

**A Gift From Heaven**  
**by David Steen, Directed by Jim Holmes**  
[Beverly Hills Playhouse](#)

Runs: November 13 - December 19, 2004

This play is that rare paradox of the parts being greater than their sum. A quartet of talented actors. A highly decorated set designer. A gem of a theater. And yet...

It is 1955 and Matriarch Ma (Beth Grant) rules over a ramshackle shack in the hills of North Carolina, terrorizing her adopted daughter Messy (Tara Buck), and seducing the simple-minded Charlie (Michael Petted). Enter Anna (Tara Killian) a cousin whose parents killed themselves by setting their home on fire. She is shell-shocked and sweet, a waft of fresh air in the stale, incestuous cesspool of her new, temporary home. Life in the lower rungs of society is surely dire, desperate, and disgusting, and Beth's Ma is a hard, embittered, and at times, an oddly tender woman; Michael is an uncomfortably wordless, introverted and awkward mess; Messy is pure country hick bravado, desperately wanting the love of a woman's whose life mission it is to deny it.

As with so many stories set in the "backwoods" of our country, there is enough incest, child abuse, and rape to fill three lifetimes. Director Jim Holmes nicely sets up a terse mood at the beginning of the first act, but the approaching storm becomes rather obvious halfway through it, and we spend the rest of the evening waiting for the inevitable. It is a literal storm that finally drives sweet, innocent Anna into the arms of misunderstood Charlie, an eventuality that we knew was coming from the minute she stepped over the damned threshold, and that we likewise know is not going to end well. In the final, awful denouement, we learn that Charlie is Ma's son by her uncle and Messy is her daughter by her father, and thus not only her children, but her cousin and her sister as well. How Messy resolves all the troubling issues is tragically the only way she will ever be embraced by Ma.

The cast is splendid, especially Tara Buck, whose tour de force performance manages to be heartbreakingly tragic even while making us laugh. Tara Killian offers a seamless arc to her character, as does Michael Petted. Beth Grant's steely eyes and gravelly voice convey her profound and desperate needs when she is in control, but falls short when the tables are turned on her. In the end, this is a story about our universal need for love, and how far we will go to get it.