

JOHN SCHUCK ACTS LIKE A DIRECTOR

By ROBERT KOEHLER

It's like putting together a good oil and vinegar dressing," said actor-director John Schuck about his staging of Romulus Linney's "Sand Mountain," playing Thursdays-Sundays through Feb. 1 at the Back Alley Theatre. "The challenge is to be interesting with very few ingredients."

The ingredients in this pair of Appalachia one-acts are, for Schuck, "the ones that have always been the most exciting for me in the theater: a space, actors, language and making magic on the basis of performers telling stories."

The central character in the second piece, "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain," is called Sang Picker, ("sort of an Appalachian bag lady," Schuck chuckled.) She recounts a tale that answers the title's question.

"The device Linney uses is the story-within-the-story," Schuck explained. "It reinforces his theme of how we need myths, whether or not they're biblical stories. However they fit, they make life bearable."

"It's not your typical Christmas fare," he acknowledged of Linney's backwoods bill. That's especially true of the first piece, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," about a 20-year-old widow and the local men trying to court her. "But 13 is considered prime!" the director noted. "It's a repellent notion today, yet we certainly learn a lot about that society."



SARAH M. BROWN

Director John Schuck creates magic in "Sand Mountain."

What is this actor, whose broad, friendly features have made a permanent imprint on audiences, doing in the director's chair? "To be honest, I haven't directed in 25 years," Schuck said. "At that time (at Baltimore's Center Stage), though I enjoyed it, I felt ill-equipped to give and take from performers at a level I would have liked."

"At this point in my life, I've acted in repertory (including the American Conservatory Theatre, under William Ball) and several resident theaters (the Cleveland

Playhouse and Washington's Arena Stage, among others.) I've reached the age at which I think I have something to give back."

"A lot of directing is like teaching. You don't tell people what to do. You open up what's inside them and allow it to come out. In this particular production, I have been very specific in building the house in which these plays function. And now it's time to tell the actors, 'There's the house. Now breathe life into it.'"

There's a disarming shyness that comes from this large, commanding man, but it mixes with a jolly confidence. When he's directing, Schuck has discovered, "I like the way of thinking. I feel more generous, more stimulated (than when I'm acting)."

He had another confession: "A lot of what I'm doing with this cast is off-the-cuff, really. But because of my background, I'm finding dealing with actors with varying temperaments and styles not to be a problem. Even on a rough night like we had recently, when half the cast was out sick or at another job, we managed to get in a great rehearsal. I thought about what (Lakers' basketball coach) Pat Riley told me a few months ago when I asked him what the toughest part of his job was.

"He said, 'How do you get them up? How do you keep that enthusiasm going?' That's very true in the theater. But it's amazing how, by trusting yourself to respond in the moment, what you come up with."