

A review

'LAPD' uses stories of area homeless to write chapter on what it's really like

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

The power of words and images to define, and thus control, people is at the heart of "LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department) Inspects the Twin Cities," a provocative theatrical piece created and performed by a wide diversity of people brought together because they've all been defined as homeless.

The performance is the result of a month's work among the Twin Cities' homeless by John Malpede, leader of LAPD, along with several formerly homeless people who have joined his roving company. Scouring shelters, community centers, shacks and the undersides of viaducts, Malpede and crew worked with the homeless, coaxing their stories out of them, finding those who could articulate the experience, and then putting the storytellers on stage in a quickly devised theatrical format.

Malpede's work is neither politically didactic nor liberally sentimental.

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Staff Photo by Bruce Bisping

David Halenda, left, held an imaginary knife to the throat of taxi driver Glen Mansfield in a scene from "LAPD Inspects the Twin Cities."

LAPD Inspects the Twin Cities

Who: Created by John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department with members of the Twin Cities homeless community as part of the Walker Art Center-Southern Theater "Out There" series.

Where: Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Av. S., Minneapolis.

When: Today at 8 p.m., Sunday at 3 p.m.

Tickets: \$9; call 340-1725.

Review: This provocative show, performed by the homeless telling their own stories, isn't overtly political or sentimental, not even always likeable, but it's real and allows people to define themselves and interpret their own experiences.

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His interest is merely putting a human face on homelessness and, by letting the homeless relate their true stories in their own, raw way, empowering them to define themselves.

When the one-hour show is over, a sense of fascination and, perhaps, new sensitivity takes over. One doesn't feel like running to the nearest homeless shelter and volunteering, nor does one feel guilty about going out for dinner afterwards and then heading to a cozy bed.

But for those of us who have uneasily glanced at the grizzled, toothless, teetering men heading for soup lines, avoiding honest engagement with them by quickly defining them as drunks or druggies or crazies as we hurry past, this show unsettles our assumptions.

The homeless aren't a monolithic group. They include guys who look on homelessness as the "freeing of the soul," an unemployed guy whose wife tossed him out only a few weeks ago, forcing him to find refuge on the streets with his older brother, a graduate of Anoka State Hospital. There's a young, black gay man, a neofascist loudmouth who is a misogynist and proud of it, a beautiful black woman dealing with questions of sexual power.

Ted Prather talks movingly about missing his three kids and wanting to get back into the mainstream. He could be our next door neighbor. But others, like the irrepressible "Disney" Spielberg, grizzled and worn, explosive and with a violent undercurrent bristling about his wry vision, challenge and unsettle us. He mordantly reinterprets the American experience so that it's the rest of us who seem to be missing something.

A lot of these people love the streets, the honest interaction they find among the homeless, a spiritual dimension they've discovered living on the edge.

In a way they're great, idiosyncratic reinterpreters of experience. Like Mark Prather (Ted's brother) who is a true eccentric, a poet of the streets, a man in touch with his pain and his anger. "You do Vietnam," he's saying, "and then call us crazy?"

Some of the stuff is straight personal testimony, about living on Nicollet Island in abandoned buildings. But Malpede and his people are part of the show and they give it a specific form, using overlapping dialogues, simultaneous speeches, anything to re-create the sense of the chaos of the streets. They find humor in all this, great, absurd humor in the human condition, but always with an edge.

A lot of the staging consists of feigned violence looking real, anger swelling into an explosiveness that could get out of control. The lines between art and real life get blurred.

The performers don't ask us to like them or admire them nor do they

feel they have to apologize or explain themselves. "We don't want your liberal guilt," they say, "just the freedom to define ourselves and interpret our own lives. To some of us, a cardboard box lean-to is our castle."

To others, of course, good, guilt-ridden liberal programs are the difference between life and death. For every Disney Spielberg proudly foraging his way through life there are dozens of others who are wounded, confused and afraid. Malpede isn't denying that nor is he romanticizing the homeless experience. He's just putting us in touch with the humanity of some people living an alternative lifestyle and empowering those people to make sure that what we see is their reality, not ours.



John Malpede