

WORLDS OF HOMELESSNESS

MORE THAN THEATER – THE OTHER LAPD



Los Angeles Poverty Department LAPD performance of "I fly! or How to Keep the Devil Down in the Hole" at REDCAT | © Photo: Steven Gunther / REDCAT

People in Los Angeles think “police” when they hear the letters LAPD. But LAPD also stands for “Los Angeles Poverty Department”, a theater group comprising homeless and formerly homeless people. It was founded in 1985 by the director, actor and performance activist John Malpede. The Goethe-Institut in Los Angeles has now formed a partnership with LAPD for the “Worlds of Homelessness” initiative and attended the premiere of its latest play: *“I Fly! or How to Keep the Devil down in the Hole”*

By Kerstin Zilm

The show is due to start in less than half an hour. Comfortably seated to one side, Ray Lewis watches members of the audience in the lobby of REDCAT, a theater for innovative art established by CalArts at Walt Disney Hall. Ray is a drummer and alternative practitioner. He spent 19 years living on Skid Row, the neighborhood with the largest population of homeless people in Los Angeles. He was a drug addict and had been in jail several times. He has been clean for five years now. *“I want to show other people how they can feel better in themselves and develop in a positive direction,”* says Ray. An exercise he learned during rehab plays an important role in the latest LAPD play. Keith Johnson is having a quick cigarette before the show. He arrived on Skid Row from Chicago six months ago. *“God told me that I should preach his message here,”* he explains. His passion is dancing and singing. He has found a place for himself in a community at LAPD. *“No-one looks strangely at you, no matter who you are or where you come from. They welcomed me with open arms.”*

Stephanie Bell is on her way to the stage. The 57-year-old actress and singer uses a walking stick. She has survived a heart attack and several strokes. Skid Row is her home. "I have my friends here," she says. "We watch out for each other." Stephanie has been a member of the LAPD ensemble for 24 years. "Nowhere else can you see the true stories of our lives."



/ REDCAT

© Photo: Steven Gunther /

Los Angeles Poverty Department LAPD performance of "I fly! or How to Keep the Devil Down in the Hole" at REDCAT

This is precisely what LAPD founder John Malpede wants to achieve. He believes that the media and politicians tend to portray only one image of Skid Row: namely tents on the sidewalk. *“In fact, it is a complex and dynamic community full of knowledge and wisdom,”* he says. *“It can teach us a lot about tolerance and crisis management.”* Produced by Malpede and his wife Henriette Brouwers, the latest LAPD work is based on the fate which befell a former Skid Row resident: Charly “Africa” Keunang. In 2015, he was shot by a police officer in front of his tent. A shock for LAPD’s members, many of whom knew the man from Cameroon. His death prompted the question: *“What now?”* And the answer: beyond our grief and protests at police brutality, we must ourselves take steps to ensure that everyone in our community feels safe. They created the play “I fly ...” in workshops. In it, the actors give “Africa” a voice: they explain how events unfolded from his perspective – a viewpoint that was paid little attention elsewhere. On stage they show meetings and protests, confrontation and oppression, colonialization and enslavement, humor, grief and persistence.

“When they look back in 100 years, the only theater being done now which will matter will be the work John Malpede is doing with the LAPD.

- Peter Sellars, acclaimed theater director

The story is set against the backdrop of the real-life “Festival for All Skid Row Artists” that takes place in the local park. This year it is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Each festival is held without the presence of police or other security personnel. The individual acts are accentuated by the drumbeats of the Skid Row Playaz and music by funk-soul band “LA Playmakers”. Ray Lewis gets up from his seat at the drums and goes over to the microphone. It is time for him to pass on his knowledge. Ray gets the audience to stand up and look into each other’s eyes. *“I love me! I love you!”* they proclaim to one another. *“I am enough! You are enough! We are enough!”* The exercise ends with spontaneous hugs and Ray returns to his drums, his eyes shining.

This blend of art, activism and unusual perspectives is what prompted the Goethe-Institut Los Angeles to team up with LAPD. *“What is more, they have a very good reputation on Skid Row because they have been active right at the heart of the community for decades,”* says Institute Director Lien Heidenreich. She sees LAPD as an important element of the two-year “Worlds of Homelessness” initiative, which is designed to provide a platform for artists, architects and intellectuals from around the world. *“Thanks to our global network, we are able to shed light on the issue of homelessness and housing shortages from entirely new perspectives and through innovative collaborations.”*

At the end of “I fly ...” audience members, actors, musicians and directors dance together on stage. Among them is Lorraine Morland. From her front-row seat she listened carefully, joined in the singing, laughed and cried. *“Art is food for the soul”*, she says.

Lorraine slept in a doorway for four years. She has been off drugs for 24 years. To this day, she comes to Skid Row to sing in the choir and to support those who want to make life better for the community there and for themselves. What will she be taking home with her from this evening? *“Public safety is not about having more and more police. It is what happens when we look out for each other.”*

AUTHOR



Kerstin Zilm is an Independent Producer from Germany. She started working as a reporter in Berlin, East and West Germany shortly after the wall came down. In 2003 she came to Los Angeles as head of the West coast radio studio for Germany's public broadcasting network ARD. In 2008 Kerstin established her own studio in Los Angeles.

Translation: Chris Cave

Copyright: Goethe-Institut USA; This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 3.0 Germany license.



 Questions about this article? Write us!

 share 41  tweet

» Data privacy

 Print article

RELATED LINKS

» [LAPD \(Los Angeles Poverty Dept.\)](#)

« [Back to the WORLDS OF HOMELESSNESS Main Page](#)

TOP 