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John Malpede at Creative Time performing *Olympic Update*. © and courtesythe LA Poverty Department

OLYMPIC UPDATE: Homelessness In Los Angeles

This script, written and performed for the first time in 1984, narrates the Olympic games of that year as experienced by the homeless people of downtown Los Angeles. It is about the impact of the games on the street people of "the homeless capital of America": Los Angeles, the city with the largest homeless population in the U.S. (35.000-50,000). In the performance Malpede plays two homeless men. MoTo and his friend, who have been asked by the Olympic organizers and the city of Los Angeles, to travel America and report on the Olympics ("They gave us one way bus tickets."). It also includes taped transcripts of testimony by homeless people before the L.A. County Board of Supervisors. All of the stories in the piece are true, or might as well be.

MoTo appears over the hill looking stately, dignified, wearing a sportscoat, slacks, and tie. From a distance his clothing looks clean, but, up close, it's filthy. He's carrying a megaphone and a large ghetto-blaster wrapped in foil and a clear plastic garbage bag. He goes up the ramp to the giant megaphone. He puts down the megaphone and the blaster on the platform and begins to talk through the giant megaphone. His style is oratorical, as if addressing a political convention. He begins by reading from Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," which he alters as he reads.

Alight and foot-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path beating me wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am no good.
Henceforth I whimper no more, no mas, no more, need nothing.
Done with indoor, outdoor, side door, and rear door complaints, complaints, complaints,
Strong and content I grovel the open road.

All seem beautiful to me.

I can repeat over and over to men and to women, you have done such good to me that I would do the same for you.

I will cut myself for you as I go,

I will scatter myself among men and women as I go. I will toss a new gas and roughness among them. Whoever denies me, it shall not butcher me. Whoever accepts me, he or she shall be blistered and shall blister me.

MoTo unwraps the ghetto-blaster, picks it up and turns it on. It plays the "Olympic Fanfare," (made famous by ABC) and then "The Star Spangled Banner." While the national anthem is playing, he wraps up the blaster and descends the ramp with it and the small (i.e., normal-sized) megaphone. At the foot of the ramp the performer becomes MoTo's friend who hurriedly moves toward the audience. His hurried manner suggests a concern with the pacing of the entire presentation. At the end of "The Star Spangled Banner" he turns off the tape and begins to talk to the audience in a low-key, conversational, though presentational, manner.

Friend:

MoTo and I, we just came from Los Angeles. And, on behalf of AND THE HOMELESS CAPITAL OF AMERICA the City of Los Angeles, home of the '84 Olympics, MoTo and I have been asked by the L.A.C.O.O., (The Los Angeles Committee for the Organizing of Olympics), to travel this land during the Olympics and tell the people of our land with this Olympic Update Report. And they asked us to do this. And they paid for us to do this. They gave us bus tickets to travel to America and come here. They gave us one way bus tickets. They paid for them. And this is called Greyhound therapy.

We were in Los Angeles for the Olympics. What the Olympics were like, the Olympics were like the movie *Blue Thunder*. *Blue Thunder* was in Los Angeles. And, just like in the movie, there were super helicopters, like Blue Thunder, from the L.A.P.D. Skywatch, watching down from the sky. There were Olympic helicopters everywhere. All over the city. The skinny ones, not the puffy helicopters that are round like balls, but the long ones like *Blue Thunder*, that look like giant grasshoppers and can see through walls. They can point right at you, and they know how cold or hot you are. And they can find you and shoot you down just because you're warm, thinking the wrong thoughts. (And you thought there weren't any more of them because in *Blue Thunder* Roy Scheider shot them down with an old-fashioned bubble helicopter, and got the tape to the T.V. station that showed how they were going to look through walls and go into your mind and read it even when you were sleeping).

