

PEOPLE

Funny girl

Kate Clinton thinks you could use a laugh

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

It's not easy interviewing Kate Clinton. While the pioneering "fumorist" (feminist humorist) is warm, down to earth and engaging, even offering me a cup of coffee over the phone, she has me laughing so hard during our conversation I can hardly type. So if I misquote you, Kate, it's your own damn fault.

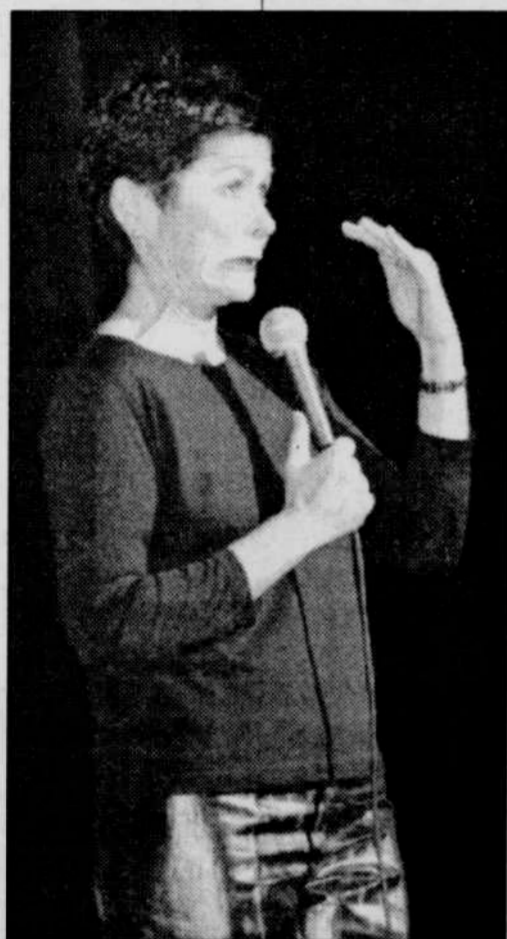
On Nov. 16 Portland audiences will get a chance to experience for themselves the "oldest living, continuously performing, out lesbian author/humorist in North America." ("Over 10 million served!" she adds.)

Clinton describes her new show, *You Look Like You Could Use a Laugh*, as being "a newspaper, really. Local news, international news, sports, media, entertainment, critiques." And, of course, a favorite comic, the original dyke to watch out for. She calls it her own *News from Les-Wobegon*.

As the first openly gay standup comedian, Clinton is unabashedly political. Early influences include 1970s feminist theorists Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich, who gave her "a philosophical base and good grounding in why I do what I do. Not a lot of one-liners, but they gave me an understanding of feminism I needed."

Since her first club date in 1981 ("the same year Ronald Reagan began his comedy") Clinton has always talked about being a lesbian. "I had no idea it was bad to talk about," she reminisces, "until I went to the Improv and was told I couldn't talk about it."

Her experiences then were similar to those of Ellen DeGeneres today. "I would love Ellen DeGeneres' take on going into a lesbian bar," she comments, but "you are seeing someone who is very much a corporate commodity, and the networks don't want to lose their audience. In every audience [for Ellen's performances] there are people from the local affiliate, and they don't want to be scared



off. That, unfortunately, is the reality of putting a show on network TV."

Yet, after 20 years of standup comedy, straight appreciation of Clinton's act is flourishing. Despite the lesbian content, more and more heterosexuals have been coming to her show. In fact, she performed in Florida before the 2000 election was decided and felt "that the blue hairs were completely relieved during the gay material and very nervous during the political stuff."

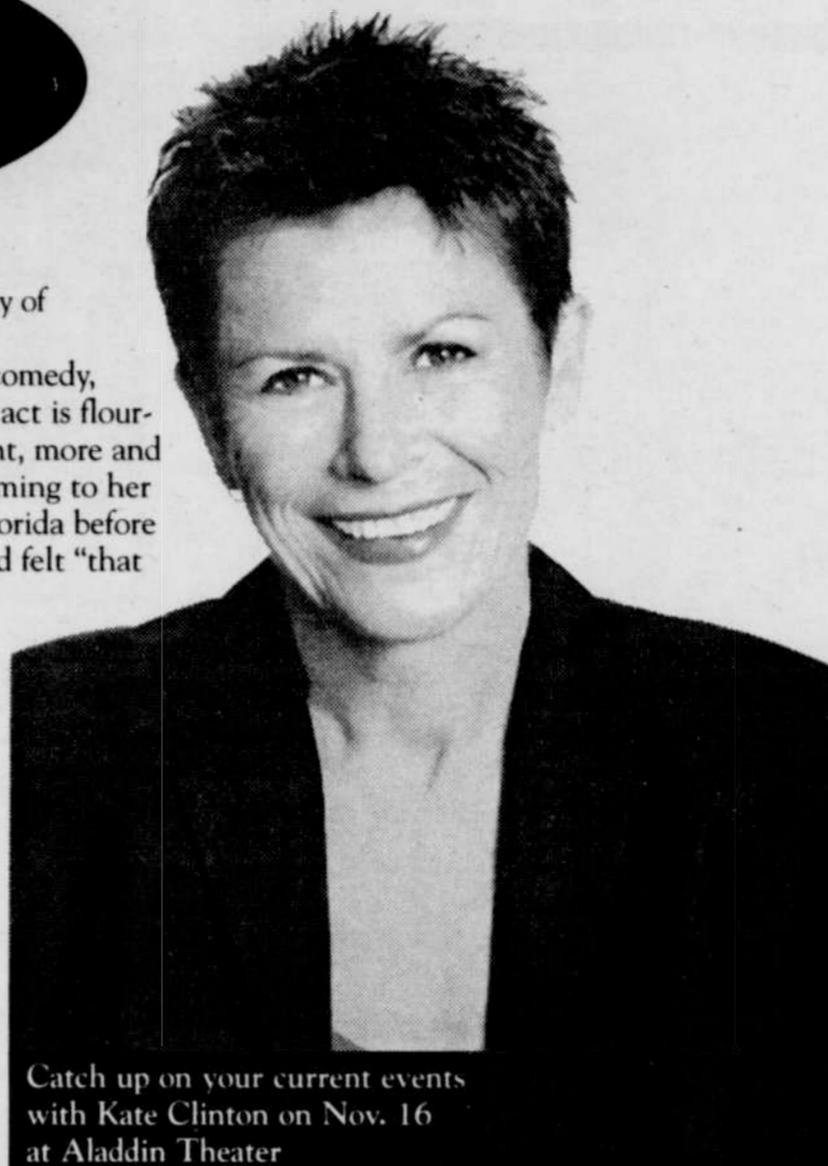
Lately, she's been getting a similar reaction when she talks about being for peace. "I feel the same nervousness in the audience," she divulges, "as when I first started talking about gay issues."

