

## **"WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SEDUCE YOU?" KATHLEEN TURNER SEIZES THE ROLE OF MRS. ROBINSON IN A STAGE ADAPTATION OF 'THE GRADUATE'**

By *Maureen Dezell*, Globe Staff

**Truth be told, says Kathleen Turner, "I find men under 30 quite uninteresting.**

"I shouldn't make blanket generalizations, but I will," she adds with a throaty laugh that sounds as if it's soaked in smoke, honey, and single-malt scotch. "I can appreciate a nicely formed bod as much as anyone. But men, until about the age of 29, lack conversation."

Turner puts aside her personal indifference to jejune members of the opposite sex to play Mrs. Robinson, a woman of a certain age and experience who seduces a callow Benjamin Braddock in the stage version of "The Graduate," which opens this week at the Colonial Theatre.

The Broadway-bound production is based more on Charles Webb's novel "The Graduate" than Mike Nichols's 1967 film adaptation. But it was brought to the stage because of the resonance of the movie, a classic that singularly captured the calm of postwar American affluence and youthful anomie just before the social, political, and sexual storms of the 1960s. A treasure trove of popular culture milestones and memorable moments, "The Graduate" also launched Dustin Hoffman's movie career, turned Simon & Garfunkel into mainstream musical bards, made "plastics" a punch line, and introduced "Mrs. Robinson" to America's sexual lexicon.

But this eagerly anticipated revival owes almost as much to Turner as it does to the film. A bawdy dame with a brain whom

Time magazine once described as the "first authentically mysterious feminine presence since Garbo," she is an American pop icon in her own right. The presence of a veteran performer with strong personal opinions about the roles of young men and older women updates the movie's almost comically skewed

notion of a May-October coupling in which the woman is the one going gray.

Turner bares more - albeit briefly - than Anne Bancroft did when she played Mrs. Robinson in Nichols's movie. She also dares to do more with the part.

Bancroft was 36 - a mere six years older than Hoffman - when she uttered the boozy, breathy come-on "Would you like me to seduce you?" Benjamin sleeps with a woman the age of his mother who's actually only old enough to be his sister. It's male fantasy and a half.

Turner is unabashedly middle-aged. As she sees it, unwrapping a surgically unaltered

47-year-old female form in "The Graduate" is another way of pushing limits of female sexuality and power. That is something she did for the first time 20 years ago in "Body Heat." Since then, she's been redefining the role of screen siren ("Prizzi's Honor"; the voice of Jessica Rabbit in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit") and stage seductress ("Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"; "Tallulah").

"Hollywood tells us women past a certain age can't be alluring," Turner says.

"Well, to hell with them. We are."

Just the idea of Mrs. Robinson, the siren in the suburban living room, bored by all of its conventions, looms large in many a young man's fantasy, says Jason Biggs, who costars in "The Graduate" as Benjamin.

Biggs jokes that he feels like a sex symbol by association with Turner. "Talk about fantasy," he says. "She's a subject of many."

But what about Mrs. Robinson?

Her saga is in many ways a mid-20th-century American spin on a story that's been told throughout the ages: the Hippolytus-Phaedra legend, a cautionary tale of the stepmother who tries to seduce her elderly husband's innocent son, then commits suicide when he spurns her advances.

"The Graduate" dispenses with the overt incest and tragedy of the legend, of course. It is more salacious - both older woman and younger man get sexual thrills in a relationship that exists outside the boundaries of convention and commitment. At least, until he falls in love with her daughter. The story is a paean to the sexual revolution, the early victories of which, it's

been said, freed women to have sex with men who were then free to leave them. As Turner sees it, Mrs. Robinson has a right to be angry about that.

"An older woman is not looking to create a home or have children," says Turner. "And he is happy to have someone take over his life for a while. She feels she controls him, and that's a pretty powerful feeling, especially for a woman in those days."

