

## STAGE

# Actor scales a director's 'Mountain'

John Schuck brings professional sense of character from television to theater

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By TOM JACOBS

Daily News Theater Writer

John Schuck isn't a doctor, and he doesn't play one on TV. At least, he hasn't yet. Mostly, the veteran character actor has played policemen, such as Rock Hudson's sidekick Sgt. Enright in "McMillan and Wife."

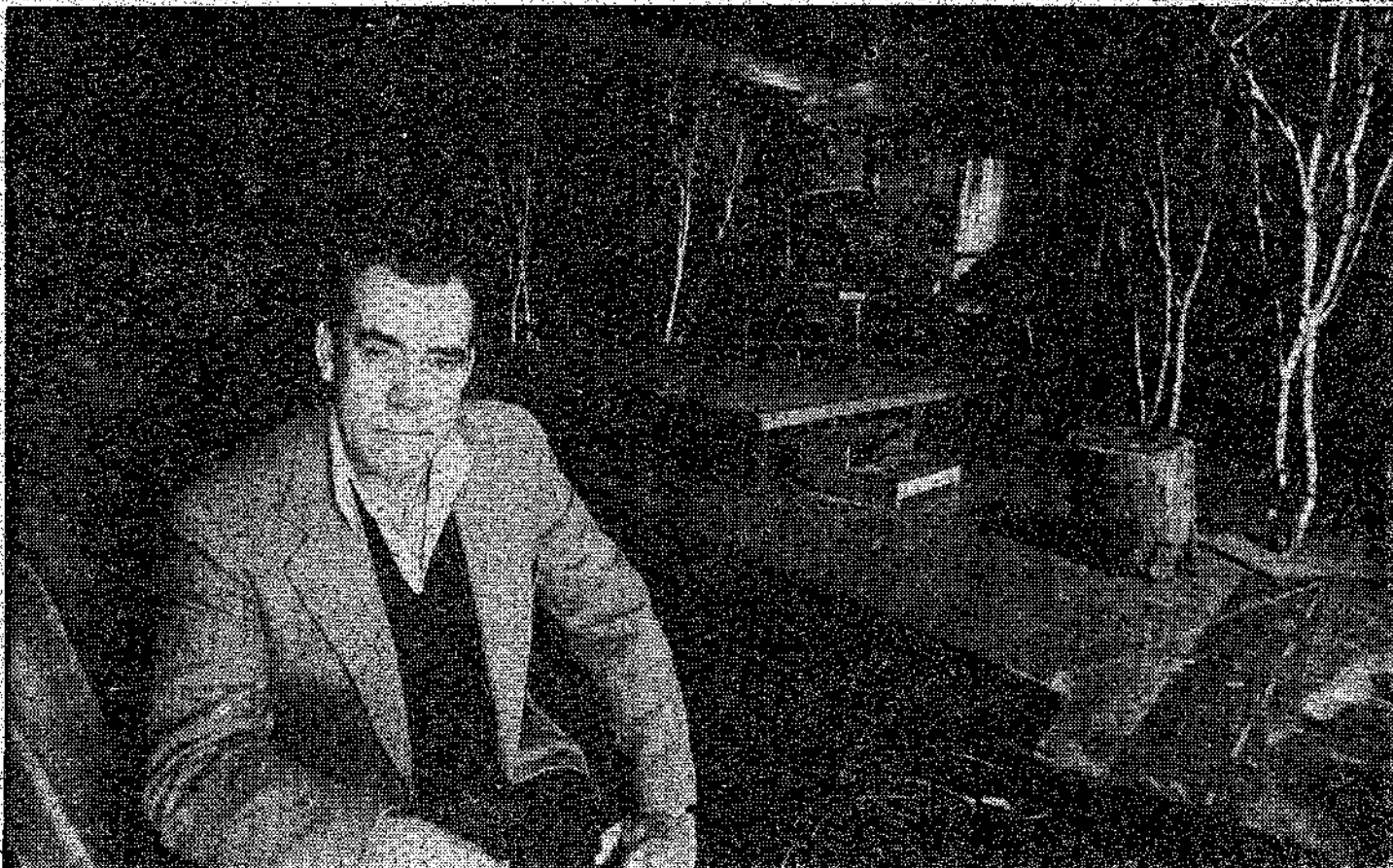
But he understands very well why the actor introduces himself that way on the cough syrup commercial — the one with the line "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV."

"You don't play people on television. You play professions," he explained during an interview at the Back Alley Theatre. "When two actors meet, one asks 'Who have you played?' I've played a doctor, a policeman, a fire chief, a truck driver . . ."

