

TODAY

'Amazing Grace' is a superb bit of theater

By FRANCES BAUM
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Area Theater Critic

BELIEF is an extraordinary thing. It is also fragile, especially when it involves the mystical. L.A. is famous for trendy looks at psychic phenomena, but we — along with the rest of the world — take such fads no more seriously than we do punk haircuts or someone's deep desire for a hot tub.

So, what if it is real? What if psychics really *do* have the answers? That is the question posed by "Amazing Grace," a sweetly superb bit of theater currently running at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. For some (including me) the story line takes a great suspension of disbelief, but the warm-

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ly comfortable results are worth the work.

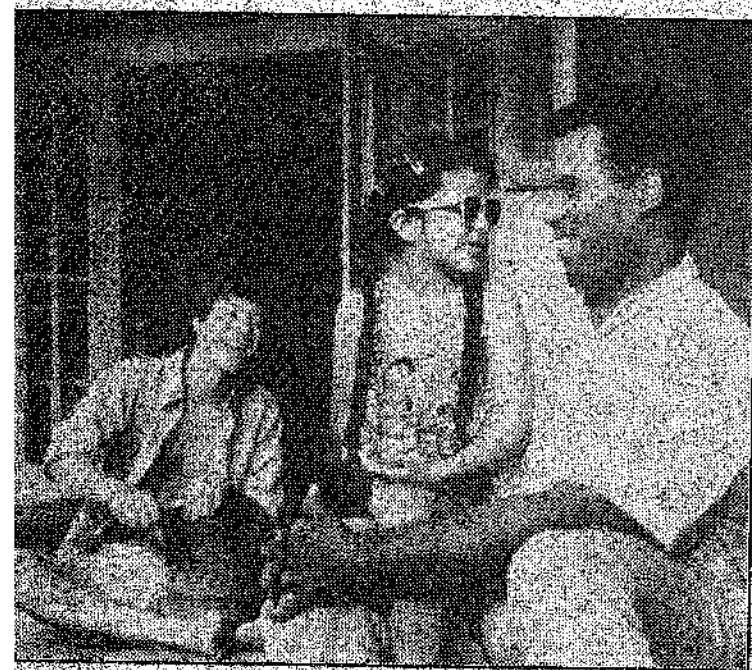
Grace is an aging psychic who has moved to Malibu from Georgia with her retarded grandson, Troy, with every intention of retiring. Maggie Ames, an actress who has bought Grace's life story, studies her, sure it will make a fabulous movie but unable to believe Grace's claims. Josh, also deeply skeptical, comes to Grace from the LAPD, searching desperately for any angle on a serial child killer.

All are enveloped in the warmth of Grace's gift. Gradually, by listening to Grace herself, and to "Teacher," the spirit through which Grace is the medium, each comes to a greater sense of self.

Patricia Huston proves a wonder as Grace. Aging gradually, continually more ethereal, she makes what should be a laughably impossible situation easy to accept.

Daryl Roach's gruff policeman melds nicely with the rest. His layers peel away without any stereotype to the long-time anguish of his job and his personal past. Yet, without any doubt, the finest performance of the bunch comes from Jim Hiestand, as the retarded Troy. An unaware visionary, he remains likeably intense and directly genuine. He is, indeed, special.

"Amazing Grace" runs at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys Thursdays at 8 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 7 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. The theater is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys. Call (818) 780-2240 for further information.



Hiestand, left; Christine Borna and Daryl Roach in the Back Alley's production of 'Amazing Grace'