



Los Angeles Times

November 24, 2004

A Gift from Heaven

Beverly Hills Playhouse  [Map](#)  [What's nearby](#)
254 S. Robertson Blvd., Beverly Hills



Tara Killian and Michael Petted portray cousins bound by hardship in "A Gift From Heaven."

"I don't know how to act around people," stammers Charlie (Michael Petted), the lumbering, shaggy-haired young man of the house in David Steen's bleak, affecting "A Gift From Heaven."

Charlie might be speaking for everyone onstage: No one in this isolated, hardscrabble shack in the hills of North Carolina seems to know quite how to behave. If they're not halting, faltering or stamping like nervous horses, the occupants of this mood-swinging household are testing limits, each other's and their own. Since no one wears more than a single layer of clothing in the dusty Appalachian heat, it's hardly unexpected when they act out their pent-up needs and frustrations on each other's bodies.

Ruling this sad roost is the severe, witchy Ma (Beth Grant), whose routine consists of berating her coltish adopted daughter Messy (Tara Buck) and cowed son Charlie with threats and "Jesus dust," a key ingredient in her own eerie, homespun version of Pentecostalism.

When orphaned cousin Anna (Tara Killian) comes a-calling, Ma alternates between simpering sycophancy -- since Anna has links to a moneyed branch of the family tree -- and chilling tantrums that keep everyone off-balance.

Under Jim Holmes' sculpted, unhurried direction, the play's stubborn rhythms and roiling subtext get their full due, with bracing jolts of humor and horror jabbing out like bony fingers. We can practically smell the rot on Victoria Profitt's wood-slat set, under the cheerless warmth of J. Kent Inasy's lights.

We can no more blame these folks for craving escape than for doin' what comes naturally.