

LAWEEKLY

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A Gift From Heaven

By Neal Weaver

David Steen's scarifying play is unadulterated Southern Gothic, with characters and situations so extreme that it verges on Grand Guignol. The setting is a tumbledown shack in the hills of North Carolina, in 1955, presided over by ruthless matriarch Ma (the powerful Beth Grant). A victim of incestuous rape, she has mothered at least one child - Charlie (Michael Petted), who may be retarded, or merely a victim of emotional and social deprivation. There's also a girl named Messy (Tara Buck), whose origins are more obscure. Ma, corroded with pain and primitive religion, regards Charlie as her personal property - her gift from God, whom she'd kill to protect and hold onto. Messy looks for love in dubious ways, so Ma regards her as a slut. Into their midst comes a pretty blond cousin, Anna (Tara Killian), and when she and Charlie succumb to a shy-but-potent mutual attraction, the stage is set for violence. By the end we're grateful that anyone survives.

Jim Holmes directs this revival with care and commitment that keep it from toppling over into caricature or melodrama, and Grant's Ma is both terrifying and sympathetic. Buck gives an equally full-blooded performance, while Petted and Killian bring battered charm and lyricism to the young lovers. Victoria Proffitt's bleak set, Stasha Surdyke's threadbare costumes and J. Kent Inasy's moody lighting admirably complement the grim drama.

Camelot Artists Productions at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, 254 S. Robertson Blvd., Beverly Hills; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru Dec. 19. (310) 358-9936.