But now there are Olympic Helicopters, and they fly over the city and sit on the sides of skyscrapers – like the 17-year locusts, when the 17-year locusts came and covered all the trees in Ohio. And, now, the Olympic helicopters, they sit on the sides of the buildings reading thoughts and looking for terrorists. And the L.A.P.D., they come down into the Skid Row Park at 6th and Gladys, across the street from the Hospitality Kitchen and the Regal Hotel, and they make everyone lie down on the ground with their hands behind their heads. And they talk through their walkie-talkies to the Olympic Helicopters. And the Olympic Helicopters read the minds of the people lying on the ground, and they signal the L.A.P.D. and the L.A.P.D. take them away, away. They take them away and they put them in jail so that we can have the Olympics.
If you're a terrorist you can pretend you're not by thinking cool thoughts all day long. But when you fall asleep, the terrorist thoughts will come back into your mind and the Olympic Helicopters (no matter where you are) will feel the heat and find you. And now that all the terrorists have been plucked up and carried off to jail by the Olympic Helicopters you can get a bed at the Weingard Shelter or the ~~Union~~ MIDNIGHT Mission. And before the Olympics you hardly ever could and you'd have to sleep outside in a box. Box, box, box all around the ~~Union~~ Midnight Mission on ~~Main Street~~ Los Angeles Str. Box, box, box around the corner on 4th Street. Box, box, box back into the alley in your box. And that's OK. It's good, because if you're sleeping there with everyone in boxes, you're not going to get in any trouble. Like the old lady who slept all alone in the goofy car she decorated with balls in the vacant lot over on 6th Street. She got cut up.

All over the USA everyone wants to talk to MoTo. In Los Angeles they want to talk to MoTo. Here in New York they want to talk to MoTo. All over, at City Hall, the bankers at the World Financial Center, they all want to talk to MoTo. They ask him to talk to microphones, in huge rooms with marble on the walls. We go downtown.

People talk. We wait for MoTo's turn to talk.

Friend finishes talking and punches in a tape excerpt of L.A. County Supervisor Ed Edelman's July '84 Hearings on the Homeless.

Chuck Tan:

Good morning, sir. Chuck Tan is my name. I came to L.A. September 22nd of '83. I became ill after arriving by bus. What money I had I used for food, rooms, and whatever I had for clothing. I went to the D.P.S.S. to ask them for help and was turned down for not having identification. They would not help me. They sent me to the missions. I told them I was ill. At the time I was on crutches. When you're in them missions you have to go up two to three flights of steps. They gave me eight dollar checks for rooms. But, after I cashed the checks I dión't have enough for the rooms. Therefore I was back out on the street. I come close to losin' my foot for that simple reason. The give you eight dollar checks for a room. It costs you anywhere farce a dollar-and-a-quarter to two dollars to cash it. Where are you going to get a room for five dollars?

Supervisor Edelman:

You mean the hotel doesn't take the check itself? You have to cash the check? I don't understand.

MoTo's friend turns off the tape and resumes talking.

Friend:

Sometimes MoTo doesn't talk for days. I talked to him three times before he even said his name. Now when he gets like that sometimes I play a trick on him. Then he gets mad and talks. Like when we go on missions. MoTo'd never never gone to the missions before I'd been with him. He'd always sleep out, in dumpsters, under bridges, or the roof of the toilets in Skid Row Park. He liked to sleep on the roof because he didn't think he'd get in any trouble there. And he'd always hide his things so that if he got beat up while he was sleeping they wouldn't get his things. And now, before we go to the mission, he hides all his things outside before we go. MoTo says to me, "Don't ever give them knives, spoons or anything, because what they give back to you it's not the same. Because it may look the same and feel the same and be just as heavy, and in all ways like it. But, it's not the same. It's not the same thing you gave them. And you got to remember that, and you got to hang on to that. And, no matter what happens, you got to remember that. And don't get fooled by what you see and feel and hear or you'll end up being their fool. And your things will end up gone.