It's well-paying work, but less than satisfying — which is why Schuck, a man whose face is as familiar as his name is unknown, is currently in Van Nuys. Searching for satisfaction, he has returned to directing after a quarter-century spent onstage and in front of cameras.

Specifically, Schuck is directing "Sand Mountain," a program of two one-act plays by Romulus Linney, which opens at the Back Alley Sunday afternoon. And he is enjoying himself tremendously.

After so many years of taking orders, he's in charge of a production. And more



important, after so many years of "playing professions," he's dealing with multi-layered, interesting, quirky characters.

"I go home even after a bad evening feeling very exhilarated," the genial Schuck said. "You're constantly being stimulated, and you have to stay focused. The reward that I'm feeling is wonderful.

"You have to think. You have to respond on a human level. You have to use the crafts that you've acquired and share them (with the actors). It's also a tremendous time of sharing life lessons that you have learned.

### The demands

"Much more is demanded (in the theater). I'm demanding much more of myself."

Schuck has traditionally demanded a lot of himself. Fascinated by music and theater since his parents took him to see "Oklahoma!" on Broadway for his fifth birthday, he was heavily involved in school plays and choirs. Upon graduation from Ohio's Denison University, he acted in Cleveland, New York and in regional theaters, including three years at San Francisco's well-known American Conservatory Theatre.

It was there that Robert Altman spotted Schuck and signed him for the role of Painless, the suicidal dentist in the movie "M\*A\*S\*H." Since that film was made in 1969, he has lived and worked primarily in Los Angeles, though he doesn't hesitate to go out of town for projects that interest him. (One such show was "Annie"; he played Daddy Warbucks for 18 months on Broadway.)

"Los Angeles can become a trap," he said. "You feel you're going to miss your big break if you leave town. Nothing could be further from the truth. I think all of this (experience) leads you to where you're supposed to be."

"I go home even after a bad evening feeling very exhilarated," says John Schuck of directing "Sand Mountain."

## THE FACTS

■ **The plays:** "Sand Mountain Matchmaking" and "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain."

■ **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.

■ **When:** Previews 8 tonight and Saturday night. Opens 3 p.m. Sunday. Regular schedule: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through Feb. 1.

■ **Starring:** Gary Bisig, Cynthia Carle, Justin Darby, Basil Hoffman, Jimmy Hoffman, Patricia Huston, John Dennis Johnston and Jeff Tyler.

■ **Behind the scenes:** Written by Romulus Linney. Directed by John Schuck.

■ **Tickets:** \$13 to \$15, with half-price tickets available for youngsters age 13 to 18. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.

Directing is "much more difficult" now than it was when Schuck last did it shortly out of school, and for a good reason: "I know more now." Part of that learning process, he added, has been by bad example.

### A difference

"My own experience with acting under actors who direct (has been largely negative)," he said. "I hate those who do not have the ability to differentiate between directing using the actors' individual talents and (imposing their ideas of) how they would play all the parts."

"(Such an attitude) is very understandable, but it's very frustrating. I think I've avoided that trap."

What makes him think so? "I cannot

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— Actor John Schuck

think of one scene as it is now played that is the way I visualized it (originally). So there has been a process of change, and, I assume, growth."

The two plays are both set in the southern Appalachian Mountains. The first, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," introduces us to the three very different suitors of a 20-year-old widow. In the second, "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain," a local woman tells the tale of how Jesus and St. Peter came to spend an evening in a shack in the Appalachians — and what happened that night.

"They both deal with the right of passage, to a great extent," Schuck said, "and the importance of myth in our lives. In the

second play (the theme is) the freedom we have to take the intangibles of our lives — our religion, our stories, our heritage — and bend them so that they serve us. Otherwise there's no point to them.

"(Linney) is fascinated with (religion) as a source of rich theatrical material," he added. "So much of our theater grew out of religious ritual. He's very refreshing in that he keeps going back to these themes."

### Good for Christmas

That should also make the plays appropriate, if untraditional, Christmastime fare.

"These are perfect for the holiday season. The second play takes place at Christmas and includes the story of Mary and Joseph. The language is a little rough, but no child above the age of 8 or 9 will have any problems with it whatsoever."

Schuck, who can currently be seen as a Klingon ambassador in "Star Trek IV," has no plans to give up acting. But he does hope this production "will begin the process of paying the dues necessary" to be a sought-after director.

"At this point in my career, I'm tired of starting over all the time," the 46-year-old actor said. "If you have a series, that's fine. Then it's over and you're cold potatoes. Then you do a hit movie. So you get a couple more jobs, and two years later you find yourself back (out of work)."

"Work is scarce. It always has been. Those of us who can call ourselves working actors are very lucky. But I've really reached a point in my life where I need to have much more consistency. The theater provides that. It's a much better mistress."

"I feel my career is just starting."