

SNIPER'S NEST BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

TOO
CLOSE
TO HOME

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NEST

"DO YOU Want the Cosmetic Version or the Real Deal?" When the LAPD—Los Angeles Poverty (not Police) Department comes to town, you get the real deal whether you want it

or not. LAPD is a unique theater troupe made up of people who are homeless or formerly homeless, and a few professional theater workers. Last month they came to Boulder, Colorado to perform "Do You Want..." as part of "LAPD Inspects America," defined as "a mission impossible project in which some LA group members come into a new city, meet, and then work with some of the homeless people there, and replicate our process in a hot minute." They have been doing this for several years now, collaborating with the homeless in cities all over the country.

Boulder is a very white city of nearly 100,000 quite successfully masquerading as its recent small-town past. It houses a university, a Buddhist college, a hard-working peace center, an invisible working class, mountain scenery, a lot of sports addicts, scientists, artists, radicals, healers, massage therapists, and unreconstructed hippies. Homeless people are an anomaly in this outwardly prosperous setting, but they are here in increasing numbers, as everywhere else in this decaying nation. About 200 people are homeless in Boulder County any given night, says the director of the city's 68-bed shelter—which is open only at night from mid-October to mid-April.

LAPD was in Boulder for three weeks, under the aegis of the Colorado Dance Festival (a member of the national progressive and multicultural performance network which has long since outgrown its name). At the end of that time, they produced a preview vignette in a local laundromat and five full-scale performances. "In Boulder," say the program notes, "we met people through the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, the Salvation Army, and in

miscellaneous encounters on the street, and held workshops with them. Sometimes people who get involved in these activities begin to come to the daily workshops where we'll build the show; sometimes they say they'll come but are never seen again; sometimes they come and then disappear—or vape (as we say); and sometimes they come and stay."

Heartwarming, sentimental, and easy to get, LAPD's productions are not. The people who brought their children to the laundromat behind Tom's Tavern, where Boulder's homeless hang out, probably didn't bring them back to the night performance. The audience crowded into the tiny room consisting of a few other homeless people, a few of the curious lured by newspaper publicity to a free performance, and a few local artists/intellectuals (plus a TV camera). The overlapping true stories of two homeless men from Boulder, told amid the humming washers and dryers, dealt with theft, mental abuse, friendship, homosexual desire, abduction, and murder. Noah Galilee (who described himself in the program as an "individual far away reaching for a space in life") anxiously related an adolescent

experience so excruciatingly painful that the expressions on the audience's faces approximated those of the protagonists. Mario Romero Amaral (originally from East Los, who served some time in the same prison as Charles Manson) acted out his story as though he'd been doing it for years, with the professional aid of LAPD regulars David Halenda and Hektor Munoz.

Seeing these tales acted out (in the first case) and told directly to the audience (in the second) was chilling, and thrilling—not due to sensationalism, but because of the clearly catalytic, even resurrective quality of the experience for those involved, which was so skillfully transmitted to the viewers. The laundromat—as a place of cleansing—ultimately seemed a very appropriate place for this to be happening.

The "finished" performance, by four women and six men, focused on family life as part of a "Call Home" series. It included versions of the laundromat stories and several more—all equally strange, heart-rending, and occasionally so absurd as to provoke nervous laughter. The evening began in shadows



LAPD IN PHILADELPHIA—LUKAS FELZMAN

with people sleeping fitfully on various levels, muttering fragments of their sadness and loss: "You could have called me, you don't love me"; "I just want somebody to take care of me." Frances Joy, dressed in a bedraggled evening gown, briskly cleaned a toilet as she told her poignant tale of neglect; Heather Sallaz was a living statue, manipulated by Billie Joy George as she talked about a drug-related death in a car accident, and actress Judy Gershon was vibrantly natural as the victim tooling around town with her smoldering boyfriend in search of thrills. Michael ("the Firehouse") Lee "played" an abused runaway teenager beginning a career in arson; as he turned off sprinkler systems, he talked about turning off the pain; as he disconnected alarms, he compared it to a father disconnected from his love.

The "main" story line involved LAPD's Halenda, Munoz and Daniel James Smith in a grotesque, confusing, yet mesmerizing saga of abuse in which mother and older son incomprehensibly conspire to drive a younger child over the edge. Staged with great simplicity in the round, circling the audience, who sat facing every which way in the center, it was like no other theater I've seen, inventively executed to conform with its own limitations, but never amateurish.

This has not always been the case with LAPD. I saw them a few years ago at New York's Museo del Barrio in a wild, anarchic, hyperactive performance that verged on total chaos. John Malpede, LAPD's founder and director, describes its evolution with some ambivalence. "...some of the actors have gotten so damn good, that we're in a situation now where it's like pretending to be wild and crazy people who can't keep it together. So we're in a different place now, and the horrible thing about it is that it's more regular, it's more like what other people do. Now.... we're encumbered with this kind of ability disability..."

Malpede is a former performance artist—once known as the second half of "Dead Dog and Lonely Horse" (in partnership with Bill Gordh)—who fled the New York progressive avant garde for Los Angeles skid-row reality. In 1985, he became a legal advocate for the homeless with Inner City Law and began to do improvisation workshops

with people on the streets because he "wanted to find out what was going on." He handed out fliers and was "sure no one was going to come. But people did come. In a way it was like, open the door and permission is granted, and people just ran in and started doing stuff immediately." The goal was "to create a community on Skid Row and to get the real deal, what was going on, out to the general public."