So now, when MoTo, he's not talking for days, I'll want to trick him and I'll do something like I'll go right up in front of him in the line, and I give them my fork, and I give them my knife with the broken plastic handle, and I give them whatever I have, and they write it down, and they put it in a box, a metal box, and they give me a number and a piece of paper that they put it down on. And, when MoTo sees this, he shakes his head and he gets so angry. And he pushes me in the ribs and he talks. "What's the matter with you? Why don't you listen to MoTo when I tell you something for your own good? You let them make a fool of you and now your things are gone!" I get MoTo angry and he talks! And he doesn't know that that's why I do it.

Friend hurries back to the platform (he is aware of and concerned about the timing of the presentation). He ascends platform (as Moto) and begins to talk.

MoTo (speaking thru giant Megaphone):

The banks. The Banks.

What about the banks?

What about the banks?

What about the banks? And what about the investments?

The investments. Oh yes, the investments.

They put them on. They don them. They wear them.

Where them? Where?

In the mirror. In the mirror.

And they look so warm standing there, wearing their investments. They don't have to stuff paper under their clothing. Oh no. Why? Why? Where? Because they're wearing their investments. They're already made of paper. Commercial paper, federal paper, state paper, municipal paper.

How to keep warm? I'm telling you: That's how to keep warm!

I quote and I quote: "With what fortitude we bear the misfortunes of others." I quote and I quote: "With what fortitude we bear the misfortunes of others." I bear the fortitude of others. I bear with fortitude for others.

Out from the dark confinement! Out from behind the screen! It is useless to protest. I know all and expose it. Behold through you, as bad as the rest. Through the laughter, dancing, dining, supping of people. Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those washed and trimmed faces:

Behold a secret silent loathing and despair.

No husband, no wife, no friend trusted to hear the confession. Another self, a duplicate of everyone, skulking and hiding it goes. Formless and wordless through the streets of the cities, Home to the houses of men and women, at the table, in the bedroom, everywhere. Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright. Death under the breast bones. Hell under the skull bones.

Death under the breast bones, hell under the skull bones. Hell under the death bones. Skull in the soup.

MoTo finishes, pauses, comes down a ramp. At the base of the ramp, performer again becomes MoTo's friend hurriedly (again, with a self-conscious regard for the pacing of the presentation) comes toward the audience to talk with them.

Friend:

MoTo used to be a banker. He's banked all over the world. MoTo killed his wife. He was banking in Buenos Aires. He came home to Michigan and his wife was not there. He knew where she was. She was with another man. He drove to the man's house. He found her there with her shoes off. The man said, "You have a lot of problems in your marriage." "You're number 1, you asshole!" MoTo screams. He wanted to burn the man's house down. His wife dragged him out of there. She was afraid he was going to hit the man. Outside, MoTo called her a whore. He hit her in the nose and then he pushed her in the car, screaming and driving crazy, scaring her to death. "You cunt! You whore!" he screamed. He threatened her with his driving. He threatened her with his words. He almost rammed a bridge on the freeway. Then as they raced up a hill a huge tire loose off a semi-trailer truck came rolling down the hill on the other side of the road. It hooked and jumped the guard-rail. MoTo swerved to get away from it. It hit the car on the left front fender. The car lifted-up and it jack-knifed. It floated back across the guard-rail to the other side of the highway and came to rest on its side. His wife's side. In the hospital the doctor told him that his wife was dead. His family came to the hospital and they told him that it was his fault. His wife's family came and they told him that it was his fault. It was his fault because he worked all the time. It was his fault because he never took a vacation. And it was his fault because when he was home all he ever did was scream, scream, scream.

When MoTo got out of the hospital, he never went home. And he never went back to the bank. He never went back to the bank.

MoTo told me that it was his fault.

Ascends platform as MoTo, who again addresses audience through a giant megaphone.

