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Camping it up with Blanche and Baby Jane

ARTS COMMENTARY

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If ever a movie cried out to be mocked, it's the 1962 classic "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?"

The psychological thriller revolves around two sisters who were both stars in their time. Fortune reversed their fates as they aged.

As a precocious young girl, Baby Jane was a singing and tap-dancing vaudeville sensation, but she lacked talent and appeal after she grew up. (She was a spoiled brat as a child, and her disposition hasn't improved as she aged.)

Her older sister, Blanche, however, grew to become an extremely successful movie star whose career was destroyed when her legs are crippled in a car accident. Now she's confined to a wheelchair in her room on the second floor, where she's abused, physically and psychologically, by her younger sister, now an alcoholic and very unstable mentally.

Blanche needs to escape. But how? She is dependent upon her torturer for everything.

Jane is like an abusive husband, isolating Blanche physically and socially.

The two are living in a special hell of their own making. It is sibling rivalry to the extreme.

The movie starred Joan Crawford as Blanche and Bette Davis as Baby Jane.

Laboratory Theater's "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? A Parody of the Horror" stars Rob Greene and Randall Kenneth Jones, both throwing themselves into their roles with an over-the-top glee.

Everything about this play, written by Dale Gutzman and directed by Lab Theater founder Annette Trossbach, is over-the-top.

The make-up is slathered on. Blanche's penciled-in eyebrows are upside-down V's. Baby Jane favors blue eye shadow. And their bosoms are positively Parton-esque.

Mr. Jones as Baby Jane lumbers about, dressed in pink, her golden blonde hair still in childish banana curls. Baby Jane is no longer dainty. (To give you an idea of how far from dainty Mr. Jones is, one of his previous roles was that of Frankenstein's monster.)

Impersonating Ms. Davis' strange, staccato way of speaking, he bites off words as if snapping the necks of defenseless small animals.

Meanwhile, Mr. Green plays the martyr to the hilt, dressed in black like a Puritan. The scene where he tries to escape from his room, navigating the stairs on useless legs, is one of the highlights of the evening. (Baby Jane has taken Blanche's phone, and the only working one is on the ground floor near the front door.)

The two actors chew the scenery with abandon.

It's the type of play – and production – where anything goes. Sight gags, physical humor, word play, bad puns – it's all in there, along with rotary phones and a manual typewriter.

Some jokes fall short, but don't worry, there's another one coming – and another, and another – if that one didn't nudge your funny bone.

Some actors play multiple roles; Steven Coe and William Patrick Rogers are particularly funny as cigar-smoking movie producers.

Patrick Erhardt plays Mrs. Flagg, a daffy British mum, with Jack Weld as her son, Edwin. (The scenes



Jack Weld as Edwin Flagg, the pianist hired to help relaunch Jane's career, and Randall Kenneth Jones as the title character in Lab Theater production of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane: A Parody of the Horror." COURTESY PHOTO

where Baby Jane comes on to Edwin are some of the funniest in the show.)

Cindi Heimberg plays the nosy but clueless next-door neighbor, and Eren Sisk is her exasperated teenage daughter .

The role of the housekeeper, Elvira, played by a woman of color in the movie, is now a Swedish (or Swiss?) maid with a feather duster who seems to have walked right off the stage of playing Inga in "Young Frankenstein."

One of absurdities that made me laugh was the disembodied hand of the stage manager (Holly Hagan), which would appear from the wings on occasion to provide a prop.

It's difficult to reduce a movie with all its various locales to a stage, especially one as small as Lab Theater's. But they make do (though Blanche's bedroom looks awfully small, barely large enough in which to throw a tantrum). Set designer Michael Eyth gets away with giving the suggestion of rooms or spaces.

This parody is grotesquely humorous. We find ourselves laughing at people being slapped or beaten and talking cruelly to each other. The horror and suspense of the movie has been transformed into something humorous, campy and slapdash. Familiarity with the movie is not necessary but will definitely help you get the jokes and references.

Early in its run, the show's obviously a success; I've rarely seen the Lab Theater so packed.

Is it high theater? Far from it.

But it provides some laughs.

Or, as Mrs. Bates, the neighbor, says: "One must forget the unpleasant past ... and concentrate on the unpleasant present." †

'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane: A Parody of the Horror'

>> Who: The Laboratory Theater of Florida

>> When: Through July 15

>> Where: 1634 Woodford Ave., Fort Myers

>> Cost: \$23 (\$20 for seniors and \$10 for students)

>> Info: 239-218-0481 or www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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