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STAGE WATCH

EQUITY WAIVER PLAN UNDER SCRUTINY

By SYLVIE DRAKE, Times Staff Writer

Actors' Equity Assn. announced Wednesday that it has asked independent consultant Carl Sautter to undertake a six-month study of the Equity Waiver plan—a plan whereby the actors' union has chosen to waive its rules in theaters of 99 seats or less.

You could almost hear the sighs of relief as they spread among the operators of such theaters.

Most had feared far worse. Last fall, San Francisco's disgruntled Equity membership voted to drastically alter its identical

Equity—never has been. He did the 1980 study and had good cooperation then. This really is an update of what he gave us four years ago.

Is there cause for alarm? Some bad apples have multiplied and so have fly-by-night Waiver producers. This makes it tough for the more serious-minded rest.

Nor has the Los Angeles Waiver theater community been quick enough to police itself, and the League of Los Angeles Producers, created in part for that purpose, has done nothing outwardly significant to date. Guidelines drafted more than a year ago by producer Joe Stern, following a joint meeting of the League and the Los Angeles

Producers' more serious Waiver producers worried since Weston warned last Thursday that changes were in the air. Are they?

It depends on the information we get, Weston replied. "Anything is possible. We tend to hear from people who are unhappy. There may be as many or more people who are happy. But when you have a large number of people registering complaints, you have to take a look. If we recommend changes," he added, "we'll take a

vote of the membership. That's the thing I want to stress—that the ultimate decision regarding any change will be made by our membership. The more information we have, the better position we're in to analyze what's needed. There's nothing worse than acting out of ignorance."

It seems a sensible first step. "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" will be seen on television, that is.

The Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys and Eric Bentley, editor/compiler of "Are You Now," the current hit at the Back Alley based on transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Commit-

tee, have struck a deal with Alan Lansburg Productions. That company has optioned the Bentley play for development as a major television project by Shoen-Greenblatt Productions (Martin Sheen, Bill Greenblatt) in association with Peter Calabrese of Better Than Most Productions.

"We haven't decided about the exact format," Greenblatt said Tuesday, "but we're leaning toward a film. Leo Penn is directing and Martin Sheen will, certainly, play a role, possibly that of the chairman."

Bentley is contractually obligated to include the Back Alley in any such arrangement but, according to "Are You Now" producer

Laura Zucker, that was no problem. Bentley and Alan Miller, artistic co-director of the Back Alley with Zucker and the director of "Are You Now" (and one of its actors), are old friends. They met in 1972, when Miller was in the original Yare Hoperatory production.

As for Alan Lansburg, "They have a six-month option," Zucker said, "so they have to move very soon. There's no guarantee anyone from our production will be involved—not even Alan. You kinda sell a property with those kinds of encumbrances. Exact terms remain undisclosed, but the deal between Bentley and Back Alley is the usual 60%, 40%.

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Waiver plan because of what the majority perceived as intolerable abuses by Waiver producers. Mounting complaints of a similar nature (inconsideration, financial discrimination, inadequate back-stage conditions, etc.) have led to the current re-examination of the Waiver in Los Angeles.

"It only takes a few abusers to spoil it for everyone," said Edward Weston, Equity's Western regional director and creator of the 12-year-old Waiver plan.

Sautter's study, to be completed in November, will cover the period from April to September of this year, and will examine financial patterns, casting and ticket policies in Waiver theaters—and not for the first time. Sautter prepared a similar study for Equity in 1980. It was a favorable report.

"One of the reasons we retained Carl Sautter," Weston said, "is that he is an independent consultant who has a good relationship with the theatrical community. He's impartial. He's not an employee of

Theater Alliance, were not acted upon by either organization. Abuses continued unchecked.

Yet the fact remains that the situation in Los Angeles is fundamentally different from the one in San Francisco. The Waiver works better here because actors have an opportunity for lucrative employment in film and television, even when they don't earn significant (if any) money in Waiver.

The local actor uses the Waiver much more as originally intended, as a way to practice his or her craft, free from restrictive union rules. If the Waiver also serves as a showcase, so much the better. In recent years, however, showcasing has not been its main concern.

Durable Waiver theaters in Los Angeles have become a creative force in their own right—the single most important catalyst for theatrical creativity in this town. Loss of the Waiver would mean loss of the very flexibility that gives developmental theater its essential stretch. That's what had so many of Los

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