

STAGE REVIEWS

Playing to Assorted Holiday Moods

'SAND MOUNTAIN'

By DAN SULLIVAN, *Times Theater Critic*

Most holiday shows are made of plastic. "Sand Mountain" is clear pine, with the edges joined just so.

We had this pair of Romulus Linney one-acts at the Back Alley Theatre last Christmas. The show returned over the weekend with the original cast, one year older and one year better.

Next year, somebody is sure to suggest that they do the show in a larger house. It might work. But there's something special about sitting around the cabin with them at the tiny Back Alley, listening to the rain on the roof.

The rain comes in the second play, "Why the Lord Came to Sand Mountain." This is still the heart of the evening. But the first play, "Sand Mountain Matchmaking" has aged nicely over the year.

The scene is a cabin porch. Cynthia Carle plays a young widow who picked out the wrong man the first time and isn't about to make the same mistake twice. The first three men who come courting (Jeff Tyler, Edward Blackoff, Basil Hoffman) would rub a porcupine the wrong way. But the fourth (Gary Bisig) she can talk turkey to—and other things.

This sketch seemed a tad cute a year ago. Now you can see it as a fairy tale, with Patricia Huston as the wise old lady who gives the heroine the magic word. (Quite a frank one, for these parts.) It gets us in the mood for a real stretcher.

Now we're inside a cabin. It's raining like anything, and two men want to come in. The tall one (Basil Hoffman) claims to be St. Peter. The other one (Gary Bisig) seems to think he's Jesus.

Other than that, they look OK. So the farmer and his wife (Carle and Blackoff) let them in. To tell the truth, the farmer and his wife are a little drunk. With 14 children to raise, it helps. (Bo Sharon plays the children, alternating with Jimmy Hartman.)

Supper is served. Not much of a supper, in St. Peter's view—why didn't they stay with those nice rich farmers in the valley? However, the Lord cleans his plate and takes a swig as the jug goes around. And now the stories start.

The best one is about the Lord Himself. To hear it, in fact, is why He has come to Sand Mountain. It's about the problems he had as a boy. In Mary's eyes he couldn't do anything wrong, but in Joseph's eyes he couldn't do anything right, and he, Jesus, said some terrible things to him.

To see Bisig and young Sharon merge into the same character is to know the miracle of theater, but that's not the last miracle in the story. What's exemplary about John Schuck's production is its loyalty to facts—this cabin, this table, this fire (and when to poke it), this corn bread, these people.

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JOE KENNEDY / Los Angeles Times

Jeff Tyler, left, Gary Bisig and Basil Hoffman in one of two "Sand Mountain" one-act plays.

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When actors inhabit a space this truly, they become more than the sum of their individual performances, to the point where it's hard to say who is responsible for what moment. Much of Bisig's business as the Lord, for example, is to enjoy being with his creatures again. His fellow actors have got to give stuff to enjoy. But the company never settles for generalized good cheer.

Everybody is sharp, sometimes pained, sometimes peculiar.

The physical production is equally organic. Hilary Sloane's clothes are what mountain people would wear, Jack Forrestal's cabin set is where they would live, Ken Lennon's lighting draws us to the fireside, Reid Woodbury's sound design makes us glad to be out of the rain. You can go home again.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. on Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 and 7 p.m., until Jan. 10. Tickets \$13.50-\$17.50, (818) 780-2240.