

# ARTS COMMENTARY

## The rumor's true: 'Rumors' provides multiple laughs

**nancySTETSON**  
nstetson@floridaweekly.com




The cast of "Rumors."

DAVID DACK MAKI / COURTESY FLORIDA REP

It was raining.  
Traffic was crawling.  
My to-do list was longer than my days, and my days were already too long.  
Frankly, my mood was as foul as the weather.  
Not exactly the best frame of mind in which to see a comedy — or maybe the ideal frame of mind in which to see one, because I obviously needed it.  
It was opening night of the 14th season at Florida Repertory Theatre. I took my seat and prepared to watch Neil Simon's "Rumors," a farce.

Then I laughed.  
I laughed again.  
Soon I was roaring. And the rest of the audience was, too.  
Every so often, a part of a line would be drowned out by laughter. Some of the characters were so funny they didn't even get to finish their line before people started laughing.  
The producers of the original Broadway show claimed "Rumors" has 6,000 laughs.  
Unfortunately, I can't verify that.  
I was too busy laughing to keep count.

The show begins mid-action. A couple, Chris (Michelle Damato) and Ken (Brad DePlanche) have arrived at their friends' anniversary party, when they hear gunshots. They break into the house, only to find their host bleeding from what appears to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound. His wife is nowhere to be found, and the help is missing, too. It's all very curious, and the two are in a panic.

Chris and Ken want to keep the incident quiet, because the host is not only their friend, but the deputy mayor of New York. Besides, they don't even know what's happened. But they plot to keep the other dinner guests in the dark when they arrive.

Of course, despite their promise to each other, neither can wait to give their friends the low-down.

The two-story house is elegant with understated gray walls (set design by Jim Hunter). The owners are obviously

wealthy; the décor is on the bland side and doesn't show any personality. There's a couch and some chairs for the guests to flop into or hide behind, and a staircase leading to the second floor that gives some of the characters quite a workout as they run up and down throughout the show. And, as farces require, there are a number of doors (six, in this case), most of which get their own a good workout as they're flung open and slammed shut, over and over.

Thanks to Roberta Malcolm's costuming, the men look sharp in their tuxes and the women lovely in their gowns. These people are definitely the upper crust, driving BMWs, attending charity events (and buying a new dress for each fundraiser they attend.)

Mr. Simon introduces us to his characters couple-by-couple, as they arrive at the house. (Even the police officers who show up — Mark Chambers and Julianne Avolio — are a unit.)

While "Rumors" isn't a deep or multi-layered play — it exists purely to entertain and make us laugh — it's very revealing when it comes to married couples. They bicker and fight, throwing lines at each other like prizefighters in a ring. They have mini-power struggles. They drop little comments that drip with sarcasm.

All their little spats and disagreements rang so true that I truly believed each couple had been long married.

Claire (Carrie Lund) and Lenny (David Breitbarth) are the second couple to arrive. They've heard rumors about the hosts. Lenny's heard that the hostess is having an affair, while Claire's heard it's the husband who's cheating.

What is rumor? What is true? You're never quite sure with this play.

The third set of couples to arrive is Ernie (David S. Howard) and Cookie (Viki Boyle). She's a TV cooking personality and he's an analyst. The two have two of the best lines in the play (his in act one, hers in act two), which unfortunately can't be printed. And Mr. Howard gets laughs just by how he says "Hello" when he answers the phone.

Glenn (Peter Thomasson), who's running for state senate, and Cassie (Jackie Schram) round out this quartet of couples.

Mr. Thomasson, with his silver hair and spray-on tan, preens before the mirror and, dripping with insincerity, is the perfect representation of a slimy politician. His wife, on the other hand, is haughty, and when she gets angry with him, decides to flirt with someone else's husband.

Director Robert Cacioppo has cast well — every actor in this ensemble is truly funny and adept at comedy, physical and spoken. Ms. Lund is particularly droll; she gets off many dry lines

throughout the night. Mr. DePlanche and Mr. Breitbarth are also comedic pros; I especially loved a scene where they were both holding the phone and wrestling with it while arguing.

And Ms. Damato had the audience in stitches, especially when she'd had too much to drink.

Mr. Cacioppo also worked his actors' physical differences into the show, to great humorous effect. Ms. Schram, who's tall and slender, must tower well over 6 feet in her stilettos. Ms. Damato, on the other hand, is petite. The Mutt-and-Jeff effect is very funny.

I saw another production of this play earlier this year and didn't laugh quite as much. This ensemble understands the nuances of the dialogue, and things that weren't funny in the earlier production are now. With just a gesture, or one word or an expression, they have the audience helplessly laughing.

Mr. Simon wrote "Rumors" with all the comedic ammunition he had at hand. There's physical humor, slapstick, one-liners, situational humor, set-ups and recurring jokes.

And this ensemble knows how to do justice to it all.

Mr. Simon has some terrific lines in this play — take, for example: "They were as close as freshly laid wallpaper." It's not only a great image, but his choice of the word "laid" also adds to the sexual innuendo of the comment. There's also: "I want us to be the way we were before we became the way we are."

"Rumors" opens at a fairly frantic pace and grows only more manic as the action continues. It's brilliant and wonderful, sheer lunacy that wildly veers from disaster to disaster, growing more absurd by the minute.

If you're in desperate need of some levity, "Rumors" is definitely the play to see. ■

**in the know**

- "Rumors"
- >> **When:** Through Nov. 19
- >> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre at the historic Arcade Theatre, downtown Fort Myers
- >> **Tickets:** \$40 and \$45
- >> **Info:** 332-4488 or [www.BoxOffice@FloridaRep.org](http://www.BoxOffice@FloridaRep.org)



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