

AT THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

PLAYERS ON THE FRINGE, MAKING THE FUTURE
BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS



Matthew McCray, center in glasses,
and his sons of Semele

SON OF SEMELE ENSEMBLE has been around since 2000 — its first production premiered in 2001, a play called *Earthlings* by Artistic Director Matthew McCray, a self-described unemployed actor, who assembled his troupe from peers at O.C.'s Chapman University. They've now settled comfortably into a storefront venue on Beverly Boulevard, a few blocks east of Virgil. When not producing its two plays a year, SOSE partners with like-minded companies, such as NeedTheater and Oasis Theater Company. SOSE now has a company of 28, and has distinguished itself with productions such as the 2003 West Coast premiere of Matthew Maguire's *The Tower*, a "choreo-poem" about a woman climbing the Tower of Babel and how the meaning of words in contemporary society has been shattered. This kind of poetic, surreal and darkly humorous production synthesized radically disparate ideas into a raw theatrical experience that was part vaudeville, part religious mass. That blend of tones reappeared last year in a top-tier production of Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner*.

Though the company's original mission was to present new plays or the West Coast premieres of little-known plays by little-known writers, McCray says the company is now trying to develop its own ensemble-devised work, *Wallow*, by working with L.A. scribe Oliver Mayer, who is attending and assembling ideas from rehearsals.

"We're meeting in a room, bringing in ideas as a group. Oliver is observational, deriving text that comes from the mind of the group, filtered through the mind of the writer."

McCray says that SOSE productions almost always lose money, despite modest budgets. Yet the nonprofit organization remains solvent with the help of patrons who simply "like the work [SOSE does]."

"Our future is less about looking at work that has been done before but looking at how the company can take an early hand in the creation of work, either with or sometimes without a writer."

SON OF SEMELE ENSEMBLE

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NEEDTHEATER, founded in 2006, remains a nomadic company. In the spring of 2007, REDCAT presented a workshop of its ensemble-created homage to Los Angeles, *La La La*, in its "Studio" series. In the few years since then, and with a view of theater that's just as inventive as that of Son of Semele Ensemble, the company has nonetheless been moving in precisely the opposite direction — away from ensemble-created work and toward plays written by a single playwright. These include two scintillating productions