

## STAGE

## Playwright casts eye from afar on his roots

By TOM JACOBS  
Daily News Theater Writer

Like many writers, Romulus Linney feels a certain amount of ambivalence toward the place where he grew up.

The author of "Sand Mountain," which reopens at the Back Alley Theater Thursday, had what he calls a "Southern country childhood." Born in Philadelphia, he spent the bulk of his childhood growing up in a little town in Tennessee.

The man the New York Times calls "the most underrated, underrecognized American playwright today" has lived an urban existence since he moved with his family at age 13 to Washington, D.C. He's spent the last several decades in New York City, teaching, directing and above all writing — often about the American South.

He gets angry when he sees stereotypes about Southerners.

And yet, he has no interest whatsoever in moving back. "I go back a lot," he said. "I love the South physically. But I do live in New York, and I like my life

here."

Asked to explain his mixed feelings about his home region, Linney, who has just the slightest hint of a Southern accent, started discussing Moliere.

"A way of interpreting Alceste (the main character in "The Misanthrope") is that he doesn't hate people," he said after a long, thoughtful pause. "He loves them too much, and he's continually disappointed by them."

And that's the way Linney feels toward Southerners?

"Maybe no place can live up to my childhood memories."

Unquestionably, those early years had their impact. Many of his novels and plays — including "Sand Mountain," which was a hit at the Back Alley last winter — have their roots in Southern folklore. And the Tennessee lad's use of language — in casual conversation, and especially in his plays — is characteristically colorful.

"Southerners are all loquacious," he said. "There's a Southern tradition of sitting on the porch and gossiping. They like to talk."

What's more, he added, South-



Director John Schuck, right, adjusts a prop for the play "Sand Mountain," which reopens at the Back Alley Theater Thursday with performers Cynthia Carle, left, Patricia Huston and Jimmy Hartman.

erners are always having the King James Bible quoted at them during church services and prayer meetings. The cadences of that magnificent literary work gradually creep into their everyday speech, he said, and the results can be eloquent speeches about banal topics.

Many such speeches can be heard in the two one-acts that

make up "Sand Mountain" — of which the second, "Why the Lord Came to Sand Mountain," was written first.

Linney adapted it from his third novel, "Jesus Tales" (which was recently reissued in paperback by North Point Press), in which he incorporated biblical tales from both Southern Europe

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and the American South.

"Basically all these stories are about Jesus and St. Peter walking around and having adventures, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza," he said.

After carefully collecting these folk tales, Linney "did not hesitate to change things around," arguing "I'm a folk." He then spun several of the stories into the play, in which the Lord and St. Peter spend a rainy night with a dirt-poor mountain family.

The companion play, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," was written to fulfill Linney's long-time desire to utilize a classic bit of Southern folklore: that the size of a man's sexual organ corresponds to the size of his nose. He incorporates that contention into an unsentimental story about a 20-year-old widow and her four suitors.

"Mountain people are, on the surface, prudish, but underneath they're very healthy in their attitudes towards sex," he said. "They're sexually very blunt."

"Sand Mountain" is one of a number of theatrical programs Linney has created by putting together related one-act plays. An evening of three Linney one-acts entitled "Laughing Stock" just opened at New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre to considerable acclaim.

Linney finds linking several one-acts together "artistically

## THE FACTS

- **The play:** "Sand Mountain."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** Opens 8 p.m. Dec. 3. Regular schedule: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, through Jan. 10.
- **Starring:** Gary Bisig, Cynthia Carlé, Patricia Huston, Jeff Tyler, Edward Blackoff and Jimmy Hartman.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Romulus Linney. Directed by John Schuck.
- **Tickets:** \$13.50 to \$17.50. For reservations, call (213) 780-2240.

challenging and a lot of fun."

"When you put three one-acts together, it's kind of like the '30s three-act play, which is a supple form," he said. "The two-act play is a rigid, awkward form."

Though he has yet to have a commercial success in New York, Linney has no complaints about his career. "I've gotten a lot of awards," he noted. "Everything I've written has been performed."

One regret: Several of his plays suffer from what Linney calls "second-production syndrome." They've been produced once, successfully. But since most theaters are interested either in a world premiere or an established hit, he can't find any companies willing to mount a second production.

How about it, artistic directors?