

THEATER

It's a challenge to say enough about *Lips* to inspire you to dash out and buy your tickets while not spoiling too many of the surprises in this exciting new play.

The first act is quite mysterious, not so much a whodunit as a whydunit: Why does the first female president of the United States decide to tell the world she's a lesbian? Known only as Joni, this prez is elegantly delineated by Reed College faculty member Kathleen Worley. Her Joni is a bold, straight-talking dame with a very unusual secret agenda.

The set for this three-character play is minimalist—all black and white and hard surfaces. Though there are at least 10 different settings, all scene changes are accomplished with lighting and a few shifts of props. Although there isn't much visual texture to linger over, that lack redirects all attention to the actors and their words—and the words by veteran playwright Constance Congdon are the star attraction.

Congdon's script provides many heartfelt speeches on the subject of gay rights, as well as plenty of laughs along the way. Joni describes herself at Vassar as a "LUG—lesbian until graduation." Later on she says: "And so it came to pass that dead-from-the-waist-down June Cleaver moved into the White House."

Another character with some mystery about him is Andy, the all-purpose aide to the president ably acted by Sean Parker, who seems to be playing both sides of the political fence as he plays matchmaker for his boss. His romantic candidate is Rachel, a young woman with a scarred past and a strong motivation to cooperate. The two of them have their own complex past together, which adds to the drama. Rachel is not all that likable at first, but Linda Hayden's emotionally charged portrayal makes her incredible adventure easier to believe.

More evidence of Congdon's wit is found in an exchange in which Rachel asks Joni if there has ever been a gay president. "You mean after Eleanor Roosevelt?" Joni asks back.

After the inevitable press conflagration begins, Congdon demonstrates her facile use of language while showing that Joni is prepared for any consequences: "We're setting a big, sort of righteous fire that will attract all the cameras and writers like moths." She then adds, "A 21 alarm fire." When Andy asks why 21, she replies: "That's how many guns they fire when they bury a president."

Lips is mounted by the Profile Theatre Project, a fledgling company in its third season, which also has a unique premise—to focus each season on the work of one playwright. Last fall the group presented Congdon's *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, a play whose title reveals the author's quirky sense of humor. And despite its very serious themes, which include a lesbian mother's fight for custody of her child, *Lips* also is a comedy.

Congdon can't resist referencing her inspiration, Monica mania. After Rachel asks Joni for a favor and is turned down, she says: "I thought you could do anything." To which President Joni replies: "Watch any news at all in the last few years?"

Congdon, whose first professionally produced play premiered in 1981, currently teaches playwriting at Amherst College in Massachusetts. She recently squeezed in an e-mail interview with *Just Out*.

When asked about the settings for her plays, she replies: "A sense of place is very strong in my work. You can see it in *Lips*—I lived in Maryland for five years. D.C., northern Virginia, Camp David are in the play. I don't know if I've ever written a play without some scene outside."



From left: Sean Parker, Kathleen Worley and Linda Hayden flesh out the characters in *Lips*

Kiss these Lips

There's much to love about this new play featuring a very gay-friendly female president

BY ORIANA GREEN



Constance Congdon

In *Lips*, which was inspired by President Clinton's sexual escapades and the media frenzy that followed, Congdon wanted to explore what might happen if a president in the near future had another kind of sexual secret.

"The subject matter was much on my mind during the Clinton ordeal, particularly the self-righteousness of the media pundits who were feasting off the nonevent, meanwhile ensuring that

their lecture circuit speaking fees would skyrocket," the author says. "And then I started thinking, what would a president think who followed this mess?"

How long does she think it will be before we really have a woman in the oval office?

"*Lips* is set not so far in the future. I think the country is more than ready for a female president," Congdon asserts. "There are so many factors involved on

the road to a strong candidacy. I guess Anne Richards isn't young enough. I was actually sorry Elizabeth Dole dropped out. I wish Barbara Jordan were still alive. I'll never forget the euphoria of Geraldine Ferraro's candidacy."

So, does Congdon consider herself a feminist?

"I consider myself a humanist. I feel strongly about the rights and need for social justice for all people," she says. "As a woman, I am, of course, very interested in feminist causes. I've learned a lot about politics watching the tremendous strides women have made in my lifetime."

And would she call herself a political junkie?

"I'm not a political junkie, but I read books," Congdon answers. "I recommend *Breaking the News* by James Fallows."

How did she come to write such a queer-focused play?

"The play has an idealistic center and it's based, partially, on my longing for a cause that is unequivocally righteous and right," she explains. "Gay rights is one of those righteous causes. It's been, like civil rights in general, one of those beacons. The gains in my lifetime, here, too, have been amazing and are a constant sign for hope for the century we've just started. I was born in 1944, so I know how far we've come."

And this isn't the first time Congdon has tackled gay issues.

"There are a lot of queer themes and characters in my plays," she says. "*Dog Opera* is in the *Actor's Book of Gay and Lesbian Plays*; my play *Casanova*, in my collection *Tales of the Lost Formicans and Other Plays*, has more than one gay character and gay themes; my play *The Bride*, about my growing up, has gay themes and characters."

Achieving success as a playwright is so rare, why take that challenging road?

"I started out as a poet, but I had one play produced and I was hooked on the performance-production experience," Congdon explains. "There's nothing in the world like sitting in an audience having a good time at your play. And there's no hell like being there when they hate it."

Does it bother her that she often has so little control over actual productions?

"I'm always involved in the first production of my plays, from casting on—that's how I make the script better," she says. "I love actors. I am amazed by what they do and that they want to do it. And, just like any novice, I can't believe they can remember all those words, even if I wrote them myself. Of course, there are productions I haven't liked, but a play has to be produced or else it's a bird without wings—or wings without a bird. Or a kite without wind. Before I start sounding like bad haiku, I'll stop. But I think you get what I'm saying."

Constance Congdon will be coming to Portland in April for the performance of her play *No Mercy* and for the world premiere of her play *One Day Earlier*. She will also be teaching a series of playwriting workshops and engaging in post-show discussions with the audience. Don't miss these opportunities to experience contemporary theater at its best.

■ *LIPS* is playing at Theater! Theatre! through March 26. The theater is located at 3430 S.E. Belmont St. in Portland. For show times and ticket prices, call the box office at (503) 242-0080.

ORIANA GREEN was once president of the National Thespian Society and didn't mind at all when people thought it was a lesbian organization. She is also the Entertainment Editor of *Just Out* and can be reached at oriana@justout.com.

