

After Motherhood, the Theater Is Her Baby Again

By JANICE ARKATOV

For actress Patricia Huston, the second time around beats the first time hands down.

"When I was younger, all I wanted to do was get married and have babies," she said reflectively. So, despite appearances in TV series ("Gunsmoke," GE Theater, "Perry Mason") and a contract with Desilu, which enabled her to "make all this money and feel very guilty about it," she quit acting.

"For 20 years, I raised my son—and now that I've come back, I know that I prefer this. Theater is the most wonderful place to be in." Currently, Huston is waltzing to a busy dance card: playing Douglas Brackman's dotting secretary, Hilda Brunschweiler, on "L.A. Law," plus two Appalachian women in Romulus Linney's "Sand Mountain" (reprising its run last year at the Back Alley).

Huston's "Sand Mountain" characters "are pre-feminists," the actress noted, "so sure of themselves." In the first piece, the sly "Sand Mountain Matchmaking," her character gives advice to a young widow about sizing up her suitors. In the second, "Why the Lord Came to Sand Mountain," her Sang Picker narrates the story of the night an undistinguished Jesus visits a poor mountain family. "It's a moment out of time," Huston explained. "I'd like to transport people—'Beam me up Scottie!'—to another place, relieve the doldrums or the pain of living. We as actors give the audience a little encouragement to come and see something other . . ."

Huston's interim work during her hiatus from acting was a lot less soul-satisfying.

"I was in selling," she said a bit apologetically. "I sold Avon. I was not a good seller; I ended up buying most of [the cosmetics] myself. Then I wrapped gifts at Christmas time at a liquor store. But the worst was when I ran out of money and was on welfare. Getting off was the hardest thing: finding a job that paid enough—and still being able to take care of my baby. It was terrible." Through a welfare-sponsored program, she got a job manning phones at a psychological institute, and eventually worked her way up to registrar there. Then one day, her mother was visiting from Chicago and ran into director Edward Ludlum, who had earlier cast Huston in two local produc-



PATRICK DOWNS / Los Angeles Times

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"He said to her, 'You look like an actress.' She said, 'I'm not, but my daughter is'—and mentioned my name. He said, 'Pat! Where is she? What is she doing?' Then he coaxed me to come to the theater. I was really shy. So first he had me see the class, then talk to them, then he had me teaching, then directing. Then he did a play and told me I could have any part in it. Well, I couldn't refuse him. But I was terrified. I didn't know if I would remember my lines. Would I panic? I went out there and it was just like bike riding. It all came back."

Although she loves her profession now, Huston feels that her break with acting was a necessary one.

"It was the beginning of the women's movement in me," she said. "I wanted to be me, whoever that was. I think there's a danger with all theater people: if you don't have a strong center, you float from this part to this part—and the self gets lost. So for me it was a time of search. To me, being an actress is almost a three-dimensional form. You *become* the art piece: trying to craft your body, feel feelings that aren't yours. Producers and directors either don't know or don't care, so they urge that, that loss of self. Now I know who I am, and it's different

from the character."

The core is strong—unlike the first time, when, Huston says, "I think I was at the brink of great fame (her film credits include "I Want to Live," "The Bonnie Parker Story" and "House of Women"—with Jeanne Cooper, mother of "L.A. Law" co-star Corbin Bernsen), and it scared me."

Nowadays, the actress might even welcome celebrity. "Possibly," she said lightly. "I think I'd rather wait a couple of years, wait for a more solid feeling about myself. Still, I wouldn't be young again for anything. I used to go on auditions and *agonize* about if I got it. A lot of the time now, I forget about it. Literally."

And she adds, there's little worry about her looks. "If you want to see ugly," Huston said with a laugh, "it's the lady in the first act [of 'Sand Mountain'], because it looks like I'm bald. But it's fun playing those women. Again, it's a quest: 'Who am I? Am I this face? These feelings?'—then being able to project a character separate from myself. So I don't mind. I did when I was younger, because I never felt beautiful." She recalled recently being presented with a photograph of herself 23 years ago, playing Helen of Troy, "and I was so *pretty*. Really, at the time, I had no idea."

Stage: Still Giving

Keep the Christmas spirit going a little longer: "Sand Mountain," an evening of two Romulus Linney one-acts, offers plenty of heart, particularly in "Why the Lord Came to Sand Mountain," with Gary Bisig as the Lord who visits some hillfolk incognito. The show at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys features a fine cast and John Schuck's staging is a standout.