

GARY BISIG'S SERMON ON THE 'MOUNT'

By JANICE ARKATOV

You might think that playing God is a heavy mantle to bear. Gary Bisig knows so.

"When we did our first run-through, Jesus and I didn't have much to say to each other," noted the Ohio-born actor, who plays the biblical figure come to life as an unpretentious Appalachian visitor in Romulus Linney's one-act "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain." (The full bill, entitled "Sand Mountain," continues at the Back Alley through March 29).

"I wasn't anti-anything," Bisig, 43, said. "It's just that as far as I was concerned, He meant nothing to me. But we're reading the play aloud and the next thing you know, people are looking at me like 'You're the Lord,' telling me I'm the Lord, calling me Lord—and it had this terrible effect on me."

Bisig laughed. "Suddenly, I started to get like Max von Sydow and everyone else who ever played the role in the movies: wise, understanding, pontificating. I didn't like it, didn't want it—but it just rushed up on me. [Director] John Schuck was looking at me like 'Whaaaa?'



TONY BARNARD / Los Angeles Times
Actor Gary Bisig: "I mean, I don't work all the time, or even a lot. But when I do, I love it."

So, I started working on it, going against [the nobility]. I worked at being a derelict, a baby, a lizard, a hunchback; anything that'd knock that other stuff from my brain."

Bisig had an easier time with the

tandem piece, "Courting on Sand Mountain." In it, he plays the successful suitor of a young widow who's already scared off a number of prospective husbands.

"What's great about Linney is he writes so simply. The first piece really acts itself; you can't ruin it. You can make it as alive as you can, but really, all you have to do is say the line and that tells the story."

"This is an original," he said. "It's not funny the way a Neil Simon play is funny, and not serious like Pinter. But it's got both those elements—and a touch of Saroyan, that odd-ball quality."

It's a combination that works.

"Some audiences are very Christian. They appreciate it because there's nothing in there that really hurts. On the other side is the hip group. They love [that Jesus is so normal], so they're laughing from an entirely different angle. Yet, at the end, everyone is touched."

In spite of the favorable popular/critical response, "I don't think any of us have gotten [new] work out of this," he said.

Yet, it hasn't always been such smooth sailing.

"If I were starting out today, I probably wouldn't," he said with a shrug. "Only because, looking back, I don't know how I got here. I left the farm at 17, went to New York—and hit the wall." For 15 years he knocked around in stock and off-off-Broadway, then in 1976 moved West "to check out the

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movies. And it's been great. I mean, I don't work all the time, or even a lot. But when I do, I love it. Because all I knew, growing up, was movies and TV. Except we used to have horses, and I wanted to be a stunt man."

Recently, he got a chance to do that too, playing an outlaw in "Poker Alice," an upcoming CBS movie starring Elizabeth Taylor. ("When she fixes you with those eyes, it's like star power.")

"Whenever the romantic scenes [between Taylor and Tom Skerritt] were getting too thick," Bisig said genially, "they'd cut to us, riding around on our horses. And we did do our own riding. I had a 5-year-old stallion, not even a trained

horse. One day, we were riding across the desert in Arizona, the gunshots went off and my horse tore off, ran through a mesquite bush, knocked me off the side of the saddle. My rein broke, I had no steering, and he's taking me right to this huge, old cactus. . . . I thought, 'I'm too old for this.'"

In spite of the bumps and bruises, Bisig (whose films include "Buckaroo Banzai," "War Games" and "9 to 5") rarely gives in to regrets.

"If this is the life you've chosen, live it; do what you've gotta do. I've gone through rough periods—been a bartender, a cabbie, done odd jobs. Somehow it all works out."