MoTo:

Peter Uberroth, President of the L.A.C.O.C., Peter Uberroth said to me, "This is going to be the greatest Olympic games of all time. But to have the greatest Olympic games we must sanitize the city. We must put up pastel banners all over the city. We must make the city smile. But to do this we need you, MoTo. We cannot do this without you, MoTo."

And I said to Peter Uberroth, I said, "Peter, your shit stinks like everyone else. Your shit stinks like everyone else. Your shit, it stinks like everyone else!" And he said to me, "MoTo, yes, it's true: my shit stinks like all the rest. It stinks like all the rest, only worse, MoTo. Only worse. Only you know that, MoTo. Only you know how it stinks only worse. You don't have to smell it, but you do, MoTo. You don't have to carry it around and smell it, but you do. You don't have to carry it around and smell it, but you do. You doo-doo. Doo. You doo-doo you." And Peter Youandboth, he put his arm around me, and he drew me close to his side, and he handed me a bag of the nastiest and blackest shit I'd ever seen. Black and knotted shit. Knotty, twisted shit in a baggy, shit swimming in its own drips. Its own hardness and its own drips. All knotted in a baggy. And Peter Tubbermouth, he said to me, "MoTo, I'm counting on you. All of America is counting on you. You must take this blackest of shits and you must carry it throughout this great land of ours. You must carry it across this country from California to New York, as the Olympic torch is being passed from hand to hand and carried from New York to California. You must take it in your hand and you must hold it high. You must take this shit in hand and hold it high. This Olympian task, this Herculean task, I entrust to you and you alone, MoTo. To you and you alone. And I took the bag from him and said, "Peter, you are full of shit." I took it and I said, "Peter, you are full of shit." I took it and I said, "Peter, you are full of shit." And he cried.

MoTo descends the platform. Performer becomes MoTo's friend.

All over America everybody wants to talk to MoTo. We go downtown. The seats are soft and green carpeted. Everything is cool like the walls. People talk. We wait for MoTo's turn to talk.

Friend punches in tape excerpt of County Supervisor Edelman's Hearings on the Homeless.

Ella Graham:

My name is Ella Graham.

Edelman:

G-r-a-h-m?

Ella Graham:

G-r-a-h-a-m. I have a place to stay, but I'm still homeless. I've been on Skid Row in Los Angeles for a year and a half. I been assaulted twice. Both times the attacker had knives. I had my room broken into, my food stamps stolen. I called the police and they said if I didn't see the person who'd broken in there was nothing they could do except take the report. I have to carry a pair of scissors everywhere I go for protection. And the police tell me not to leave my room after dark because it's so dangerous where I live. I pay $220 a month for rent for a room ten by ten. And I have to share the toilet and the shower with seventy-nine other rooms, even with prostitutes, pays and anything else. The toilet rooms are always filthy and the shower is so nasty I feel dirtier after I get out of the shower than when I got in, because they've got faeces on the walls and all like that. And when I complain to the manager she says if I don't like it to get out. So I have a place to stay, but I'm still homeless.

Edelman:
Tell us where this building is that you live.

Graham:
I live at 816 East 6th Street in room 107. I lived in room 107 since last March.

Edelman:
O.K. Thank you. Let me ask—

Graham:
It's the Regal Hotel.

Edelman:
The Regal?

Graham:
Regal.

Edelman:
It doesn't sound too regal.

Graham:

It isn't. (She giggles). It's anything but regal.

Friend stops tape.

Friend:

People talk. He wait for MoTo's turn to talk. We wait so long for MoTo to talk. Sometimes MoTo has to wait so long. So long.

Friend punches Hearings tape back in.

