



Basil Hoffman, left, Cynthia Carle, Jimmy Hartman, John Dennis Johnston and Gary Bisig star in "Sand Mountain" at the Back Alley Theatre.

'Sand Mountain' hits heights

By **TOM JACOBS**
Daily News Theater Critic

"Sand Mountain" is the Back Alley Theatre's first attempt at a holiday season production, and characteristically for the innovative little Burbank Boulevard theater, it's far from traditional Christmas fare.

One of the two one-acts by Romulus Linney that make up the program does include a telling of the nativity story. But it's surely the most offbeat, and funniest, rendition most of us are ever likely to hear.

What's more, it's paired with a rather lusty tale of a young widow and her four suitors.

A few people will take offense. Most, though, will thoroughly enjoy it. Linney is a splendid writer whose work deserves to be better-known, and director John Schuck has mounted first-rate productions of both of these little gems.

The first play, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," is the story of a 20-year-old widow (a very appealing Cynthia Carle) and the men who come a-courtin'. Full of laughs, it ends on a surprisingly serious and thoughtful note as the one man she's attracted to, a stubbornly practical widower, insists on discussing what their relationship

will evolve into when their passion inevitably cools.

The second, "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain," shows us — through the eyes of a feisty, elderly woman — what happened the day Jesus and St. Peter spent the night with a family of poor mountain folk. The evening's entertainment consists of the characters — mortal and immortal alike — enjoying moonshine brandy and telling stories, including the one about Mary and Joseph and their baby.

Both plays are notable for their rich theatrical language; they're full of the sort of metaphors Southern writers spin off with apparent effortlessness.

THE FACTS

- **The play:** "Sand Mountain."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through Feb. 1.
- **Starring:** Cynthia Carle, Gary Bisig, John Dennis Johnston, Basil Hoffman, Patricia Huston and Jeff Tyler.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Romulus Linney. Directed by John Schuck.
- **Tickets:** \$13 to \$15. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.
- **Our rating:** A.