

AMAZING GRACE

Guys and Ghouls

If a motion picture or teleplay were to have, as one of its ingredients, a policeman on the trail of a serial killer whose victims are all children, you can bet that the thrust of the story would be toward the apprehension and arrest of the guilty party. In Sandra Deer's unusual new play, currently at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, we don't even get to see the villain. The murders are, in fact, a sort of McGuffin that forces the reluctant cop to visit the Malibu beach house of a psychic named Grace Tanner.

There he meets Maggie, an actress who hopes to revitalize her flagging career by portraying Grace on the silver screen; Grace's retarded grandson, Troy; and the lady herself, a feisty old dame who seems too well-grounded to be a psychic, until she slumps in her seat and begins to speak in the voice of her spirit contact. The detective, whose name is Josh, is an angry and dissatisfied man. Maggie the actress has lost most of her self-confidence. And Troy seems headed for a dubious future after his grandmother's age gets the better of her. It's up to Grace to spread a little magic.

Deer obviously cares a great deal for her characters, and, thanks to the way they are being presented in this Laura Zucker production, theatergoers are provided reason to do the same. Under Allan Miller's direction, Patricia Huston has a fine time as the outspoken, generous, slightly otherworldly Grace. Carmen Duncan is an attractive, brittle and emotionally bruised Maggie. And Jim Hiestand is extremely effective as the perennially adolescent Troy. Daryl Roach, who had just stepped into the role of Josh (following the exit of James A. Watson Jr.), seemed to be working his way into the pivotal characterization and should probably be there by the time you read this.

Don Gruber's oceanside set and sound designer Reid Woodbury's breaking waves are convincing enough to make you wish you'd remembered to apply sunblock. The entire production is several steps up from the average Equity-waiver presentation. And, thanks to the positive approach that playwright Deer has taken, there's more than a ghost of a chance that you'll enjoy her blithe, spirited play. ★★★