

# Teleplays to Plays: Palisadian Joseph Stern Fights for 'Scraps'

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As a television producer, Palisadian Joseph Stern's credits have included some of the most critically acclaimed and widely viewed dramatic series ever to air on network television: "Cagney & Lacey," "Law & Order" and "Judging Amy," among them.

"There's a pretty good lineage here," he told the *Palisadian-Post*.

Now, Stern has segued from the small screen to the stage.

"Ten years ago, I began to do plays about race," Stern said. Six, to be exact, and his newest, "Scraps," a play by Geraldine Inoa, launched July 6 at Matrix Theatre in West Hollywood.

Directed by Steve Walker-Webb and set in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood three months after the fatal shooting of a black teenager by a white police officer, "Scraps" bills itself as "a frequently funny, provocative mash up of poetry, realism and expressionism that chronicles the effects of his death on his family and friends."

Inoa, a 28-year-old breakout



writer who works on "The Walking Dead," is credited and co-credited for such season nine episodes as "The Obligated" and "The Calm Before."

Stern, 78, grew up a short walk away from the Melrose Avenue playhouse he's currently affiliated with in West Hollywood at a time when Fairfax High School was predominantly white and Jewish.

Today's Los Angeles (Fairfax High included) is dramatically different—and like some of the dated, if iconic, plays, Stern has made a point to change things up to reflect today's America.

With a production of "All My Sons," the 1947 Arthur Miller classic, Stern took liberties with casting, filling the main roles with African American actors and side roles with Asian Americans and other thespians.

The idea being to switch up the context and amplify the commentary, in addition to giving juicy acting opportunities to actors who might otherwise be overlooked for such classic material.

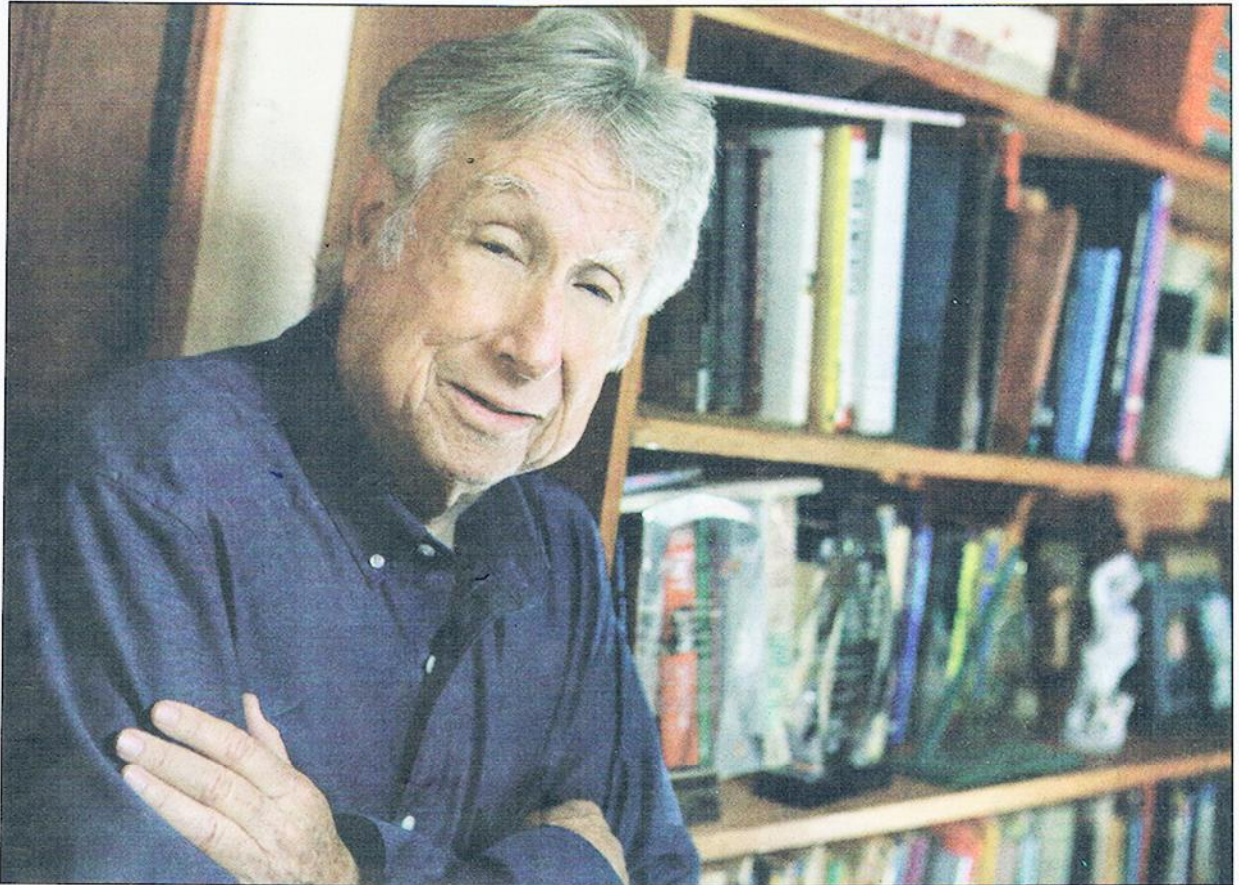
"They bring an authenticity to the culture," he said.

"When I did 'All My Sons,' I had been looking for something to do that was multi-ethnic," he continued. "I didn't change a lot of the dialogue. I had specific ideas for each part."

The production worked, and Stern received missives from black attendees who had seen his play along the line of, "It's the first time I felt included."

With 2016's "Mountain Top," Stern pushed the needle further and most recently, "Neighbors" received multiple BackStage awards and was nominated for four Ovation, including Best Play. The piece also enjoyed a successful run at the Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis.

In general, the process of



Stern has lived in the same house in the Palisades for more than 25 years.

Photos by Rich Schmidt/Staff Photographer

mounting a play at the Matrix takes about six months, according to Stern, from the casting process to the two-month rehearsal period, and Stern likes to challenge himself with heady material.

And yet, Stern said, his plays do not proselytize or tell the viewer what or how to think.

A tradition going back to past television work was dealing with social issues even back in the 1980s and 1990s. Stern said such dramas were of their time and, in some ways, ahead of their time.

"We did shows about AIDS and abortion," Stern recalled of the Emmy-winning "Cagney & Lacey" and the Dick Wolf production "Law & Order."

"It was innovative and it was before hand-held [camera] shows were common, before 'Homicide,'" he said.

So why does race still matter for Stern after all these years, even as he focuses on the theater? :

"I did this as a healing," he said. "My family was color-blind. My granddaughter is bi-racial."

And Pacific Palisades is a town in which Stern continues to find solace and inspiration for his work.

Stern credits his late wife, Peppy Stern, who died of multiple myeloma in 2002, for moving him to the Palisades, where Peppy was very involved at Kehillat Israel congregation, and kick-starting his relationship with Matrix Theatre.

During Peppy's tenure, Stern tapped his "Cagney & Lacey" colleague, actress Tyne Daly, to do a production of "A Woman of

Valor" at the Matrix in 1993. The Kehillat Israel fundraiser amassed \$100,000 for the temple.

And Stern still lives in the same house they moved into over 25 years ago.

"What I love is that I feel like I'm in Nantucket," Stern said of his Palisades neighborhood. "Yet I'm still in LA."

"Scraps" runs through September 15. For tickets and more information, visit [matrixtheatre.com](http://matrixtheatre.com).