

'The Graduate' opens at Lab Theater of Florida tonight



Tom Hall, 2014



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Arts & Exhibits Examiner

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The Graduate opens tonight at the Laboratory Theater of Florida. Under the direction of Lois Kuehne, the play stars Jonathan Best as intrepid Benjamin Braddock, Sandy Porter as the seminal cougar, Mrs. Robinson, Shannon Riley as Elaine and Rob Greene as the volatile Mr. R.

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In case you've forgotten, the plot is fairly straightforward. Benjamin Braddock is a bright but reticent young man who returns from an Eastern college to his parent's swanky home in Beverly Hills with a brand, spanking new baccalaureate degree. In short order, he gets seduced by the restless wife of his father's law partner, and then compounds the indiscretion by falling in love with Mrs. Robinson's daughter, Elaine.

Kuehne has been a director, scene designer, lighting designer and costumer for many



Courtesy of Laboratory Theater of Florida

years. She ran a successful community theatre on the east coast and has enjoyed her transition to Southwest Florida, where she's directed musicals, comedies, mysteries and dramas. Her credits include *Singin' in the Rain*, *Harvey*, *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*, *Clue, the Musical*, *Steel Magnolias*, *My Fair Lady* and *The Lower Room*, but she characterizes *The Graduate* as something of a departure.

"I usually do productions with over-the-top costumes and sets," she explains, her intelligent eyes looking into the distance at a remembered set. "I have a half-moon table that belonged to my grandmother. I use it in a lot of my productions. It sits by the front door and my husband places his keys on it when he come home at night. When he

walks in and his keys fall to the floor, he knows I'm designing another set," she laughs.

But she did not get to use her grandmother's half-moon table in *The Graduate* because this production is being done "black boxy, with shafts of light marking scene changes."

De-emphasizing costumes and set has a benefit when it comes to an iconic play like *The Graduate*. It frees the audience to concentrate on the dialogue and how the characters interact with one another.

"Each audience member is likely to see something different," Kuehne predicts. Most will get caught up in the antics and action of a true Broadway and Hollywood classic. But some will notice Jonathan Best's expressive face and boyish good looks; others will pick up on Sandy Porter's deep understanding of what drives Mrs. Robinson to do and say the things that she does; and most will see in Shannon Riley (Elaine) an emerging talent who is destined to take on bigger and more challenging roles.

And that's the joy of community theater.

"We really strive to put on quality productions," Kuehne says, stepping back from the production at hand to wax philosophic. "Every actor wants to do quality work. Annette [Trossbach] and the rest of her team create an atmosphere that makes that possible. Because everyone here has a different skill set, a unique niche, the actors are able to take just what they need [in order to do justice to themselves and their parts]."

Come see for yourself. Tickets are \$12 for students with valid ID, \$18.50 for seniors on Thursdays, and \$22 for adults. Some age limitations apply.

The Laboratory Theater of Florida is located at 1634 Woodford Ave, Fort Myers, 33901. The Laboratory Theater of Florida is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is dedicated to the promotion of the performing arts through education, community outreach, experimentation and the development of ensemble work. The company features ensemble productions, produces classic works, takes artistic risks and features and challenges local performers of various skill levels. For more information, please visit <http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com> or telephone 239-218-0481, and stay up to date with its news and events on Facebook and Twitter @LabTheaterFL.

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