Sex in the lab

by Kathryn Reklis in the November 26, 2014 issue

“We are scientists, after all,” says Virginia Johnson (Lizzy Caplan) as she removes her blouse and bra and places Bill Masters’s (Michael Sheen) hand on her breast. The Showtime series *Masters of Sex* follows the sex researchers from the late 1950s through the early 1960s. In an early episode the couple begins to sleep together for the purposes of science.

This might sound like a handy excuse for an affair, but that’s only part of the story. Sex, Bill argues, is a taboo subject in science because of moral and religious interpretations. By explaining what happens to the human body during sex he hopes to lift the shroud and receive a Noble Prize for his achievements. (He proves his point about the taboo of sex and demonstrates the size of his ego when he shows his colleagues a video of a woman masturbating.) For Virginia this study is the first time she’s been taken seriously as a woman of ideas. And as someone who’s been divorced twice and is frequently in casual relationships, she has her own reason for fighting sexual taboos.

Both researchers are motivated by their scientific investigation and believe that sleeping together is part of their work. But their motivations are of course more complicated: it’s after having sexual fantasies about Virginia that Bill proposes that they “undertake the work,” while Virginia initiates the sexual encounter immediately after Bill promotes her. Science, power, attraction, and control become entangled as they go to bed.

The show exploits the tension between scientific explanations of sex and the way most of us experience sex. The naked bodies wired up in a laboratory room are not nearly as titillating as the melodramas that unfold between the characters when they're fully clothed.

It turns out that the drama of sex is more powerful than any scientific explanation.

The real Masters and Johnson helped transform the way that people experience and talk about sex. They spoke of sex as something natural and healthy that could be pursued for the sake of pleasure. They debunked myths about female sexuality and the variety of sexual experience that is healthy and desirable. They gave sex a scientific vocabulary just as the sexual revolution of the 1960s was pushing against the moral vocabulary that had longed defined America's discussions (or lack of discussions) about sexual experience.

But *Masters of Sex* makes clear that the impulse to describe human sexual response can quickly bleed into a desire to proscribe it. It's a small jump from understanding how the body behaves in sex to generating "protocols" or "scripts" that dictate how the body should behave. Our desires will always exceed and complicate any such scripts.

This is good news. I am reminded of Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*. Binx Bolling, who is searching for life's meaning and meaningful relationships, finds himself frustrated by the "techniquing" of sex. Sex as something to be mastered does not finally satisfy him.

Masters and Johnson pursued "sexual technique." They frequently paired men and women who had never met and then observed them having sex. This impersonalization of sex is belied by their own relationship, which mixed sex with questions of emotion, attraction, intimacy, and commitment—factors that are impossible to account for in an experiment.

The tension between Masters and Johnson's messy affair and their attempt to describe it scientifically makes for scintillating television. It's also a good reminder of the limits of scientific thinking in our own discernment about sexual behavior. Good sexual technique doesn't make good sexual theology. For that we have to accept that sex is more often marked by humor and humility than by ecstasy and mastery.