

Sand Mountain

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened Dec. 3; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 2 & 7; closes Jan. 10.

BY T. H. McCULLOH

Hopefully there is a tradition starting at the Back Alley. This is the second season for their award-winning production of Romulus Linney's *Sand Mountain* and it is so welcome it seems like one of those Christmas gifts one is allowed to open early; it brightens the whole season. Part of the pleasure is Linney's writing, in this case about country he knows well, the world of writer Jesse Stuart, that separate and distinct civilization which exists high in the Cumberland and Smoky Mountains, with lore and laughter all its own, keeping to itself its dreams and mores. Both of the plays which make up the evening are again directed by John Shuck and played by the original company. Shuck has an uncanny feel for the characters and the mood of Linney's writing and guides their efforts as though he were playing their melodies on a five-string banjo, rich in tone and throbbing with the rhythm of

with the right answers to Rebecca's question is played with fine flavor and truthfulness by Gary Bisig.

In *Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain* the same company transports itself to the other side of the mountain for another parable about The Lord Jesus and Saint Peter visiting a poverty stricken, drunken couple during a storm in a shack hanging on the side of the mountain. Here Bisig, as The Lord in a black fedora and a rain slick, is the image of patience and understanding as he decides to sit out the storm with Jean and Jack and their Fourteen Children, even to sharing their board and sipping their white lightning while tall tales are shared and even a few "Jesus tales," some funny and some dead serious, concluding with the story of Jesus' birth told by the couple as they know it. Carle and Blackoff are the couple, raunchy and ripe in their honest way, with Carle particularly standing out for her delicious delivery of Linney's lines and the heartbreaking sound of her country song. Hoffman is perfect and charming as he can be as a pompous, just ever so slightly hypocritical Saint





Cynthia Carle, Patricia Huston and Jimmy Hartman in 'Sand Mountain'

the wind through the hollows and peaks of Appalachia.

The first of the two plays is a delightful parable about finding a husband in the hills. The lady is Rebecca Tull, preacher's daughter, widowed and over the hill at 20. *Sand Mountain Matchmaking* bring to her porch Clink, Slate and Radley, courting as openly as they live their lives. Cynthia Carle's Rebecca is bright and sharp and glad to be rid of her first husband. She listens to her suitors with the wisdom of someone who's been through it all and with the humor she sees in the men's attentions. Carle's performance is a joy to behold. Patricia Huston is right much a joy herself as neighbor Lottie Stiles, who gives Rebecca a phrase, a "spell," to test her suitors. Alternating with Bo Sharon, young Jimmy Hartman is refreshingly real and delightfully honest as Lottie's little Vestor, who doesn't mind doing a little advance courting himself with riddles and his wise advice to Rebecca that a cat's big 'til a dog comes along. The cats pawing at Rebecca's skirt are charmingly and wittily limned by Jeff Tyler as horny young Clink, Edward Blackoff as the demanding farmer Slate and Basil Hoffman as Bible quoting Radley. Sam Bean, the dog who comes along

Peter; Tyler is blustering and smarmy as a Prosperous Farmer from down the mountain who tries to talk The Lord into spending the night with "His" believers at the church rather than with the white trash in the shack, and who foxes himself and his friends by his thoughtless greed. Once again Hartman is wonderful as Fourteen Children, particularly when they're fighting with each other, and as the child Jesus in his parents' story. The story is narrated by Sang Picker, who swears the evils of the world can be solved with "gen sang" and spreads her wisdom over the side of Sand Mountain as The Lord spreads his bounty; she is played all stops out and with her tongue sitting alongside her cigar in her right cheek, by Patricia Huston.

Jack Forrestel's scenic design for both plays is as rich and rewarding in its detail as in the first production and it is lit beautifully by Joshua Ott and Ken Lennon. Hilary Sloane's costumes look as though they were imported from the Smokies and Reid Woodbury's sound design not only becomes another character in both plays, it takes one through the night fog far up into the darkness high on Sand Mountain and helps to make its tales come alive once again in this old fashioned Christmas card from the Back Alley.