

OVATIONS PROFILE

A Different LAPD

The Los Angeles Poverty Department is recognized by the Ovations for its community contributions.

by Jamie Painter

Small theatre companies come and go with about the same frequency as restaurants in this town. Some L.A. theatres cannot find the necessary funding or audience base to stay afloat. Others simply lose their space or momentum. With so many obstacles facing these 99-Seat companies, it's refreshing to note that the Los Angeles Poverty Department, which also goes by the ironic acronym LAPD, has been going strong for nearly 15 years.

More impressive than the number of years LAPD has been around is the service it provides. The nonprofit company's mission is to create high-quality, challenging performance works that express the realities, hopes, and dreams of people who live and work on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. For the past decade and a half, LAPD has met that goal by offering free bi-weekly theatre workshops and staging theatre productions in local hotels, shelters, parks, rehabilitation centers, and theatres in downtown Los Angeles. This week, the Theatre LA Ovation Awards will honor the L.A. Poverty Department with the Community Outreach Award for its outstanding contributions to the city and to individuals who might otherwise not have a medium to express themselves.

"Over the years, we've had a lot of publicity," acknowledged John Malpede, LAPD's founder and artistic director. "We've won awards in San Francisco and New York. We've been in all the arts and theatre press in national magazines. We've been in *People Magazine*. But it's so nice to be recognized by the theatre people in Los Angeles. We're very appreciative, because we're not fancy."

In fact, the reason LAPD has managed to survive this long, according to Malpede, is because the company has operated under the assumption that flexibility and frugality are necessities—be it moving its office space or holding stage productions in sometimes unlikely locations, like the top of a 10-story downtown parking structure, as LAPD did this past June for its most recent production, *Race*.

"One of our real corporate heroes is low-budget Chicago-based clothier Robert Hall, who's company's campaign for years has used the slogan, 'Low overhead. Low overhead.' That's also how we operate," said Malpede from LAPD's "slightly-larger-than-a-breadbox" office, located in an Echo Park church. "Even though, on one hand, we've been really fortunate and have gotten a lot of grants and recognition, if we weren't enormously flexible on how we're actually going to survive, we wouldn't survive."

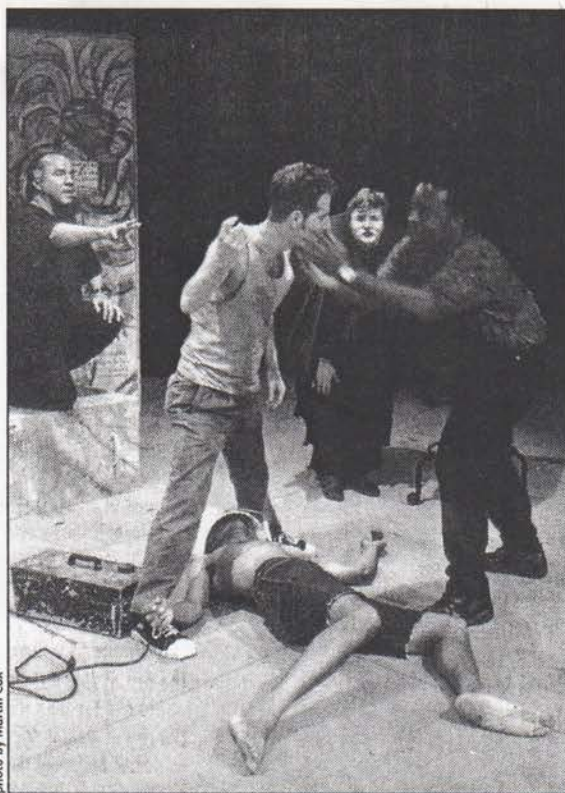


photo by Martin Cox

Ron King, David Halenda, Sunshine Mills (laying down), Shawnee James, and Tony Parker in *Virtual Reality*.

Olympic Challenge

Malpede was a well-known performance artist when he began working with homeless people on Skid Row. During the 1984 Summer Olympics, Malpede was given a grant to create a performance piece related to the Olympics, and he watched in disbelief as people on the streets were physically taken out of the city in an effort to clean up Los Angeles' image for the games. He responded by creating monologues based on homeless people's experiences and by volunteering as a welfare advocate with Inner City Law Center, a legal service organization in the heart of Skid Row.

It was while working at the legal center that the seed for LAPD was born. Malpede began to consider the homeless he counseled more than just clients; they became his friends. In October, 1985, Malpede decided to offer a free theatre workshop for Skid Row residents. He knew it sounded a little crazy, but he did it anyway.

"I thought this was such a weird idea," admitted Malpede, who held the first workshop at the law center on Skid Row. "I didn't know if anybody would actually show up, but tons of people did. I was surprised."

OK, maybe not tons—about 15 men and women. But it was enough to prompt Malpede to keep the workshops going, and he's remained committed to the cause ever since.

