



Photographs by STEVE APPLEFORD For The Times

**CARRIE GAZZARUSO**, right, who plays a prostitute, rehearses with co-director Meri Pakarinen.

# Take 2 on life

'Hustlin' is performed mostly by residents of a skid row rehab facility and tells stories rooted in their experiences

BY STEVE APPLEFORD

The woman onstage is in mourning, rising unsteadily from the floor in fishnets and a dangerously short skirt, in disbelief that another friend has died on the streets. "She was so young," cries Carrie Gazzaruso, a curtain of blond hair over her face. She quickly pulls off a thong and wraps it tightly around her arm, collapsing back to her knees to prepare a needle loaded with heroin.

Her moment of calm after plunging the hypodermic into her arm is interrupted by panic as she gasps, "Oh, my God, too high, too high." She struggles to stand before falling again, lying motionless. A pair of actors help Gazzaruso to her feet, and she recites a poem about the life of a prostitute:

"It's 4 in the morning, I'm still on the floor / I can't find the courage to walk out the door / Too tired to run with nowhere to hide / I can no longer afford the price of this ride."

The scene unfolding during a rehearsal for "Hustlin" is more truth than fiction. The play, set to open Sunday at the McCadden Theatre in Hollywood, is performed almost entirely by residents of a skid row rehab facility downtown, telling stories rooted in their own experiences with drugs, homelessness, prostitution, crime and incarceration.

Taking notes during a recent rehearsal is Meri Pakarinen, co-director of the play with her husband, Michael Bierman. They lead the non-profit Strindberg Laboratory, bringing street-level theater to the homeless and others in recovery or prison.

"Theater is great because you learn to communicate, you get self-confidence and most of all you learn about yourself," says Pakarinen, who participated in a similar program in her native Finland for six years. "It's really empowering when they see that people are responding and the play is working. Then they can touch other people."

In recent weeks, two cast members abruptly dropped out of rehearsals while others already in the play stepped in to take additional roles. One of them is Marshall May, a naturally vivid performer who has several parts in "Hustlin," including an enraged pimp demanding money from Gazzaruso's drug-addicted prostitute. In another scene, May wears a wig over his shaved head as a mother figure who storms onto the stage demanding drugs, knocking



**MARSHALL MAY** portrays a preacher's wife and other parts.

## 'Hustlin'

**Where:** McCadden Theatre, 1157 N. McCadden Place, Los Angeles

**When:** 4 p.m. Sunday

**Tickets:** \$12 donation requested

**Information:** (213) 265-6313, [www.strindberglaboratory.com](http://www.strindberglaboratory.com)

her family's dinner to the floor, shouting crazily.

"I've been in situations that are like that," says May, 46. "I've been like that at my own house. I tell everybody, 'Don't ... with me, I'm smoking cocaine and it's too expensive to lie about it.' I got to the point where I'm not hiding it anymore."

May grew up in Baldwin Hills and once had dreams of becoming a movie actor. He enjoyed some early progress, securing an agent and appearing in a national TV commercial, but he was derailed by cocaine. May ended up on the streets hustling for drug money and spent a total of 12 years in prison for various offenses.

For him, the chance to perform is a step toward recovery. "The door of active addiction is closed, and new doors are opening up," says May, noting his four months sober within the program. "I have to be present and I have to be clean in order to get through those doors. And if I'm not, then I stay stuck."

Another cast member is Ulysses Hardy, 49, onstage for much of the play as a lone figure playing solitaire in the corner, echoing his years in prison. "Right now I'm doing it for me, maybe learn how to do something, express myself a little bit more without using my negativity," says Hardy, his hair braided, a small plas-

tic cross over his chest. "I've lived on the street for a long time."

It was at a skid row facility that Bierman recruited the cast for "Hustlin." Gazzaruso, 46, was intrigued with the theater project, encouraged to create scenes based on "something disturbing or really close to your heart that hurts to deal with," she recalls. "I was homeless and I was a drug addict out there. The OD scene where my friend died, all that happened. I've had it really rough. I've been rough on myself."

For Pakarinen and Bierman, the rewards are not financial. Their non-profit is essentially a volunteer effort, dependent on the cooperation of jails and rehab facilities and the donation of rehearsal and performance space from the Sidewalk Studio Theatre in Burbank. "We don't get funding, so why are we doing this? Because we learn a hell of a lot," Bierman says. "They teach us. My life changed by working in the jails. I didn't know a lot of the things I know now."

If he wasn't at rehearsal, Garvin Matthews, 54, would likely be upstairs in therapy. "It gives me some type of relief mentally. It's definitely an outlet," says Matthews, a professional musician wounded from years of drug use and incarceration back home in Pennsylvania and in Santa Barbara County Jail. "I play a cop, I play a drug dealer and I play a preacher. That's a trip, huh?"

The debut of "Hustlin" unfolds for two performances. Hung around the small theater are paintings that May created in prison, showing a fascination with Picasso and Cubism, and others that depict life "from behind the walls." Nearly every seat is full until the closing scene: the entire cast lined up as May recites an emotional farewell to addiction, set to the music of A Great Big World's pop hit "Say Something."

After the crowd exits, cast members gather to raise a toast of apple cider in celebration of their performances. Actor Levandis "L.L." Landy hopes to discuss "keeping this core group together" for other stage productions. The McCadden Theatre performance will likely be followed by others elsewhere, says Bierman.

"It was wild. It was awesome," says May. "I love that I had an opportunity to do this. In the past I never would. I'd be acting out in real life some of the stuff that you saw in the play. Today I don't have to do that. It's goodbye to drugs, and moving forward in my life."

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