

V14 STAGE

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In review

Murder mystery with a 'Twilight Zone' twist

By DINA ADLER
Special to The News Chronicle

A warning: If (like this reviewer) you are a skeptic about psychics, faith healer, trance channelers and other such phenomena, see "Amazing Grace" (now at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys) with a friend who is a believer. As I did.

Barring that, leave all your doubts and preconceptions at the door and, as someone once said about another mind-boggling experience, "you're in for one helluva ride"!

The tour guide for this psychic adventure is Grace Tanner,

magnificently created onstage by Patricia Huston. Playwright Sandra Deer has fashioned her as a composite of many psychics whose work she researched for her drama. A low-key, "down home" channeler/healer, Grace has as her alter ego (the spirit for whom she serves as the channel) a strident male called simply "Teacher." His teachings are of the "be happy; love yourself" variety — time-honed platitudes which are effortless to hear and difficult to put into practice.

But, no matter. It is Grace, rather than Teacher, who is the true focus of this drama and, due to

the consummate skill of Huston, this character quickly wins our hearts. Living modestly in her Malibu beach house (a contradiction in terms if there ever was one), Grace is genuinely surprised when her psychic powers are called into service by the Los Angeles Police Department to help solve a series of particularly grizzly child abductions and killings.

Although she protests that she has only a 70 percent success rate (just enough to make her appear human and fallible) it does not deter Josh Shepard, the handsome police officer (played with appropriate macho by Daryl Roach). The two other characters in the play are Grace's retarded grandson Troy, played by Jim Hiestand in a sensitive, compelling performance, and Maggie, an actress who has bought the rights to Grace's life for a movie, a rather two-dimensional role with which

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Carmen Duncan does the best she can. Michele Cardenas and Christine Borna alternate as an abducted-but-found little girl.

There are some obvious flaws in the plot: Maggie's transition from skeptic to believer seems a bit

swift; Josh's decision to visit his own brain-damaged child seems forced; Grace's deteriorating health is alluded to but never made apparent to the audience (a lack that is crucial considering the play's denouement). Still, "Amazing Grace" is well worth seeing by skeptic and believer alike for one important reason: It makes us think — no small achievement in an era of soap operas and rock musicals.

Not everyone will be as enthralled as my friend, the believer, but most theatergoers will feel enriched by having made Grace Tanner's acquaintance and greatly indebted to everyone at the Back Alley Theater for making the introduction.

Amazing Grace runs from Thursday through Sunday evenings through August 14th. Tickets are \$13 to \$17.50. On Thursday evenings, the Back Alley has scheduled meetings with various psychics after the performance. For further information, call (818) 780-2240. The Back Alley is at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys.