

In a city where filmed entertainment is king, the Matrix Theatre Company in Los Angeles has developed a unique concept to attract top performers: double casting. Two actors are chosen for each role, appearing in alternate performances. By sharing the commitment to Matrix, an actor can feel free to accept a lucrative television or film job, then return to the company's intimate stage on Melrose Avenue. The audience benefits, too, because double casting enlivens each performance and keeps the company fresh.

Veteran producer Joseph Stern is the force behind Matrix, which he began more than 20 years ago as "Actors for Themselves" on the principle that actors create their own destiny. The company — starting point for such dramas as Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* — has garnered 31 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards including Outstanding Production for *The Tavern* (1993), *The Seagull* (1994), and *The Homecoming* (1995), plus Best Ensemble Performance for *Mad Forest* (1996). Now Stern is premiering two new American plays in rep, both with dou-



**Penny Fuller, Robert Foxworth, Cotter Smith, and Barbara Babcock in the Matrix Theatre production of *The Seagull*.**

mid-sized theaters in the city. (The Las Palmas and the Coronet, now prominent venues, were both porno houses.) Joe started Actors for Themselves and produced *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, which ran for 14 months and

zens; they were not being empowered. It's sadly ironic, because anybody can call himself an actor. It's an honorable profession, but the culture doesn't support it, and actors don't get respect.

**Can you tell me how you evolved from actor to producer?**

I have a natural aptitude for it. As a kid, I produced the Memorial Day programs at the high school. I'm very organized, and I have a knack for bringing people together. I'm also a story-teller — that's inherent in the job.

**Why have you continued to work in the theater?**

Couldn't do otherwise. I don't have any hobbies.

**Can you talk about the perception that L.A. theater is not as good as N.Y. theater?**

It's a myth. Actors emigrate back and forth. But the union [Actors' Equity] said if there's no theater commerce, there's no professionalism — therefore, you're amateurs. We didn't have the commerce, but we had the skill. This is subtle; it's the key to L.A. theater. Actors came out here because making a living in New York was difficult. Then they'd say, "I didn't leave New York to do theater." But artists create their own environment, so they began to do plays — to legitimize it. Now, it was not to be dismissed.

**How has Equity fostered the**

# More Than One Way to Tell the Truth

## L.A.'s Matrix Theatre Revels in Double Casting.

By Joseph Eastburn

ble casts: *The Water Children* by Wendy MacLeod and *Yield of the Long Bond* by Larry Atlas. It's an amazing undertaking for a man who doesn't take a salary from his theater, but rather makes his living as a producer of one-hour drama pilots for television.

Stern was once an actor himself in New York, replacing Judd Hirsch in Lanford Wilson's *The Hot L Baltimore*. He returned to his native Los Angeles in 1974; at that time, there weren't any

caused a renaissance in L.A. theater. Eventually, he bought the Matrix Theater, inheriting the name.

I spoke with Stern at his home; though he sat back in an easy chair, his speech was rapid-fire.

**What caused you to become such an actors' advocate?**

That's an interesting question. When I became a professional actor in the '60s, actors were second-class citi-