

'Sand Mountain' offers superb blend of rich language, profound thought

By TOM JACOBS
Daily News Theater Critic

During a month when so many theaters are featuring condescending "family fare," how refreshing it is to see an adult-oriented play — and one that's themed to the season to boot.

The show is **REVIEW** Romulus Linney's "Sand Mountain," which has returned to the Back Alley for a six-week run. Plays, and productions, as good as this come along so seldom that one welcomes the chance to see it again.

Linney's two one-acts are notable for the richness of their language, and for the simple profundity of their themes. His characters, for the most part, are simple mountain folk, people who are "cow-sheep clumsy and corn-cob coarse." But there's real wisdom to be found in their folk stories — several of which Linney incorporates into this charming evening.

The first play, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," tells the tale of a young widow and the four men who "come a-courtin'." The first three — a lusty youth, a coarse farmer and a righteous preacher — all want to possess her, and she will have none of it.

Once she ingeniously frightens them off, a fourth man arrives — not with flowers and fancy talk, but a request that they "talk turkey and talk squirrel." A remarkably mature and oddly romantic conversation follows in which they honestly describe what their life together might be like — including the years after the romantic passion inevitably cools.

In the second one-act, "Why the Lord Came to Sand Mountain," the Lord and St. Peter arrive at the tiny shack of a dirt-poor mountain family, asking for shelter from the storm. Several hours later, full of thin soup and homemade brandy, they all start swapping stories — to the Lord's delight and St. Peter's dismay. (He'd much rather be down in the valley with the rich folk; they're his kind of people.)

To conclude the evening, the farmer and his wife — at the Lord's request — act out their version of the nativity story. Afterward, St. Peter complains that they've gotten most everything wrong, but the Lord expresses his approval.

He knows that myths — including the myth of his life, death and rebirth — are only useful when people can shape them into a form that's meaningful to them. Rigidity — embodied by St. Peter and, by inference, the

THE FACTS

- **The play:** "Sand Mountain."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 10.
- **Starring:** Gary Bisig, Cynthia Carle, Basil Hoffman, Patricia Huston and Edward Blackoff.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Romulus Linney. Directed by John Schuck.
- **Tickets:** \$13.50 to \$17.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.
- **Our rating:** A.

church he founded — is, in Linney's view, the enemy of true spirituality.

Once again, John Schuck's direction is superbly sensitive, and the ensemble cast — unchanged from last year — is, without exception, superb. Basil Hoffman is wonderfully priggish as both the preacher in the first play and St. Peter in the second, and Cynthia Carle nicely mixes determination and vulnerability as the 20-year-old widow in the curtain-raiser. Jack Forrestel's sets and Hilary Sloane's costumes nicely evoke a faraway but strangely familiar place and time.