That circumscribed notion of female power, Turner says, is among the reasons it took her a while to get past disliking her character. "She's a bad mother and a bad wife," the actress says. "She's selfish and socially irresponsible and an alcoholic. It took me a while to think her through."

Turner eventually came to terms with the fact that her character "got pregnant in college, and after the war went straight into suburbia. This woman has been trapped her entire life. She's angry - and she should be angry. The whole world's on the verge of social change, and she's gonna miss that again.

"One of the things we find in this production is that we now have to almost set it in a historical perspective," she adds.

Indeed, in the decades since "The Graduate" was filmed, women have risen to positions of power on the Supreme Court and in corporate America. A Mrs. Robinson was elected president of Ireland, then named to a top post at the United Nations.

Recent Hollywood releases such as "Kate & Leopold" and "Gosford Park" suggest that, like many relationships that were once considered taboo, couplings between older women and younger men may become more commonplace, or at least acceptable. So do a spate of independent movies shown at this year's Sundance Film Festival: "Crush," in which Andie MacDowell plays a middle-aged schoolteacher who falls in love with one of her former students; "Tadpole," a coming-of-age story about a 16-year-old who falls in love with his stepmother, played by Sigourney Weaver; and "The Good Girl," with Jennifer Aniston as a 30-year-old married woman having an affair with a 19-year-old who still lives with his parents.

If that signals a trend, that's fine, says Turner, but it doesn't affect her much. She's been married to the same man for 18 years and is looking forward to

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

spending more time with him and their teenage daughter once the Broadway run of "The Graduate" closes.

The show earned only above-average grades when it played in Baltimore and Toronto en route to Boston. Reviews in Toronto - like those in London, where the actress originated the stage role two years ago - have concentrated less on the play than on Turner's short and subdued nude scene, and several male writers have reported that the actress still looks good, even though she is 20 years older than she was in "Body Heat." (Isn't everybody?)

Even so, "The Graduate" has sold out runs in both those cities and is breaking preopening box office records in Boston. That may be because of the story's enduring appeal or the result of clever casting. Alicia Silverstone of "Clueless" fame is Elaine. Biggs is a 23-year-old Hollywood heartthrob (despite his desperate on-screen dalliance with a sweet, gooey dessert in the movie "American Pie"). "They're terrific," says Turner of her costars. As if to underscore her thoughts on younger men, she adds: "My daughter thinks Jason is awesome."

**HEADLINE:** NATHAN LANE GOES BEYOND BROADWAY

**BYLINE:** By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

**BODY:**

Bombastic but fleet-footed, subtle yet outrageously funny, Nathan Lane is the kind of old-fashioned stage virtuoso who makes 'em laugh, breaks their hearts, belts it to the second balcony, and brings cheering crowds to their feet.

His star shone for years off-Broadway before his Great White Way triumphs in "Guys & Dolls," "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," and "The Producers," the last two of which earned him Tony Awards.

Why, then, is this maestro of music and light laughter hunkered down at the Huntington,

rehearsing the title role in Simon Gray's "Butley," a black comedy about an alcoholic, acerbic English professor whose male lover and wife leave him on the same day?

"Butley" is not a Broadway tryout. Nor is it a drama workshop for an overextended musical theater actor in bucolic New England,

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

says Lane, dismissing two likely explanations.

He has dreamed for years of taking on the title role in "Butley," Lane says. Gray has wanted Lane to play Butley since the mid-1980s, when Lane played Nick in the American premiere of Gray's "The Common Pursuit" and the playwright and actor got to know each other.

"I feel," Lane says of the role of Ben Butley, "as if it was written for me."

Lane's older brother, Dan, took him to see Alan Bates's 1973 Tony-winning performance in the title role on Broadway.

"I was about 16, and I was fascinated by the play, by the accents. It was all so foreign to me, I couldn't understand it," Lane recalls. "And I was just mesmerized by Alan Bates."