As a fumorist (and voracious magazine reader), Clinton is attuned to political trends, riffing on the Democratic Party's need to inspire its base. "They're not energized," she exclaims, "because they're trying this very centrist legacy of Clinton

crap. Democrats don't know how to take their own side in a fight; they don't have an attack bone in their body, and the Republicans love a fight."

When I mention that a Democratic strategist like James Carville was missing from this election, she doesn't miss a beat. "James Carville goes home to his Republican wife. What is with them? What do they drink at night?"

For Clinton the purpose of comedy is to make people think. "Comedy can carry the weight of heavy topics, but serious material can't handle the weight of light topics," she explains. Not surprisingly, among her favorite peers is Jon Stewart, host of the topical *Daily Show*.



Catch up on your current events with Kate Clinton on Nov. 16 at Aladdin Theater

Clinton also believes "the truest thing is often the funniest" and is a keen observer of everything that's going on around her. "I'm the person at dinner writing things down." She makes a point of writing every day and sometimes even uses the new material the same night.

Furthermore, she allows her audiences' reactions to guide the material. "I've been saying that with all the corporate scandals in the news the only happy group is the Catholic Church because they're not on the front page. One night I said that they were below the fold, meaning the bottom half of the paper. The audience loved it, and I hadn't even realized it was funny."

Clinton continues: "The audiences are co-conspirators. They help make an idea grow because I hear them hear things in ways I never meant."

For instance, people bring ideas up to her after the show. "They will say they thought I was going to say something different. You'd never go up to a singer after a performance and say, 'I thought you were going to sing a different song.'"

She also turns to her partner, activist Urvashi Vaid, for inspiration. "Urvashi is

always saying, 'Don't say that,' and then I know I'm on to something."

Clinton calls their 15-year relationship "a marriage of comedy and tragedy. Sometimes I'm not sure which I am."

Like most long-term couples, they influence each others' careers. Urvashi has "learned to laugh," Clinton says, "and I've gotten a lot more content. I think she runs tapes at night that make her smart. She has a wide range of interest and historical perspective."

After living briefly in Provincetown, Mass., Clinton and Vaid returned to New York City, where both are highly sought-after speakers. The comedian notes the relocation was necessary because Vaid "needs to be in a city, and New York has enough people to boss around."

Despite the jokes, it's clear Clinton has a tremendous affection and respect for her partner. Although hesitant to talk about the relationship because "we don't want to jinx it," she does admit to having some "fabulous fights," which she calls refreshing after growing up in a house where "if you had an emotion you had to go to your room."

At this point, the couple have no plans for kids of their own, either. "I love children," Clinton says, "but I know enough not to have them. I would be reading a book and forget about them in the bathtub. I just became a great-aunt, however, which I told them is redundant."

For Clinton, being gay is all about freedom—"the freedom to figure out exactly what you want to do. I think that's what straight people are jealous about. And I think gay people have an enormous responsibility to have a good time."

I ask her who would play her in the movie. You know, *The Kate Clinton Story*. "I hope it's not Tyne Daly," she laughs, then suggests Kaye Ballard instead.

"I made a joke once about the Statue of Liberty being modeled after Kaye Ballard. Two gay men got the joke and burst out laughing; the lesbians missed it. In fact, I did a joke once that involved the word 'brisket,' and I laughed so hard at it myself I could hardly see. Finally my manager told me that I was the only one who laughed."

If my conversation with her is any indication, there's no danger of that happening to her Portland audience. □

KATE CLINTON is on stage 8 p.m. Nov. 16 at Aladdin Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. Tickets are \$25 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a free-lancer writer who has a strange, yet compelling, attraction to lesbian comedians.

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