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About Performing Communities

Los Angeles Poverty Department

Interview with Robert Chambers, company member

By Ferdinand Lewis

[Interviewer's note: Chambers, who performed in "Agents and Assets," is not only an actor but is also a writer and founder of the Homeless Writers Coalition. The Coalition publishes a newspaper that is also a grassroots strategy for empowering the homeless: Not only is Skid Row's voice developed and represented in the paper, but the paper is sold cheaply to Skid Row residents who are then encouraged to sell the papers on the street at a small profit, providing dignity and empowerment for them, through this alternative to panhandling. -F.L.]

Ferdinand Lewis: You've been a member of the company for how long, Robert?

Robert Chambers: Well, this is the first time I've really done anything with them. I did sit in on a rehearsal years ago, but this is the first time I've really performed.

FL: Have you performed before?

RC: Yeah, we do poetry readings. I've done acting. It's been a long time. I acted in a play about six years ago and then before that I hadn't done anything since I was in my early 20s.

FL: You've been aware of the LAPD and what they do?

RC: Oh yeah. We've been, we've always had a pretty close relationship.

FL: Has your organization crossed over with LAPD in any other way?

RC: This is our first time coming together. You see the coalition has gone through a lot of transitions in the years. We're performers and formerly homeless and were originally homeless and so we've had our transitions, ups and downs. We had a hard time getting funded by grants because we are homeless and a lot of foundations don't want to empower the homeless directly.

FL: What impact has LAPD had on that?

RC: Well, I think it's really positive. I think anything culturally is a positive impact, as a lot of the people testify. If you're an actor or

something of that nature, you need to sustain your art. That's very important. That's why as I say anything culturally in downtown Los Angeles is important. What you really see are cultures from everywhere and it does seem to be of its own culture, but it's a very negative culture. You have to go into the history of Skid Row, a noninterpreted culture. Culture involves the environment which people are in, but I'm saying the Skid Row culture in itself could be a negative culture because Skid Row originally started with a term used for down-and-out alcoholics. Today it's been infiltrated moreso by the poor; there's families here now and, of course, people affected by the crack epidemic come here.

FL: Is there community?

RC: Yeah, it becomes a community. It's not a very close-knit community. Organizations like the Homeless Writers and LAPD form their own kind of communities. They bring together people with shared interests, so that becomes a community.

FL: You've seen a number of their shows. LAPD's other shows?

RC: Yes, I have.

FL: Would you call this one successful?

RC: Yes, I would. I think this is kind of a different reach from most of the things. Of course, the play before this was different, too. I saw that, too. But, LAPD originally started out as a kind of improvisational group and basically a performance-art type of thing. But this is more of a kind of – well, it's not a dramatic presentation, because we're actually using transcripts, but it's a dramatic presentation of actual happenings, so this is something even more unique. I think the highest purpose of art is communication and I think this is a very neglected area of our national history. I think it was another instance of pretty much a cover up of real political issues that even the powers that be, the media that be, was afraid to touch.

We did a couple of performances in some of the Skid Row hotels and a lot of people thought it was an actual event happening. You know, they thought it was some kind of a panel or something going on and they would shout out from the crowd. People down here aren't ignorant, they realize that there are things going on that are touching our lives and sometimes they don't know

exactly what they are, sometimes they think it's just paranoia. But these are real things. These are real events that are happening and are taking great effect from our lives.

FL: What would they shout out?

RC: Well, things like, "Yeah, you ought to do something about them bringing in those drugs" and this and that and the other. It's just like it was real for them and you might possibly have the possibility of doing something about it. Of course, some people reacted that way, but some people did realize what they were doing. I think they were appreciative of it because it shows them that that life isn't so hopeless, that there are people out there that do understand and have some light, what has caused and created their conditions.

Ferdinand Lewis is a founding member of The Ghost Road Company, an educator, writer and theater artist. He is currently at work on two books: "Ensemble Theater: An Anthology" and "Ensemble Theater: Traditions, Approaches, Strategies." He lives in Los Angeles.

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