Even as he rehearses the part, the actor remains somewhat in awe of the acclaimed British actor's so-far definitive rendering of the self-loathing British don whose reckless self-destruction has been compared to Hedda Gabler's.

"It's a huge and challenging role. The range of emotions is extraordinary, and he never leaves the stage," says Lane. "He's also a difficult, sometimes very unpleasant character. In 1970, when the play was written, that kind of character hadn't been seen before that often. It gave Alan an opportunity to spread his wings and tapped into everything he can do."

Lane, 47, has stepped lithely into larger-than-life performers' shoes before. He won each of his Tonys - for Pseudolus in "Forum" and Max Bialystock in "The Producers" - for roles originated by comic performer Zero Mostel.

Lane's star turn as Max on Broadway is considered so peerless that Jason Alexander, who plays the role in the Los Angeles premiere of the Mel Brooks musical, has inserted a line in the character's jail monologue in which he imitates audience members parsing the play: "He's good, but he's no Nathan Lane."

"There isn't anyone else like Nathan," says his close friend actor Victor Garber ("Alias"). "He is able to express more in a look or a word than most actors I've ever worked with."

Lane's elastic features are expressive; his famously skewed eyebrows annotate facial expressions that can flicker from those of a con man to a clown or a droll intellectual to a regular guy in less than a New York minute.

His "Producers" costar, Matthew Broderick, has seen it firsthand.

"When we were working together, I found myself hoping something would go wrong - that someone would forget a prop or not enter, which always makes things fun," says Broderick by telephone from the set of his new movie, "The Stepford Wives."

"Because Nathan can't really be thrown. He's extremely quick on his feet. He's very funny, and he's also a good audience."

"As funny as Nathan is and as good a singer as he is, he's just as good in straight, serious roles," adds Broderick. "He's incredibly versatile. And very, very smart."

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

Those who've watched him closely say the role in the Huntington production will bring as much from Lane as anything he's done so far.

" 'Butley' seems like a dream role for Nathan," says playwright and screenwriter Paul Rudnick, calling from his corner of the set of "The Stepford Wives."

"You can't just have a good actor - you have to have a brilliant actor, someone who can hold the stage, who's the reason for the evening. Someone who has elegance and the common touch.

"When Nathan comes onstage, the welcome, the affection is extraordinary," Rudnick adds.

Theater devotees have followed the actor's work since his early, signature performances in Terrence McNally's "The Lisbon Traviata" and "Lips Together, Teeth Apart," a play McNally wrote for Lane.

"Nathan was born for the stage and most truly exists there," says McNally. 'Not a sad clown'

Lane acknowledges he is most at home onstage. He was a chubby, lonely kid who discovered the comfort and joy of making people laugh and engaging an audience early on, he recalls.

Lane has described his Irish Catholic family background as "bad Eugene O'Neill." Born in Jersey City, the third of three sons in a blue-collar family, he was named after his uncle Joe, a Jesuit priest. He changed his name to Nathan when he applied for an Equity card and discovered there was already a Joe Lane in the union.

Lane's father was a truck driver, an amateur tenor who drank himself to death; his mother was a manic depressive, helpless for extended periods during Lane's childhood.

When he was 21, he told his mother he was gay. Her response was, "I'd rather you were dead." Lane riposted, "I knew you'd understand."

But Nora Lane made a point of seeing all of her son's shows.

"What she used to say was, 'I'm not saying it because I'm your mother, I'm saying it because it's true. You were the best one,' " he says.

The Dickensian aspects of his background have been over dramatized, he adds. "I am not a sad clown," he insists. "I am not a sad clown," he says again, adding an expletive for emphasis.

Lane sits down for an interview with the enthusiasm of someone about to undergo a root canal. He loosens up quickly, though, when he begins to talk about "Butley."

He grows intrigued when he is asked about a bracketed swath of dialogue that Gray included in early published editions of "Butley" but has since excised.

