

Do-It-Yourself Destiny in 'Amazing Grace'

By MICHAEL ARKUSH

Sandra Deer is a playwright, not a psychic. So don't confuse her with long-winded, esoteric questions about the psychic phenomenon, the sixth sense and all that stuff. Stick to the basics.

Like, "why did you write a play about a psychic?"

"I've always been intrigued by the idea there's knowledge and levels of consciousness we don't have," answered Deer, a Georgia writer whose play, "Amazing Grace," opened Thursday night at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. "Maybe we're not quiet enough to listen for it."

But amazing Grace Tanner, played by Patricia Huston, is. She's a psychic. A retired widow from rural Georgia, Grace moves to Malibu for the proper sunset; its light is supposed to inspire harmony. She soon finds herself helping the police solve a murder mystery.

(Such assistance can backfire. Etta Louise Smith of Pacoima, who claimed she had a psychic vision, led police in 1980 to the body of a slain nurse. She was

later arrested as the murder suspect, but was released for lack of evidence. Three men with no connection to Smith were eventually convicted of the murder.)

Grace's offbeat personality dominates the show, which is directed by Darryl Hickman. But the underlying theme, Deer said, is better reflected through the growth of two secondary characters: Maggie (Carmen Duncan), an aging actress, and Josh (Daryl Roach), a policeman. Through their association with Grace, both characters discover hidden truths about themselves.

"They learn to take responsibility for who they are," Deer said. "You have to create your own destiny."

On that subject, Deer could be an expert. When her husband died 10 years ago, she turned from teaching English at a Georgia college to staying home with her children. She began writing plays.

Her early efforts were unsuccessful. Then she scored with "So Long on Lonely Street," now on stage in England. Two years ago,

she started writing "Amazing Grace," although its roots date back much further.

"About 10 years ago, as a birthday present from my sister, I went to a psychic," she recalled. "I don't remember anything he told me."

While not a believer, Deer is far from skeptical. She claims that those who want science to prove the legitimacy of psychic phenomena miss the point. "Its nature is supposed to be beyond the understanding of our experiences."

Despite its title, "Amazing Grace" is not a religious play. "There's tremendous conflict in this play and an edge to it," Deer said. "It's not just about peace, harmony and love."

"Amazing Grace" will be performed at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, through Aug. 14. Evening performances are Thursdays through Sundays; matinees are Sundays. Preview performances (through June 5) are \$9.50 to \$16; after that, tickets are \$13.50 to \$20.



Sandra Deer, the author of "Amazing Grace," turned from teaching college English to writing plays after her husband died 10 years ago.