

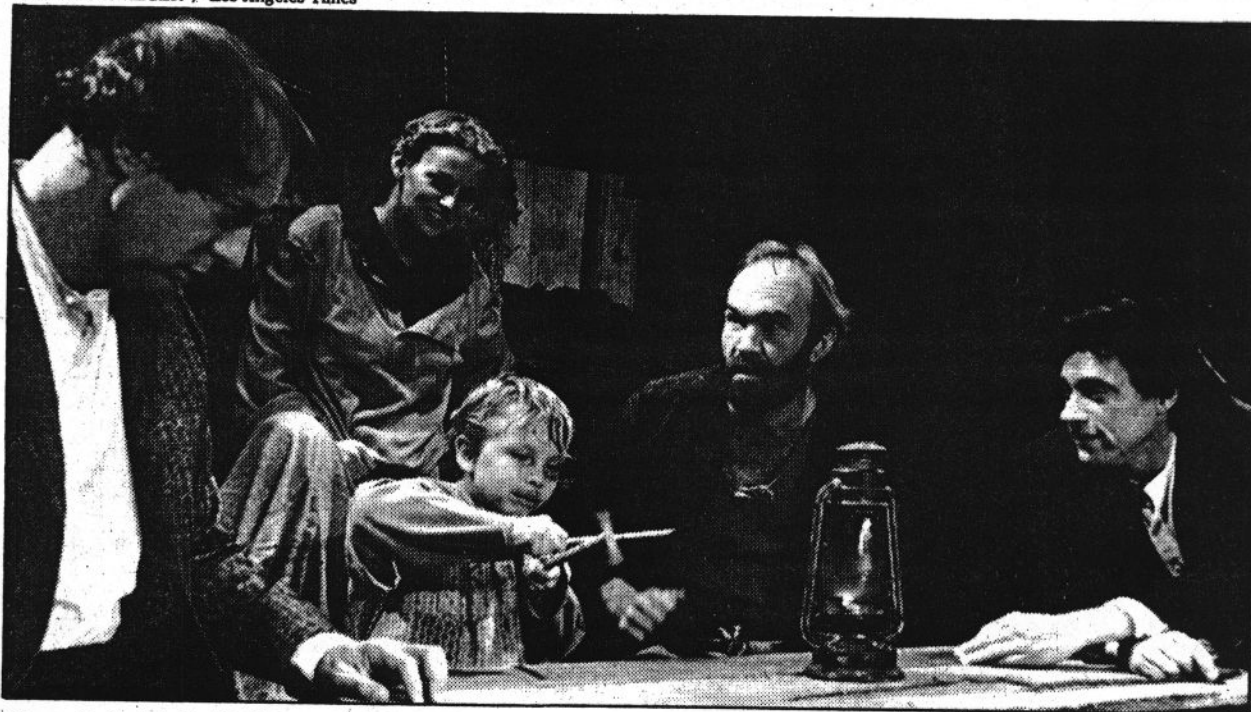
IT'S CRITICS CHOICE IN THE L.A. TIMES!

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From left, Basil Hoffman, Cynthia Carle, Jimmy Hartman, John Dennis Johnston and Gary Bisig.

STAGE REVIEW

'MOUNTAIN' VISIBLE IN ANY SEASON

By DAN SULLIVAN, *Times Theater Critic*

Romulus Linney's "Sand Mountain" at the Back Alley Theatre satisfies the hunger for a new Christmas story without being merely a Christmas story. It would play well in any month, and it deserves to run for several.

The scene is a mountain cabin late at night, with the fire blazing and the rain drumming on the roof. (An easy effect to believe in this small theater.) A jug is passed around and people are telling stories.

Somebody asks a stranger if he wants to hear the Jesus Story. He certainly would. That's why he's come down to Earth, to know how folks remember him.

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(Gary Bisig.) It's a charming piece, but a bit folksy-quaintsy.

The cuteness falls away in "Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain." Carle and Johnson become a dirt-poor Appalachia couple with a cabin full of kids, all played by young Justin Darby (alternating with Jimmy Hartman.)

One night they open the door to St. Peter (Hoffman) and Jesus (Bisig). They come in, shaking the rain from their rubber slickers—a moment that assures the viewer that director John Schuck and his actors have thought the story through to the ground. Carle tells the strangers that they're welcome to have supper, what there is of it.

After supper, the jug comes out, which scandalizes St. Peter, but not Jesus. The farm couple lose their shyness, and the stories begin, capped by the one about how old Joseph took a wife named Mary, who was young enough to be his great-granddaughter. Sure enough, one day she tells him she's pregnant.

By this time the couple are on their feet, acting out the story. It doesn't have one soft spot. For example,

Joseph gets furious at Mary for filling their son's head with notions that he's somebody special, somebody who doesn't need to learn a trade.

This isn't played for a cute response. Joseph is dead serious. And, behind their story-telling roles, we see that the farm couple have had many such arguments, he in a rage, she trying not to cower. Not only is the story about Jesus, it's about them. Meanwhile, back at the table, St. Peter falls asleep

There's more going on in this little play, spoken and unspoken, than has been seen in a month of "important" drama in some of our larger theaters. Linney knows his classic myths and his Bible; more important, he knows his people. And if there's anything he left out, Schuck's actors supply it.

Each fills his character to the brim, with Bisig particularly impressive—because he's so little interested in being impressive—as Jesus. There's no halo around his head, just a little smile. He knows, that's all.

The designers of this show deserve equal billing with the actors.

Is this The Lord himself, or some wandering preacher who thinks he's Jesus? As with all good firelit tales, there's an area of mystery in Linney's play, something that will be spoiled if it's put into words.

The people in the cabin, though, are as real as your hand. And just as they get caught up in the Jesus Story, so the viewer gets caught up with them, without benefit of liquor.

"Sand Mountain" is actually two plays. The tuneup is called "Sand Mountain Matchmaking." A pretty young widow (Cynthia Carle) is courted by three men who don't understand women at all (Jeff Tyler, John Dennis Johnston, Basil Hoffman) and by one who does

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Hilary Sloane's costumes give us the poverty of the region—again, there's no cuteness. Jack Forrester's roughshod cabin takes on a glow under Ken Lennon's lights, but we know it will be drab again by morning. Sound designer Reid Woodbury sends the rain down in torrents—a storm we're glad to be out of.

A good play in a small theater can become its own world. "Sand Mountain" shows how.

'SAND MOUNTAIN'

Two one-act plays by Romulus Linney, at Back Alley Theatre. Director John Schuck. Producer Laura Zucker. Scenic design Jack Forrester. Lighting Ken Lennon. Costumes Hilary Stone. Sound Reid Woodbury. With Cynthia Carle, Jeff Tyler, John Dennis Johnston, Basil Hoffman, Patricia Huston, Justin Darby, Jimmy Hartman, Gary Bisig. Plays at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, with Saturday-Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. Closes Feb. 1.