That first workshop was admittedly "chaotic," according to Malpede, who over the years has developed proven techniques to better oversee the workshops and to bring participants closer together.

"When 15 people came to our first workshop, it was mainly 15 people who each had a 300-page novel or a film script or 12 rap songs that no one had ever bothered to listen to," he recalled. "So no one wanted to listen to anybody else's rap song or novel, because they wanted to present their own. It was a very chaotic situation. Out of that and for other reasons—because there were a lot of people who were mentally disturbed—we developed this way of creating things together, in which everyone is the author and people aren't contesting that their work is the thing that is being focused on. The situation now is really different. The group is more coherent. The people

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involved are much more focused. And the work is really different."

The most successful productions LAPD has staged include *Inside*, the company's second production; *The Robert Show*, which won a Bessie award in New York for Outstanding Creative Achievement; *Jupiter 35*, presented as part of the 1990 Los Angeles Festival, which was based on group member Leroy "Sunshine" Mills' fall from a Skid Row window and his recovery at L.A. County General Hospital; *The Road Show* at Los Angeles Theatre Center; *Flying Through the Walls* at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), and *Call Home*, a project which was presented at the 1993 Los Angeles Festival, the result of a grant that allowed homeless people, many who had lost touch with their family members, to call home.

At Home and Abroad

While LAPD's programs have remained constant—providing free workshops and staging two to four annual productions—it has also seen its share of growth. LAPD doesn't just wait for participants to show up at its doorstep; the company reaches out to the community at large. For example, LAPD holds outreach theatre workshops with such organizations as the Salvation Army's drug rehabilitation program; SRO Housing hotels; St. Vincent's Center, a shelter/day center for the homeless; the Volunteers of America's drug rehabilitation program, and Sunset Hall, a center for the elderly.

LAPD has also stretched its wings to communities beyond Los Angeles. In its early years, the company was invited to travel to cities outside of Los Angeles as part of a program called "LAPD Inspects America (and Beyond)," in which LAPD members would travel to other cities, recruit local homeless participants, and create a production based on local conditions. LAPD traveled to 20 cities in California, the United States, and Europe. These residencies spawned similar theatre groups in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Minneapolis.

From that experience, Malpede decided that a more effective way to train people would be "to bring people to Los Angeles and have them work with us in our community, where we could really focus all our attention on them." That led in 1993 to LAPD offering "Change/Exchange," a three-week summer intensive residency program in which artists and activists are invited to Los Angeles to work with LAPD group members and learn about creating and sustaining community-based work. Change/Exchange residents Glenn Hilke and Wolfgang Vachon, for example, subsequently started a city-wide arts program for homeless people in Montreal. Another Change/Exchange participant began a youth theatre dealing with HIV in Indiana that later traveled around the country.

As for success stories within the LAPD workshops, Malpede acknowledged there are too many to mention. He did however say, "At this point, there are a number of people who originally were on the street or living in a shelter when they got involved with the group and who later went on to direct shows, lead workshops, and do other performance work on their own."

Malpede also pointed out that LAPD has also had its share of triumphs with helping people improve their lives in very concrete ways.

He mentioned, for example, "There was one woman who wouldn't apply for SSI, a government benefit for people with disabilities, because she thought it was stigmatizing. She really had a severe mental problem, and without this benefit, her existence was very precarious because she was on county welfare and there are a lot of requirements you have to fulfill in order to keep your welfare. She would mess up and lose her housing. Then she'd go into a total bag lady mode and you could really see her deteriorating. Then she'd get back her housing, lose it

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again, and it was just a repeating cycle.

"Finally, because other people in LAPD's group were getting this benefit and doing quite well, and through her meeting a lawyer [in connection with LAPD] who specialized in this subject, she eventually decided to get the benefit. After that she had a much more stable source of income and was able to stay inside and better cope with her life."

That firsthand knowledge that LAPD can help change people's lives in very positive ways has kept Malpede committed to continuing bringing theatre into this very poor segment of the community.

"For one thing, it often times is a lot of fun," said Malpede when asked why he's been with LAPD for so long. "Another thing I like about it is the tangibility of it—working with people and feeling that something good is happening that you know about in a very direct way."

Malpede also noted that his company has, in its own unique way, fought the stigma often associated with the homeless—



photo by John Williams

Otis Rogers and David Halenda in *Give Up All Your Possessions and Follow Me!*

that they are beyond relating to. Malpede believes that LAPD's productions have helped bridge the gap between Skid Row residents and others more fortunate.

"The kind of stuff we do isn't about reducing people to their story about why they hit the streets or something like that," he explained. "It's really just the opposite of that. It's about looking for the gut-to-gut commonality, so that people seeing our shows can connect with [these actors'] hopes and fears—so that it transcends the social reality."

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