

Review: Bette and Joan in drag, and more crazy fun in Lab Theater's 'Baby Jane'

CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 8:00 a.m. ET June 29, 2017



The campiness was already there in Joan Crawford's towering eyebrows and Bette Davis' over-the-top, unhinged performance. So it was only a matter of time before someone took "Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?" and went full-on camp with it — dead rat, screaming hysterics and all.

Thankfully, Lab Theater has done just that with its new production, subtitled "A Parody of the Horror."

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(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The horror, the horror: 'Baby Jane' gets parody treatment at Lab Theater in Fort Myers

(<http://www.news-press.com/story/entertainment/2017/06/21/baby-jane-fort-myers-lab-theater-laboratory-theater-theater-theatre-drag-men-feud-bette-davis/411919001/>)

This batty comedy has just about everything you could hope for: Men in drag playing the Bette and Joan roles with heaving, gigantic bosoms and spackled-on makeup; some deliriously melodramatic acting; naughty innuendo; sight gags; and plenty of fun pop-culture references (Feel free to shout out the phone number 867-5309. Just don't expect Jenny to answer).



Randy Jones (right) and Rob Green star in Lab Theater's "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane: A Parody of the Horror." *(Photo: Special to The News-Press)*

Director Annette Trossbach and her cast are having an absolute blast with this one. And you can, too. Audience participation is encouraged, and the people attending one recent performance took that directive and ran with it. They gasped and booed and shouted and made the show feel less like a creaky, black-and-white movie classic and more like a wild night with "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

All we needed was "The Time Warp" and Dr. Frank-N-Furter in fishnet stockings. Instead, we got "I've Written a Letter to Daddy" and a monstrous Baby Jane Hudson clomping around the stage in blonde Shirley Temple curls.

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(<http://www.news-press.com/story/entertainment/2017/06/27/fort-myers-cape-coral-fourth-july-independence-day-events-things-do-4th-july-4th-fourth/428440001/>)

Rob Green and Randy Jones make comedy magic as wheelchair-bound former movie star Blanche and her deranged, abusive sister Jane — a former vaudeville sensation once known as "Baby Jane" Hudson, but now long-ago forgotten and insanely jealous of her sister's later success.

Emphasis on *insane*.

Green plays the straight man ("woman?") here with his sweet, mild-mannered Blanche, but he finds lots of laughs with his earnest performance, ridiculous hysterics (complete with a spinning wheelchair) and one of the highlights of the night: An epic, tortuous trek from Blanche's upstairs bedroom to the telephone far below in the living room, with the paraplegic Blanche dragging herself s-l-o-o-o-o-w-l-y across the floor, inch by funny inch — and stopping along the way to toss aside a photo of Jane and later to pose fetchingly on the couch.



Rob Green plays Blanche in Lab Theater's "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane: A Parody of the Horror." (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Still, just like with the 1962 movie, it's Jane who gets the best moments and the best lines — her character gives actors permission to completely cut loose, and Jones doesn't disappoint. He makes the most of this maniacal role with a go-for-broke performance that's as unforgettable as it is hilarious.

Just about everything Jones does will make you laugh: his loose-cannon, rapid-fire delivery; the way he spits or hisses his lines with villainous gusto; his deranged cackling; his Frankenstein-sized silhouette in a blonde wig and pink dress; his unladylike clomping as he goes up and down the stairs to Blanche's bedroom; the absent-minded way he touches his massive fake breasts for comedic affect; and, generally, the way he chews the scenery like he's starving for sustenance.

This is funny, funny stuff and an absolutely inspired performance. It's so convincing, I worry for Jones' sanity.

Trossbach keeps the energy level high and coaxes some solid performances from the rest of her cast — particularly Jack Weld as Jane's piano accompanist (simultaneously horrified by Jane's sexual advances and enchanted by the money she's paying for his services) and Kayleigh O'Connell as an overheated Swedish maid (she calls Blanche "Bloosh") who also happens to be Jane's arch-nemesis, even squaring off with Jane to the theme music from "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly."

Along with these fun performances, the cast throws in plenty of random pop-culture jokes and sight gags, such as the GIGANTIC bottles of booze that Jane dumps into the garbage, or the big rainbow flag that makes an appearance at one point (it is LGBT Pride Month, after all).



Joan Crawford and Bette Davis starred in the 1962 movie "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?" (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Not every joke works, but that's OK. The comedy keeps coming, relentlessly and reliably.

Tickets for "Baby Jane" are selling out quickly at Lab Theater, but I hope this skewed parody catches on elsewhere, too. Written by playwright Dale Gutzman, the comedy has seen only two productions so far and hasn't even been published yet. But Trossbach saw one of those shows at the Hippodrome Theatre in Gainesville, and she wanted to bring it to Lab for its Southwest Florida debut.

I'm glad she did. This one's a winner. And you'll never look at Bette and Joan the same way again.

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If you go

What: "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane: A Parody of the Horror"

When: Now through July 15. Performances are 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday with 2 p.m. Sunday matinees July 2 and 9.

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers

Tickets: \$23 (\$20 for seniors and military, \$10 for students)

Info: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com (<http://laboratorytheaterflorida.com>)

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