

Playwright Takes His Current Celebrity in Stride

By SYLVIE DRAKE,
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At 57, Romulus Linney is finally getting all kinds of attention.

Consider: The San Diego Rep's successful revival of his 1971 "Holy Ghosts" went on to become the hit of the American Theatre Exchange's summer season at Manhattan's Joyce Theatre. For the holidays, the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys is resurrecting "Sand Mountain," Linney's twin Appalachian one-acts that had a spirited run there last year. Next May, the International City Theatre in Long Beach is planning the West Coast premiere of his "A Woman Without a Name." And the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven is currently scoring a hit with three Linney one-acts under the title "Laughing Stock." (See related review by Dan Sullivan on Page 1.)

It is, by any standard, a rami-explosion.

"You may call it that," Linney said from New York, with characteristic restraint, "but it's just a buildup of a lot of work. I've had many productions in New York. Some have gone well, some not. The solution, I saw early, was to work in the regions."

Linney, who was an actor back in the '50s, also holds a directing degree from Yale and often directs his own plays, "not so much because I want to, but because I want them to be right."

When he settled in New York, "I sort of became a novelist," he said. He wrote two novels, "Heathen Valley" (1952) and "Slowly, by Thy Hand Unfurled" (1965), later



Romulus Linney, teacher, director, prolific playwright.

making plays out of both.

Last April he staged "Heathen Valley" himself at the Philadelphia Festival for New Plays, while "A Woman Without a Name," based on "Slowly, by Thy Hand Unfurled," was developed and produced by the Denver Center Theatre Company in 1985-6.

"The way these things are," Linney elaborated, "it's sort of like a wind blowing the leaves around. Every now and then one of my plays gets done. One thing can be said: They don't seem to date."

"Why the Lord Comes to Sand Mountain" [the second of the "Sand Mountain" one-acts] was part of a novel called "Jesus Tales" that's just been reissued [North Point Press]. In 1984, I adapted it into a play and wrote the companion piece. They've been done all over.

"Last fall I directed 'Pops' [an-

other set of one-acts] at the Whole Theatre Company in Montclair [N.J.]. But the plays at New Haven are a good example of how my work has really been a buildup.

"They were written over a 20-year period. 'Goodbye, Howard' was a short story first. 'Tennessee' was written in the '60s and done many places, including the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York where it won an Obie in 1980. The third play, 'F.M.' [1983], came out of my teaching.

"I teach fiction and playwriting [at Columbia, Hunter College and the University of Pennsylvania]. It's the way I make a living—and I enjoy doing it. Three years ago I took those three plays and put them together, because I saw they fit together and could be played by six actors."

"Laughing Stock" had its original production at the Manhattan Punch Line in 1984, with Frances Sternhagen, who is re-creating her roles at the Long Wharf. "Everything revolves around her," Linney said. "She's a terrific actress."

A hallmark of Linney's plays is that they all appear to be very different from one another, both temperamentally and thematically.

"On the outside," he counters, "On the inside they're much the same. I went to a nice college [Oberlin], I like to read. It's clear to me now—after you write for a while you begin to see what you

do—that there are the plays of my Southern background, such as the 'Sand Mountain' plays [Linney grew up in Tennessee and North Carolina], the historical plays ["The Sorrows of Frederick," "Childe Byron"] and those based on personal experiences."

Sometimes they overlap.

"'Holy Ghosts' is a play I'd wanted to write for a long time," he said. "It's based on my Southern childhood, certainly I hated going to church, but every once in a while a revivalist would come through and I saw that some people had very different [religious] needs. It was very emotional and intense. I loved the music and the hymns."

"These were not TV revivalists. These were poor men who seemed to be having a wonderful time—very different from the church where a bored little boy sat in the back row playing cards."

You might say Linney is a methodical writer, not easily buffeted by the winds of fortune or dissuaded from an uncommonly steady course. In between teaching schedules, he keeps four to five writing projects going at all times ("so that when I get stuck on one I can move to another"). The current swirl of interest in his work is gratifying, yes, but he is not deceived into believing it will change his life. When asked if it's finally paying the bills, his answer is wry: "A little more than before."