

Jessica Tandy shines in otherwise tepid 'Story Lady'

Some good moments, but mawkish approach misfires

By Steven Alan McGaw

Watching TV during Christmas and the holiday season inevitably reminds us of the best and worst of which television is capable. On the one hand, there are great, inspiring specials, like PBS' yearly "Festival of Carols," or an encore of the moving "The Homecoming." Even Christmas episodes of regular series can be memorable, such as last holiday's "Murphy Brown" installment.

On the other hand, too many programmers apparently feel the season gives them license to air shamelessly manipulative fare having little to do with genuine emotion and everything to do with cheap sentiment. Who among us has not wearied of programs promising to illuminate "the true meaning of Christmas"?

That brings us to "The Story Lady," a new made-for-TV Christmas movie airing on NBC on Monday, Dec. 9. Multiple-award-winner Jessica Tandy stars as Grace McQueen, a New Jersey widow who comes to live with her daughter and son-in-law (Tandy Cronyn and Richard Masur). Frustrated in her attempts to find volunteer work, it occurs to McQueen that her lifelong skill at storytelling could be the basis for a pleasant local-access TV show. Reading selections by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, the "Story Lady" quickly nabbs a devoted viewership, largely among latch-key children home alone in the afternoons.

One of those children is Alex Pollard (Lisa Jakub), the daughter of ambitious advertising executive and single mom Julie Pollard (Stephanie Zimbalist). Told that Alex and all her friends are devout "Story Lady" fans, Pollard has an idea: Perhaps McQueen could be transformed into Granny Goodheart, the storytelling mascot for a large toy company and one of the agency's major accounts. Pollard pitches the idea to her boss (played cartoonishly by Ed Begley Jr.) and co-workers, who embrace the idea, especially since "the old lady won't want too much money."

Keeping their cynicism to themselves, the advertising folks woo McQueen with promises of entertaining millions of children and the novelty of not having to pay for her weekly broadcasts. McQueen signs a contract, then reveals her decision to her amazed family. "Are you strong enough to do this, Mother?" asks McQueen's daughter. "Of course," comes the reply.

McQueen's confidence, however, doesn't prepare her for what is in store when she submits herself to the fast-paced machinery of big-time advertising. An impatient acting coach barks instructions at her ("Brighter, brighter!"), totally ignoring the warmth in McQueen's low-key delivery. The day of the first taping, New Jersey's former "Story Lady" emerges from her dressing room an over-the-top confection of puffed sleeves, petticoats, rouged cheeks and white hair. McQueen gamely tries to go on, but realizes the jaded child actors gathered around her are not her audience.

Eventually, the pilot episode is

completed and sold, that's when McQueen's troubles really begin, especially as Begley bullies her endlessly. She draws the line, however, when ordered to get false teeth. "They'll look better," she's told. Without a pause, McQueen counters, "The Good Lord gave me these teeth!" At length, she knows the project must be ended, for she sees how far she has strayed from her original intent.

Tandy gives a fine, endearing performance, creating in Grace McQueen a vivid figure of dignity and charm. At the film's end, we'd like to know more of her. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of Stephanie Zimbalist's by-the-book, harried-working-mom bit, or the contrived machinations of the plot.

Christopher Gartin is quite winning as McQueen's original producer at the cable company. Charles Durning exerts considerable appeal in the film's last quarter as a crusty New York judge (don't ask how he figures in the story, but it's too little, too late).

MONDAY



Monday on NBC, Will (Kirk Cameron) rescues a troubled boy and girl (Jussie Smollett and Lacey Chabert) while seeking a Christmas playmate for his sister in *A Little Piece of Heaven*.