Lane wasn't aware of the passage. He reads it out loud, ponders it, and later keeps his driver waiting until he gets a copy. He calls Huntington artistic director Nicholas Martin, who is helming "Butley," that night to discuss his discovery.

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

"Nathan not only comes to the first rehearsal with all lines learned, but with all thoughts for his performance in place," Martin says. "He knows everything there is to know about the play. But he's like a super-actor. It never gets in the way of his spontaneity. He can do 10 different things with the same line." Pushing himself

Lane and Broderick return to Broadway New Year's Eve to reprise their roles in a three-month limited run of "The Producers." Plans are coming together for the two to costar in another film version of the work, says Lane.

"As I'm getting older, I want to challenge myself," he says.

But his efforts to break out into movies, television, writing, and producing have been frustrating.

Lane spent five years developing a biopic of Jackie Gleason. "But then there was a television version with Brad Garrett, which was very sentimental and very cliched," says Lane, disappointed. "I think it turned people off."

Even following the heady success of "The Producers," Lane says, he found it impossible to get the film made.

"People said no one remembers Gleason except for 'The Honeyymooners,' " says Lane.

"He was Irish Catholic and dark and unpleasant, yes. But he was funny, really funny, and charming. . . . I think he symbolized a lot of what the country was about at that time."

Lane enjoyed his biggest movie success with 1996's "The Birdcage," opposite Robin Williams. But that didn't break open his career, either. "After 'The Birdcage,' everybody said, 'Oh, you must have been offered everything.' And I was offered nothing," he says, chuckling.

"And, you know, the longer time goes on, the directors get younger, they're 22, and they don't go to theater, they don't know what I do. And after 27 years, I don't want to have to prove to some kid that I know how to act."

Twice he's tried to get TV projects off the ground. In the 1998 sitcom "Encore! Encore!" he starred as an opera singer who loses his voice and goes home to live with his mother in Napa Valley. It was quickly canceled.

He is still fuming about "Charlie Lawrence," a CBS sitcom that aired twice last spring in which he played a gay former actor who becomes a congressman.

" 'Charlie Lawrence' was a show I was very proud of and happy with," says Lane, who was an executive producer and writer.

"We made seven episodes," he says. CBS president Les Moonves "really did not care for it and decided to systematically sabotage it," says Lane, a palpable irritation creeping into his voice.

"Look, it was totally a business decision, but it was handled quite brutally," he continues.

He pauses and vents.

"As Michael O'Donoghue once wrote to Tom Shales, 'I only hope

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

you get rectal cancer and die screaming,' " Lane says, quoting the comedy writer's venomous comment with relish.

"Does that explain how I feel about Les Moonves? And I only hope his wife takes him for everything he's worth in the divorce."

That brief rant resembles the withering wit that flashes through "Butley," a play Lane finds more enthralling as he delves into it more deeply, he says.

"Look, this is all that matters," Lane says, gesturing toward a rehearsal room as he leaves the Huntington Theatre.

"I think it's going to be great," he says with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "I think it's going to mean the rediscovery of the play, the rediscovery of Simon Gray."

In a somewhat more subdued tone, he allows, "It already has a different feel than the Alan Bates play."

A week closer to opening night, Lane reports that rehearsals for "Butley" are going more smoothly than he expected.

"It's such a good play, so well constructed," he says. "The language is incredible. And it's screamingly funny."

"Yes, it's going very well," he adds. "And I never say that. I never feel that way about anything."

Maureen Dezell can be reached at dezell@globe.com.

The Boston Globe

## FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE: Kelsey Grammer

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

SECTION: ARTS; Pg. D1

LENGTH: 1540 words

NEW YORK - It isn't every sitcom star who can bump William Shakespeare off a marquee.

