

Being exposed to so many ancient cultural traditions at this festival, it struck me as ironic that my most moving experience would occur with a troupe of largely unschooled local performers, the Los Angeles Poverty Department. In fact, their play, *Jupiter 35*, was the most intense theatre experience of my life.

LAPD, which satirically shares its acronym with the Los Angeles Police Department, is a theatre company with fourteen core members — a racially mixed group of trained artists and homeless people, who either are, or have been, living on the city's near-endless Skid Row. Under the artistic direction of veteran performance artist John Malpede, the LAPD presents, as he says "the real deal and not the cosmetic version of life on the streets."

What they do present, he continues, are the lifestyles of the Fucked up and Damned. *Jupiter 35* is a perfect example. It is the true story of Sunshine Mills — a 40-year old veteran performer for LAPD who came from the streets — and how he was thrown from a six-story window of an abandoned warehouse, where he had been trying to save a twelve-year-old girl from assault by a crack addict.

The fall left him, literally, a broken man. His skeleton was shattered and his face had to be reconstructed surgically. *Jupiter 35* takes place in the hospital ward where fellow members of LAPD helped him to piece his life back together. The play is about that process, all the more engaging because Sunshine Mills plays himself in recreating the ordeal.

Working without a script, the LAPD collective develops a loose narrative based on material collectively derived from the actors' experiences. In performance, scenarios are structured as to the outcome of each scene, but what happens in between often changes from night to night.

This improvised approach has led to an LAPD performance style that involves asides, where the actors comment on the action happening in a scene. Character-switching among cast members allows for a diversity of opinion, a collective voice that is not concerned with being "politically correct." It is a personal voice that is wild and restless, sometimes uncontrollable and angry, a voice that speaks from a place most Americans choose to ignore.

*Jupiter 35* is a brilliant mixture of life and art — a combination of expressionistic dream sequences where Mills is under the influence of morphine and naturalistic scenes with the various people on the ward. It is very emotional, partly because some of the performers themselves are emotionally unbalanced, but also because they so desperately want to be heard, to be loved and to make a difference in another's life.

This they do, and considering the difficulty involved with dealing on an emotional and personal basis for one who is victimized by poverty and mental illness, the dramatic intensity is profound and disturbing. It reaches a level of humanness rarely experienced on stage, a compassionate amalgam of anger, tenderness, humour and dignity. Move over Sam Sheppard. This is American all-too-realism where the kitchen sink is replaced by the sewer.

Watching this play, I had the sense that anything could happen — that while they were re-enacting the crack warehouse experience in total

darkness, one of these character/actors might lose it at any moment. With foul-smelling actors in the audience, waiting their turn to go on stage, it felt dangerous, that much on the edge.

And words fail to describe my rush of feelings at the moment when I realized that the nearly-crippled, bald actor, who was being lifted from the hospital bed to his wheelchair, really did need help, that his scars were genuine, that he still couldn't walk straight, and that the photograph by his bed of a handsome black man is actually him before the fall.

Judging from the work and from talking to the actors, this performance forum is important for the personal development of these individuals. It has allowed them to be expressive in an atmosphere of trust, something unknown on the streets. It has given them a sense of responsibility and commitment they can honour, and above all a voice through which society at large can benefit. This community-based theatrical experiment may well be something we will see a lot more of in the future.