L.A. Theatre Works Kicks Off
Riveting Revival of THE GRADUATE
By Caroline Spoto

Fifty years after Charles Webb's novel was published (and forty-six years after Mike Nichols' successful film by the same name), L.A. Theatreworks mounted a national tour of The Graduate. The premier performance (October 20, 2013) was at GPAC. When I saw this title in the GPAC season, I wondered how they might go about maintaining the integrity of that iconic show without serving up rehash. Their solution was the skillful use of an innovative genre bolstered by deft direction (Brian Kite), peerless performances and spellbinding sound design (Josh Bessom).

Their reprisal of this classic is a fascinating hybrid--radio production meets stage production--that unfailingly delivers the best of both. The actors appear in costume and are physically suited to their roles, but they perform with minimal staging. Live manual sound effects replace props and there are no sets per-se. As a result, vocal nuances, full-on facial expressions and solid literary writing carry the fast-paced performance. Instead of laughing on cue, the audience was rapt, I was among them, and the experience was grand.

This mid-century generation gap tale about disillusionment, transgression, love and redemption centers on burned-out, twenty-year-old fledgling Benjamin Braddock (Brian Tichnell). Though angsty, listless boredom doesn't ordinarily play well on stage, Tichnell's awkward charm and fine-tuned reactions make it work. Likewise, half-crocked cougar, Mrs. Robinson (Heidi Dippold) inhabits her role with a delicious mixture of unabashed vulgarity, country-club cunning and wrenching desperation.

Her sham of a marriage implodes when her avoidant, attaboy husband, (Matthew Arkin) finds out about her affair. Meanwhile Benjamin's well-meaning, but vacuous "swimming pool rich" parents (Diane Adair) and (Tom Virtue) display wonderful tension as they spiral from mildly perplexed to hopelessly distraught as the story unfolds.

Lovely Elaine Robinson (Jill Renner) is a believable enigma--idealism at odds with pragmatism; self-possession at odds with obligation; vivacity at odds with inhibition. The grittiness of each character's inner life is so effectively portrayed that their outward mannerisms seem like window dressing. Shadow silhouettes of simulated sex, graphic talk and actresses who strip to lingerie without the benefit of soft, blue lighting feel so natural and inevitable that they evoke no gasps, squirming or salacious titters--edgy good taste at its artistic best.

In this demanding, scaled-down production actor Darren Richardson portrays a varied range of high energy characters, and Benjamin's parents (Diane Adair) and (Tom Virtue) surprise us in additional cameo roles.

The Graduate will be touring the country through March 1st, 2014. In this particular case, even my "white glove-level" scrutiny can't find anything not to like. If this show is headed for your town, Run, don't walk to the box office!