Kelsey Grammer gets top billing and the Bard goes unmentioned in the preshow publicity and most of the buzz about the "Macbeth" starring Grammer that opens its pre-Broadway run at the Colonial Theatre this week. Assuming that fans

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

who would normally shirk Shakespeare will turn out to see Frasier Crane play the Bloody Thane, the show's producers are peddling a persona, not a play. Grammer's familiar baritone is ubiquitous on local airwaves. In one radio ad, he talks about how he looks forward to getting back to the city "Cheers" was set in. In another, he observes drolly: "I haven't frightened myself this much since I rolled my car over four years ago."

Highbrows are rolling their eyes, of course, at the Cheers reference and allusion to Grammer's pre-Betty Ford days - not to mention the notion that a TV actor has any business playing Shakespeare's tortured tragic hero.

What few enthusiasts or skeptics seem to anticipate is the strong possibility that Grammer, a three-time Emmy winner, might be good. This is not a vainglorious psychiatrist and dilettante playing the Scottish king, after all, but an actor who's done his share of Shakespeare - and reportedly done it well.

When Grammer appeared in the title role in "Richard II" at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1992, a critic for the LA Times, who otherwise loathed the production, called his performance "towering."

"Kelsey taught me Shakespeare," says Diane Venora, Lady Macbeth to Grammer's lord, a veteran of the Public Theatre/New York Shakespeare Festival, taking a break outside a Manhattan rehearsal studio, while Grammer wraps up a morning of jousting and shouting. "We were in the same class at Juilliard, and he knew more about Shakespeare than anyone. He's a classical actor who happens to have made a successful career in television."

"I was thrown out of Juilliard at the age of 20. On the most practical level, it was because I wasn't going to class," Grammer says later over lunch in the Old Town Bar and Restaurant in New York's Flatiron District. "I spent the next year auditioning in New York, trying to get work."

He was plying a typical New York performer's trade - painting offices - when he ran into Nicky Martin, now the artistic director of Huntington Theatre Company. "And he looked at me as I was hanging a dropped ceiling and he said 'Are you an actor? Would you like to audition for the Old Globe Theatre [in San Diego]?' And I said 'yes.' And I did."

Grammer worked with the Old Globe for three years, and returned to New York, where "I waited tables and was a busboy and got into a play at the Guthrie" Theatre in Minneapolis.

In 1980, he auditioned for the role of Macbeth in a production directed by opera impresario Sarah Caldwell, at New York's Lincoln Center. He landed the role of understudy, and filled in for the lead, Philip Anglim, for several weeks. (Martin, who saw Grammer's performance, said it was "superb.")

Grammer insists he was "too young when I played it - I was 25. I didn't quite have the maturity, or the size, to embrace what I do think is one of the more important, powerful roles in the Shakespearean canon." He says that this new "Macbeth" is his chance "to get it right."

#### A stage actor offstage

The Old Town is a dark-paneled, red-oil-tablecloth, well-kept-New York-secret sort of place, its walls adorned with signed photos of actors, writers, and other local notables who've frequented the restaurant over the years. Grammer sits beneath an array of pictures and magazine profiles of Frank McCourt.

Occasionally, there's a frisson of excitement, as someone realizes that Frasier Crane is eating a cheeseburger at a corner table. When a waitress

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

bustles over to say, "I finally figured out why I know you!" Grammer smiles graciously. "Isn't that charming," he says, as if no one had ever picked him out in a lunchroom before.

Stardom notwithstanding, he seems more a mid-career stage actor immersed in a major role than a TV personality.

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's more demanding roles - an ambitious young man "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" at the outset of the drama, who devolves into a "dead butcher" by its end. It is an actor's challenge to make the murderous king sympathetic throughout.

"The language, even in the beginning of the play, is a little more innocent in its approach," observes Grammer. "And then he starts to take on the power to conjure the darker forces around us. He gets into the business of state. Then he's a lot more brusque and to the point. In the end, [what he says] flares with some extraordinary human emotions. The 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech is a naked, bare moment."

