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At Palisadian Joseph Stern's Matrix Theatre, Race Takes Center Stage for Black History Month

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Reporter

Palisadian Joseph Stern has spent 35 years at the Matrix Theatre producing plays that challenge audiences' perceptions and prejudices, and the theater's latest production in celebration of Black History Month seeks to build on this momentum.

"The Mountaintop," premiering Feb. 6, reimagines the last day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life with a lighthearted tone to humanize the historical figure.

Stern is the founder and producing artistic director of the Matrix Theatre Company, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary, as well as a six-time Emmy and two-time Golden Globe-nominated television producer.

In his role as executive producer for hit series such as "Law & Order" and "Judging Amy," Stern resolved to cast actors who reflected the diversity of American society. He took scripts that were written for white actors and re-wrote the roles to represent minorities.

When he began producing plays at the Matrix, Stern redirected the company's focus to explore the issue of race in modern society.

In 2008 he restructured the cast and now 75 percent of actors at the company are of non-white ethnicities, Stern said.

"I think race is the most important thing in our lives," Stern told the *Palisadian-Post*. "I told my actors to think of what the audience looks like when they perform and what the people they see on the streets look like. If you can see the difference, you understand why I'm doing this."

The Matrix has been honored with many awards, including three consecutive LA Drama Critics Circle Outstanding Production awards for "The Tavern" (1993), "The Seagull" (1994) and "The Homecoming" (1995).

The theater is located on Melrose Avenue, close to where Stern grew up and his alma mater, Fairfax High School.

His affiliation with the theatre came about almost by chance. Stern had been working as an actor in New York and his goal at the time was to get a script he had written produced.

On a stroll around his old stomping grounds, however, he stumbled upon the theater during renovation.

Stern didn't have the money to buy the theater at the time, but the project piqued his interest. He built a relationship with the construction team, which later got him the "in" he needed to take over the theater in 1977.



Danielle Truitt and Larry Bates star in "The Mountaintop," a play premiering Feb. 6 at the Matrix Theatre that reimagines the last day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life.

Photo courtesy of Matrix Theatre



Palisadian Joseph Stern

Photo courtesy of Matrix Theatre

"In '75 there were no real theaters, basically just porn houses and little dumps," he said. "This was the start of the renaissance of theater in Hollywood."

Stern began producing plays in 1980, "then just never looked back."

Being a former actor, Stern and his colleagues initially wrote scripts for themselves, which he described as an act of "trying to create your own destiny."

But soon he decided to push the envelope, producing plays that make his

audience uncomfortable in an effort to bring underlying social prejudices to light.

"I wanted to break down the conditioning of the audience," Stern said. "That's always been my approach to everything I do. I like it messy because life is messy."

The theater produces one play a year and each is part of a progression to, as Stern puts it, "peel the onion" of race relations in America.

In 2011, Stern did a production of Arthur Miller's "All My Sons"—typically cast with only white actors—with actors of mixed races playing roles that would have been impossible for the play's 1947 setting.

In Stern's production, the two main characters are in an interracial marriage that would have been illegal at the time, for example. In addition, their neighbors, who are Japanese, would likely have been interned.

"Arthur Miller's themes are so universal. It's like a Greek tragedy, so it worked," Stern said. "People of color said, 'It's the first time I've ever felt included.'"

Each play builds on the social commentary of the last, becoming part of a "loose master plan for a cumulative experience," Stern said.

He aims to trigger the audience and bring them face-to-face with their own prejudices.

"Each play comes in a different door, but each play deals with race," he said.

The Matrix's latest play, "The Mountaintop" written by Katori Hall, won the 2010 Oliver Award for Best New Play.

It depicts Martin Luther King Jr.'s last day alive with a surrealistic, humorous slant. The goal, Stern said, is to portray King as a man, not a god.

"When he's three dimensional we can't pretend that it's not part of our own experience," he said. "Therefore it can make us uncomfortable, which is sort of what the theater is all about."

This marks the first time the play has been produced in L.A. According to Stern, it highlights that "the past is prologue" and shows how little race relations in America have changed.

"Here it is almost 50 years later and just look around you," Stern said. "I think [Hall] saw that. When she wrote it, it was a little bit ahead of its time. She has lines in there like 'I can't breathe.' I think the incredible strife that's become prevalent in so many parts of the country resonates now more than it would have five years ago."

"The Mountaintop" runs until April 10. Tickets are \$30 or pay-what-you-can every Monday night. The Matrix Theatre is located at 7657 Melrose Ave. in Los Angeles. Call 323-852-1445 for more information.