

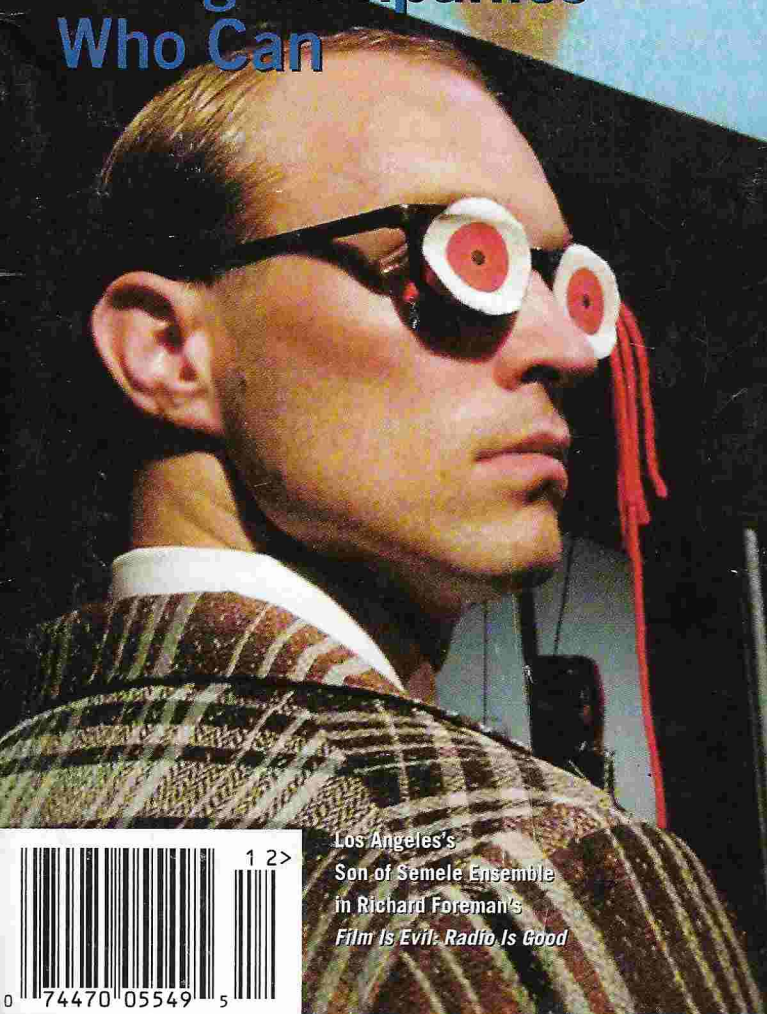
AMERICAN THEATRE

DECEMBER 2004

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CAN YOU
SEE THE
FUTURE?

Meet a Dozen
Young Companies
Who Can



PLUS

4 Translators
In Search of the Play
The Human Face of
Bread & Puppet

Los Angeles's
Son of Semele Ensemble
in Richard Foreman's
Film Is Evil. Radio Is Good



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SON OF SEMELE ENSEMBLE

YOUNG AND RESTLESS

BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS

IN THIS TOWN, PROBABLY THE BIGGEST COMPLIMENT YOU CAN BESTOW upon a company is that it “does theatre for the right reasons.” This generally means that the troupe is cognizant of what film does and what TV does—and what theatre can do differently. Sounds simple enough. But in America’s movie-biz capital, packed with actors who create theatre in their downtime between filming 30-second plugs for Citibank or sashaying onto HBO, doing theatre “for the right reasons” (and no money) takes on quixotic dimensions.

Enter Son of Semele Ensemble, a new kid on the block among a cluster of excellent L.A. storefront companies that use theatre to challenge perceptions rather than to audition for the more lucrative media. In 2000, founder Matthew McCray—self-described then as “a frustrated and out-of-work actor”—assembled an ensemble of 11, most of them fellow drama graduates from Chapman College in Orange County. In the hinterlands of L.A.’s Silverlake district, they workshopped McCray’s own play, *Earthlings*—a somewhat cryptic debunking of sexual stereotypes—which went on to become SOSE’s inaugural production in 2001.

“Our mission is to do work that addresses emerging cultural questions,” says McCray. If this seems a bit vague, it’s because the company is still finding its way. SOSE’s résumé now includes 12 productions, a membership of 26, a steady climb in standards and growing attendance in its permanent home, located (since 2003) a couple of miles west of downtown. SOSE has produced two plays by Richard Foreman, one by Ibsen, one by Richard Greenberg. It won two Los Angeles Stage Alliance Ovation Awards for a visually arresting production of Sir Peter Hall’s doctrinaire adaptation of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*; even the masks couldn’t hide the company’s devotion to the project.

In July 2003, SOSE mounted the West Coast premiere of Matthew Maguire’s *The Tower*, a “choreopoem” about a woman climbing the Tower of Babel and how the meaning of words has been shattered in contemporary society. With this breakthrough production—by turns poetic, surreal and darkly humorous—the company synthesized radically disparate ideas into a raw theatrical experience that was part vaudeville, part religious mass.

Sometimes employing masks or comedia whiteface, the company resembles the Actors’ Gang in its early years: fearless belligerence applied to political, linguistic and theological themes. (SOSE is planning an epic staging of medieval cycle plays, Edward Kemp’s *The Mysteries*, for spring 2005.) In its young life, SOSE has demonstrated cosmic reach, some gut-wrenching performances and an attraction to whatever is innately and unexplainably theatrical. And all for the right reasons.

Steven Leigh Morris is theatre critic of the L.A. Weekly.

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Theological questions: above, Brad Henson, Michelle Ingkavet and Nathaniel Justiniano in Son of Semele’s production of Robert Anton Wilson’s *Wilhelm Reich in Hell*; below, Son of Semele founder Matthew McCray.