LAPD worked primarily with monologues for several years because very few of the actors were "capable of interacting with another person in the way you need in order to do a scene." Many simply had to do their own thing. LAPD doesn't work from scripts, but from explosive emotions and revealing socio-personal subtexts. In the early days, versions (never cosmetic) changed from night to night and "asides" became central, a metaphor for the focus on marginality the troupe achieves in the public eye. Having abandoned control of authorship, Malpede understood that the trick was to listen, to learn a new language, to give in to the energy produced by chaos rather than try to control it.

Spontaneity is a key ingredient. Workshop sessions are still brutally uninhibited. People drop in and out of character, play themselves or each other. For some time the performances revolved around the vicissitudes of a disturbed and disturbing transvestite named Robert whose unpredictability fueled the LAPD style. He eventually ended up in jail, whereupon Malpede donned his dress and wig and played the part.

In a discussion group after the last performance, a formerly homeless woman who had lived for a while with her child at Echo House and is still "one step away" from losing her precious job and apartment again, said the play was good because it "normalized" certain realities. "Homelessness," she said, "is a humiliating, degrading experience, and more people are closer to it, to being hit by circumstances beyond their control, than they know. Homeless people are those without support systems, or those who have used their support systems up. Nobody wants much, and most people hate asking for anything." She wished that homeless families had been included in the play, because she felt that single people were

more publicly visible—and scarier. It was agreed that people in Boulder didn't realize how difficult it is to live in a town where college students snap up the minimum-wage jobs, a town with little low-income housing, where the decision has been made to favor "quality of life" and open spaces over poor people.

There were some fortuitous by-products to LAPD's presence here—new stories to be told; a homeless actress was reunited with her husband, who read about the troupe in the newspaper. One of the younger members told me proudly he had just "found his love" among the Boulder volunteers. Mario Amaral thought he might return to LA and work with LAPD, while Munoz was considering staying and working with the homeless in Boulder. And as I was finishing this article, it was announced in the *Colorado Daily* that "residents of the Boulder Homeless Shelter have formed the Boulder Homeless Theater to help educate the public about the homeless." Five people were pictured, among them Mario Amaral and Noah Gallilee, who may be in the process of finding his space.

LAPD is an imperfect act of faith. Its subject is not homelessness as such, but its causes, deep in the human and communal psyche. Some of the actors are truly lost souls, for whom no amount of catharsis will effect a total cure. Malpede is the first to admit that LAPD is no "wonder drug," and there have been many disappointments amidst the difficulty of "keeping the lid on" a truly violent environment. The "characters" are often not sympathetic, but they reach their audiences at a place where our fears meet, even though our lives may be drastically different. Many in the audience were, as I was, deeply moved. But a local political science professor felt that the news was not new and such displays simply validated victimization and exploitation. (I disagree; these people are not whining or apologizing for their lives; LAPD discourages do-goodism.) Someone else said it was close to psycho drama or art therapy (which may be perfectly true, but in no way detracts from its effectiveness).

LITTLE PROGRESSIVE ART goes this deep into the lives of those with



LAPD DIRECTOR JOHN MALPEDE AS ROBERT—FELZMAN

whom it is concerned. LAPD wants to "force people to rethink their ideas" about homelessness. They are "ecstatic" when people come away from their performances "feeling like all liberal efforts and solutions are hopelessly inadequate. Because they are....What is needed [in LA] is massive redevelopment of the Black and Latin communities and then you're still going to have homeless people, or people who for other reasons can't care for themselves. But you're not going to have people who could have, at one

point, cared for themselves, but because of the desperate situation and getting trapped in drugs and the whole system, end up in a place where they don't know how the hell to function in society."

Malpede, who refuses to use the terms "empowerment" or "healing," also wants people to rethink "political art," a term he dislikes because "everybody in America's bored with that shit." Once a doctoral candidate in philosophy, he cites Wittgenstein and Simone Weil as people who "had their

big ideas and found a way of inserting them into reality." Certainly many of us in the left cultural community agree that the most vital "political art" is that which is working against artificiality, beyond the arts professions and political rhetoric, restoring reality and reconnecting to history "out there" with those who are suffering and organizing. In the part of the art world that knows it exists, such work is awkwardly and inaccurately called "new genre public art." Inaccurately because it is simply a continuation of the fragile but long-standing movement for cultural democracy in interactive theater and visual arts. I first heard about this "genre," and the "decentering" process that has become a key note in the postmodernist chorus, in the late 1970s.

LAPD'S MODE OF working is only one of the many ways this work is being done. Malpede is among a growing number of artists who are voluntarily displacing themselves, developing new forms rather than just renaming extant categories. Social site sculptor Mel Chin calls it "sculpting the system." Poet Estella Conwill Majozo refers to "call and response"—activism and art as inseparable and mutually important because "we are the breathers of each others' breaths."

Innovative community projects like this are art and something else. Process-based, they are elusive from the outside, and lend themselves uneasily if at all to commodification and conventional criticism. They work in that liminal space that ethnographer James Clifford has called "the moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity," a moment that may render the viewer's own culture "newly incomprehensible." We need more art like LAPD's that doesn't explain, doesn't make things easy, but leads us to understand exactly how much we don't understand.

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NB: Some of the quotations from Malpede were taken from Lin Hixon's interview with him in P-Form, Summer 1989. Some of the ideas in this article were drawn from group discussions at the "Mapping the Terrain" conference, organized by Suzanne Lacy in November 1991, which Malpede also attended.