

**perception that New York theater is superior?**

It's elitism. They want to use our venues and not give us credit. "How can actors work for carfare?" the union said. "Money equals skill." They abdicated their responsibility to their members. Ninety percent of actors here were doing waiver theater; Equity finally sent out a referendum to overturn that, and they thought L.A. theater would self-destruct.

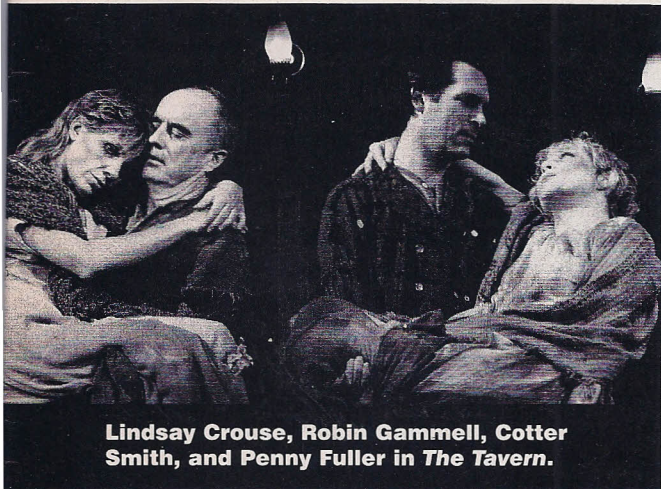
**What happened?**

We had to get a lawsuit to stop them. Fifty to 100 plays originally produced in L.A. have moved to New York, but if you make reference to L.A., you get savaged by the critics. So producers stopped crediting our theaters. If we were a regional theater, we would get more respect.

**Director Tony Giordano spoke about how double casting actually led to more cooperation. Can you explain this phenomenon?**

When we did *The Tavern*, I cast two very different actors in the same role: Cotter Smith and Robin Gammell, who's close to 60. You eliminate the competition thing. Actors feel safe, they help each other, they have a common vocabulary. It's a by-product of a sharing atmosphere. It creates an ensemble...a team dynamic.

Actress Sharon Lawrence said



**Lindsay Crouse, Robin Gammell, Cotter Smith, and Penny Fuller in *The Tavern*.**

the interaction of the different energies in double casting makes for a kind of alchemy. Could you tell me about instances when you've witnessed this at the Matrix?

I've walked into the theater and seen an actor on stage, another actor

watching in the house, and the director starting to work. You get a three-cornered conversation. They come to each other's opening nights, completely enjoying each other's performances. It's amazing. They're encouraged to steal from each other; nobody owns it. You put yourself in the fire of competition, but you flourish.

**You've said theater is about danger — that you can't be dangerous enough. Why does danger interest you?**

You're exposing yourself through risk-taking. It's the antithesis of David Mamet. He put out a book on acting, which should really be a book on non-acting. I think it's a cover for control. He doesn't want to infuse acting with behavior, but acting is about revealing yourself. It takes courage to be an actor. The word isn't independent of the actor; the actor is revealed in the text.

**You've suggested that L.A. is the place where there could be a National Rep Company. Have you ever had the desire to start such a theater?**

That's the hope. I'd like to see the Matrix join forces with other companies and move to a bigger venue. We're not prepared to raise millions of dollars; you always have the fiscal monkey on your back. A subscription audience requires a large staff. You have to pay to fill seats. But the double-cast system makes compromise an art form: it creates a true rep, and it gives more actors work.

You can see great actors in small roles in one play, a lead in another play. You won't see that on Broadway.

You said you want actors interfacing with students. Do you think you'd lose any of your edge if you took the theater off Melrose?

I don't think so. The work transcends that. You need the stimulation of a campus, the support of a larger institution. I'd give it all up for UCLA or USC.

**What is the producer's art?**

I make you accountable to your vision. When you waver, I remind you what it was you set out to do.



**Robert Foxworth, Shirley Knight, Jennifer Bassey, and Charles Hallahan in *Habeas Corpus*.**

**Cotter Smith, a founding member of Matrix, said double casting has become the ethic of the company, creating an amazingly collaborative, generous group of actors.**

The excitement is that it actually works. You're *involved* in an art form; it's healthy. You have this Rubik's cube of actors playing off someone different every night, so you can't "set" all your reactions. Our culture doesn't support the arts, but [Matrix] audiences come more than once, and actors never lost a job to work here. It's a way to help each other. There's more than one way to tell the truth.

*The Matrix Theatre Company is located at 7657 Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. Show times are Tuesday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 7 p.m.. For information, call 213-852-1445.*

**JOSEPH EASTBURN's play *Heart's Desire* was workshopped at the Williamstown Theater Festival with George Grizzard, Patricia Elliott, and Donna Murphy. His play *The Godhead* is featured in the current one-act play festival at USC, where he teaches.**