Director Terry Hands and Grammer "found a common ground of thinking about the play, where we think it's very spare," says the actor. "Terry says it should be done as if it were a freight train - that there's a momentum that can't be stopped. It is written in jump cuts. It doesn't have a flow to it. It's scene, scene, scene, scene, scene," he continues, snapping his fingers. "That is pretty ideal for the visual habits of today's viewing public. It loans itself to a contemporary staging of this play."

Grammer is "surprised that some people were so surprised that I was going to do this. Maybe I'm just being naive," he says. "Frankly, if you watch Frasier, the guy is Shakespearean. That role is huge - larger than almost anything I've even seen done in theater. I've never played anybody who goes as far as he goes. I mean, when he was jumping up and down on a bed, trying to have sex with himself, I thought, 'This is definitely without a net.'

"There are some very limited imaginations in my profession, and 'Frasier' has certainly pigeonholed me in certain people's minds," he continues. "I take on this role as a possible means to change that perspective. I also do it because I believe that I am an actor capable of a great many roles."

#### Damned spots

Like most men and women of the theater, Grammer acknowledges the legend and superstition that have historically been associated with "Macbeth."

At the first performance of the play in 1606, a young Hal Berridge, who played Lady Macbeth, collapsed from a fever and later died. Legend has it that Shakespeare himself had to fill in.

In New York in 1849, just blocks away from where Grammer is eating lunch, the infamous Astor Place Riots erupted in 1849 during a performance of "Macbeth" starring British actor William Charles Macready. Ardent fans of his American Shakespearean rival, Edwin Forrest, were infuriated that their man was not onstage. More than 20 people were killed and three dozen injured in the rioting.

Famous actors have experienced freak accidents while playing the Thane (Laurence Olivier). Reputable thespians receive their worst reviews (John Barrymore and Peter O'Toole.) In and around Boston, the two most recent major productions of what theater folk refer to superstitiously as "the Scottish play" suffered "the curse of 'Macbeth.' "

A 1988 version starring Christopher Plummer and Glenda Jackson was beset with difficulties before it got to Boston and once it went to Broadway, not the

FROM SHRINK TO SHAKESPEARE The Boston Globe May 14, 2000, Sunday

least being that it was helmed by three successive directors. In 1993, the American Repertory Theatre mounted a scaled-back production of "Macbeth" with Christopher Lloyd, who abruptly left town without saying where he was going, weeks into rehearsal. The ART combed the country for experienced Macbeths, and ended up hiring Philip Anglim.

"What curse?" says Grammer, laughing. Then he dutifully darts his eyes around the room, as actors tend to do. "I'm not going to be cocky about it. What it is is that the level of focus is so intense throughout this play that it's very easy for people to make mistakes. You get a little sluggish, and somebody gets hit on the head with a sword. Boom!"

Concentration is key. So is an adage spoken by an entertainer he emulates, the late Jack Benny: " 'Always play up to your audience.' I heard him say that once on Carson.

"I was 17 at the time, and I thought, 'That's the way you should play Shakespeare.' Don't slow it down. Or play down to your audience. Play up to them so that they sit up and take the ride with you.

"I've always pegged the success of 'Frasier' to the fact we play up to the audience."

At the end of Grammer's acting day, playing the part of an uptight shrink or Shakespearean character unraveling isn't all that different. "Throughout the process of being on television for 17 years, I've still remained the guy who started out as just an actor. Somewhere along the way, I guess, success or television identity can obscure that.

"One of the greatest things that ever happened to me was when I was doing Cassio in 'Othello' on Broadway with James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer. And one afternoon I came downstairs after the matinee and a little boy was standing out front and said 'Mr. Grammer, I saw you play Macbeth, and I've been reading Shakespeare ever since, would you give me your autograph?'

"That's all I ever wanted as an actor - to open up another mind to Shakespeare."

Copyright 2000 Globe Newspaper Company