after skit, LAPD turns "straight" values upside down without replacing them with any others. In one monologue, a man laments having witnessed, as a child, his father beating his retarded mother. His response to the unspeakable 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 battled-scarred old veteran street scammer is more than happy to give her a dose of reality: "We ain't good people, girl."

There's nothing politically correct about the show LAPD brought to the Portland Art Museum's Art/On the Edge series, no inspiring

curtain call to action. *LAPD Inspects America: The Robert Chapter* is not meant to right wrongs or even, necessarily, to elucidate them. It's a piece of theater that happens not to deliberately exclude the world in which it's situated. In its blending of actors with street people, rehearsed pieces with improvisation, and fiction with reality, it makes artier, stagier shows seem simple-minded.

The blurring of the boundary between performer and audience comes with the territory. LAPD is a shifting organization—members come



LAPD's Malpede is a scary, hectoring Robert.

and go, often without explanation, between shows. Getting the show on—and, once it's on, keeping it going—becomes the primary goal. *The Robert Chapter*, which freely re-creates a series of events surrounding the company's unsuccessful attempt to put on a workshop and performance in San Francisco, spins theatrical straw into gold. What didn't work in San Francisco works in this show. Monologues are delivered, a dance is danced, skits are performed and Robert, a raging queen compellingly played by Malpede, storms around the auditorium, sits among the audience, chain-smokes, yells and blows a horn. A technician turns lights on and off on cue, and actor-narrator Kevin Williams makes transitions between events in the narrative that occur in more or less chronological order. Viewed strictly as a play, *The Robert Chapter* works.

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 halting, 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. Good theater.*