Lillian Waddy:

Lilian Waddy. W-a-d-d-y. Good morning, Mr. Supervisor. I'm thirty-nine years old. I've lived in Los Angeles all my life. My family background was, you know, pretty basic. My father was a police officer for some thirty-five years, my brother for twenty. He just retired. And, um, one of the first jobs I got was school bus driver with handicapped children. And from there I wound up helping put the first senior ride bus on the streets, to provide our seniors and handicaps with transportation. Then, um, I experienced the, um, a tragedy in my life where I lost my sister, recently. We were very close. But, it seemed to, um, knock me off the Yellow-Brick Road for a minute, and I wound up on the streets with nowhere to go. You get tired of asking friends, you know, to sleep here and there. You get tired of going down to D.P.S.S., trying to get assistance there. And, like the gentleman said, they tell you to come back, come back. You get very depressed. Eventually, I got to the point where I wound up with a crowd of people on the streets and I wound up into drugs. You know, just finding a way to escape. Almost into alcoholism. I, uh, finally went back to D.P.S. and was given a voucher to Keingard Center for three days. When that was up I went back to D.P.S.S., was given another voucher for a hotel which – the one the young lady described – mine was even worse. Caulking down the halls in

the hotel, women are being thrown into their rooms. They're being raped. Their food stamps – what little they get – were being taken.

Edelman:

Let me just stop you for a second. You know, it sounds as though what we need is not more of these hotels.

Waddy:

What we need is more transition houses.

Edelman:

We need more places that can be supervised with appropriate concern for people and their problems. And just hearing your testimony now, it seems to me this argues more strongly for taking care of the homeless in a more, well, more sheltered environment, and with more social services than are available in these hotels. These hotels are nothing but, well, I don't want to use the word, but they're just ratholes in many ways, from what you've said and other people have said.

Friend punches out tape.

Friend:

They make MoTo wait so long. It's not fair. They make him wait so long, he gets upset. MoTo gets upset. Sometimes then I read him his favorite letter from this year and it smooths him. It smooths him.

Friend takes rumpled paper from his pocket and reads it. He reads it to MoTo on platform, (as if MoTo were standing poised to speak).

Friend (reading letter):

Dear George,

Forgive me for not calling you MoTo, but when you and my mother were married and we were all living in Pontiac, we kids always called you “George”. In truth I feel like calling you “Dad”, because that best expresses what you mean to me.

You have no idea what it means to me to have found you again after all those years when we didn't know whether you were alive or dead. So many times during those years I wanted to tell you how unfair I thought the family had been to you about my mother's death. But, I never thought I would get the chance to do so.

I can truly say that being with you was the most meaningful experience of my life. I will cherish it always. I wish I could have convinced you to come back to live with me and my family. Please know, George, the door is always open.

I've enclosed a small check which I hope you'll accept. And, Dad, please be careful of it.

I love you, Dad,
(Signed) Larry

Friend ascends platform, and becomes MoTo. MoTo talks.

MoTo:

Mr. Chairman, my name is MoTo. The cars go by. I see them. They stop at the corner. They roll up their windows. They lock their doors. I see them. Their mouths say, "They're homeless because they want to be homeless." I see them. I don't hear them.

I see them say that people are homeless because they want to be homeless. That people are homeless because they choose to be homeless.

Mr. Chairman, people are not homeless because they choose to be homeless. They are homeless for many reasons of mind and money, but they are not homeless because they choose to be homeless.

If no one chooses to be homeless, then anyone could be homeless.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Descends platform and again becomes Friend.

Friend:

And now MoTo and I, MoTo must get his rest.

End

For Dolores Carlos and Rolf Mayer. Thanks to Creative Time, Inc. New York, New York for the commission which allowed me to do this work. Thanks to the Blue Mountain Center, Blue Mountain, New York for additional support. (1984)

John Malpede directs, performs and engineers multi-event arts projects that have theatrical, installation, public art, and education components. In 1985 Malpede founded, and he continues to direct, the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), the first performance group in the nation comprised primarily of homeless and formerly homeless people. LAPD creates performances that connect lived experience to the social forces that shape the lives and communities of people living in poverty. Malpede has produced projects working with communities throughout the US and in the UK, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Bolivia.