

Theater Review: Mrs. Robinson is back in bold in 'The Graduate'

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You'll be seduced by Lab Theater's production



Jonathan Best stars as Ben in 'The Graduate' / Special to The News-Press

If You Go • **What:** Lab Theater's "The Graduate" • **When:** Now through April 5. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, with one 2 p.m. matinee this Sunday • **Where:** Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers • **Tickets:** \$20 (\$12 for students) • **Info:** 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

The scuba suit. The interrupted wedding. The immortal line, "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me!"

They're all there in Lab Theater's funny, poignant, swing-for-the-fences take on the 1967 movie classic, "The Graduate."

There are a few things you won't remember from the Dustin Hoffman movie, though. For example, there's a less ambiguous, more hopeful ending. And how's this for less ambiguous: Mrs. Robinson doesn't just strip down to her underwear in that famous seduction scene — she gets completely naked.

Nudity is something you don't see often on Southwest Florida stages, but it's a common enough occurrence in this theatrical adaptation based on the movie and the 1963 Charles Webb novel (Kathleen Turner did it on Broadway in 2002). So kudos to Lab Theater — and especially fearless actress Sandy Porter — for not taking the easy way out.

As for Mrs. Robinson: She should probably lay off the cocktails a little.

Now that we've gotten the nudity out of the way, let's get to why Lab Theater's "The Graduate" is so terrific: Perfect casting, delicate acting, lots of laughs and a skillfully bittersweet tone from director Lois Kuehne, who is rapidly becoming one of my favorite local directors (I still think about her amazing "Picasso at the Lapine Agile" at Lab Theater two seasons ago).

The coming-of-age story follows a recent college graduate who finds himself seduced by the middle-aged wife of his parent's friend. Things get complicated when Ben gets set up on a date with Mrs. Robinson's daughter and ends up falling in love with her, instead.

Jonathan Best makes you forget all about Dustin Hoffman with his surefooted take on the self-absorbed, rudderless and somewhat detached college graduate, Ben. He puts a wonderfully dry spin on his lines that makes them even funnier. I loved his eventual overeagerness in the bedroom with Mrs. Robinson and the formal, job interview-like way he tells her beforehand, "I really would like to thank you for this opportunity."

Porter is a horny force of nature as the proto-cougar, bored housewife Mrs. Robinson. She prowls Ben's bedroom and sizes up the poor guy with predatory eyes and unshakable confidence (that might be from the cocktails). But later, Porter ably shows the sadness, disappointment and fragility that hide behind those endless drinks.

As for the nudity, it's a little startling at first, but Porter and Best play it perfectly. It's a darn hilarious moment — especially with Ben's huge eyes and his frightened, awkward attempts to get out of an uncomfortable situation. The bedroom scenes with Ben and Mrs. Robinson crackle with sexual tension. But they're also hilarious.

Rounding out that famous love triangle is Shannon Riley as the fresh-faced Elaine, Mrs. Robinson's daughter. And like the rest of the core cast, she's perfect for the role: Innocent, intelligent and bubbling with life — just the sort of girl who would make Ben realize how empty sex is with Mrs. Robinson.

One or two scenes don't quite work in this Lab Theater production, but these are only minor issues. The supporting actors aren't quite as strong as the core three (although it's a hoot seeing Rob Green's Mr. Robinson lose his cool with a hand ax in Act 2).

And a scene involving Ben and Elaine at a strip joint runs into tone problems. Instead of sharing Elaine's mortification at this terrible first date, we're busy laughing at Brenda Kensler's hilariously run-down, saggy-breasted stripper — who, ironically, *does* keep her clothes on.

Still, I loved almost every other moment here, and the amount of time and thought Kuehne and her cast put into the show is obvious. That's true even with the show's minimalist set.

Kuehne's set is all black walls and furniture except for the futon bed dominating the center of the stage. It's all about the bed, after all. What happens in it and what doesn't happen in it.

In other words: Sex.

And, like Ben, you'll also be seduced.