

# Strong Messages From 'the Streets'

*Theater troupe of homeless actors performs searing drama based on real-life experiences*

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**A**MONG the many adjectives that leap to mind after a Los Angeles Poverty Department performance, "entertaining" is not one of them. Shocking, biting, aggressive, depressing, frightening, searing, gritty, revealing, or provoking — yes — but entertaining? No.

The LAPD (the anagram is deliberate) is John Malpede's baby. A veteran of performance art, Mr. Malpede turned his socio-political attention to the problems of the homeless in the early 1980s. He took up residence on skid row in Los Angeles and invited homeless actors, artists, and others to participate in a form of theater meant to give voice to a voiceless minority.

That voice is not sentimentalized. It is not made pathetic. Rage, wit, sorrow, and suffering characterize it. It is very hard to listen to because the violence enacted is so intense, making most movie treatments of street violence seem tame by comparison.

LAPD is based in L.A. but not bolted down there. Company members travel to major cities at the invitation of arts or community organizations and move into the local skid row, throwing open rehearsals to anyone who is interested. They have only three rules: No drugs, no liquor, no violence.

The actors work with core LAPD members to tell their own stories, filtered only slightly by the dramatic process. Thus a dramatized version of a true story, the killing of a grocery clerk by a homeless man, will be invested with the actor's real emotions when he was fired from a menial job. It's really a kind of psychodrama, where the most terrible moments in a person's life (or in the life of the local streets) are acted out.

There's more to it, of course — a method in all the madness. There is a good deal of humor (mostly very dark), and there are recurring themes that ultimately help local communities see where the cause of so much agony lies.

LAPD has had a positive effect in many places where it has performed. In some cities, productions have continued independently after the troupe leaves. In Boulder, LAPD's presence has raised the issue of opening a day-center in the town, and committed people are pressing for it.

Some of the performers who are mentally disabled have been assisted in getting government aid and their lives have drastically improved. Such changes have been an example to others, who have then sought help, say Malpede and others in the group.

In a recent performance here, sponsored by the Colorado Dance Festival, LAPD took a large rehearsal room at the Boulder Dance Collective, placed the audience

in the center of the room, chairs pointed every which way, and built small stages in each corner, though the performers used the entire space. Here we saw men and women lying about as if in shelters or out on the streets. Gradually, their stories unfolded, some of them overlapping or recurring through out the performance.

No mention of homelessness was made, nor was daily activity, daily mundane reality, part of the picture. In one story, a woman (played by a male actor) plots with her older son to torment the younger son.

In another scene, a young couple drives around endlessly looking for amusement.

Drugs and liquor are the main antidote for their boredom. It is this man who will kill the clerk. In another story, a homosexual man relates in horrifying detail the kidnapping, rape, and murder of a young man, a friend of his, and his own escape from the assailants. As he speaks, another actor shouts out a string of invectives, playing the part of all the murderers.

The power of this segment, which is a true story told by the man who experienced it, is so overwhelming, the viewer so stricken by horror, it's difficult to see what

good this kind of theater can possibly do anyone. Clearly, movie violence like that in "Cape Fear" is of a peculiarly titillating quality, while the stylized violence of LAPD performances is far from exciting. No one watching this could possibly "enjoy" the spectacle of suffering. And yet, are we not paralyzed by fear rather than goaded into action?

The answer comes in the last segment when a tormented young man talks to himself, reenacting a childhood experiment with arson to retaliate against a hateful father. The whole performance has really been about child abuse and its deadly effects on individuals and society.

"For me, the common denominator is child abuse," Malpede says in an interview, referring to the mental illness, violence, and victimization on the street. "We are able to inform the debate by bringing out root causes of homelessness — which is child abuse and all that surrounds it."

As difficult as the evening has been, the viewer takes away a fiery urgency to change the course of child abuse, though

LAPD gives no solutions. One thing that helps release the viewer from utter depression is the fact that the actors take their bows with such kindness to each other and to the audience they have just assaulted. As they cluster at the door, and the audience files past, the actors ask with amiable faces, "What did you think?"

Yet the fact remains that the image of street life LAPD projects is deterministic. If we stopped child abuse tomorrow, how would that help the people we see here? Their lives seem to be signed and sealed in drugs, alcohol, or mental illness. The single mother, the newly poor, the laborer who cannot find work were not among those in the Boulder show. LAPD's homeless have no choice and therefore no freedom.

Malpede, however, does not feel hopeless about them. "They can stay [with the company] five days or five years.... I feel sometimes we are making significant progress in healing the wounds [of those who stay]. People are beginning to realize the enormity of the problem. There are more services in place now than in the past in most big cities."

This is undeniably powerful theater. It has something in common with Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty" in its intensity. But its deterministic view of dire human conditions leaves out a whole range of real human experience. It raises questions about responsibility and choice that the audience may be too numbed or too guilt-ridden to think through deeply.

But one does leave the performance feeling deeply for these individuals, whose lives cannot be defined by the term "homeless."

■ *The LAPD will give 13 performances at the end of May and in early June at various outdoor and indoor locations in Los Angeles. Call (213) 413-1077 for more information.*

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**— John Malpede,  
performance artist and  
director of the Los Angeles  
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