

Still Laughing After All These Years

Kate Clinton looks back, ahead and sideways at a world she's helped to change through humor. By Kelli Dunham

You can't talk about lesbian comedy without showcasing its grand dame, Kate Clinton. Her stage persona is alternately sarcastic and sweet, occasionally maternal, and assuredly and unapologetically political. Clinton began performing in 1981 ("the same year Reagan began performing his comedy," she quips). Over 25 years later, she's still on the road. Her 25th anniversary tour is currently playing on Logo. At age 60, she's still got plenty to say.

Besides touring, you just released a new CD, you're blogging on at least three different sites and you have a video blog on AfterEllen. Do you consume your own weight in espresso every day?

[Laughs] Let's see. If I'm on a schedule, I'm OK. I know on Monday and Thursday I have the blogging thing, and then I just write every day. The good thing is, I love what I do. If I were an accountant, it would be different.

Did you see the *Saturday Night Live* segment in which guest host Tina Fey spoke supportively of Sen. Hillary Clinton, explaining, "Bitch is the new black"?

I memorized it! At first, I was worried. I thought, [Fey's] going to go after her, like everyone else. It really reminded me of the time Sinead O'Connor was on and tore up a picture of the pope. Maybe not at that level, but it was exciting. And to have it get airplay!

She really targeted the way misogyny has misinformed the press coverage of Clinton.

I was struck by this again at the debate in Texas where Campbell Brown practically asked Obama out. But when Hillary started, it was interrupt, interrupt, interrupt. Even in the *New York Times* they publish dorky pictures of her taken from under her chin and pictures of him being greeted by huge crowds of adoring people. As a performer-observer, it's been interesting to see the levels of sexism—well, really appalling.

One topic on your blog was the work being done around aging in the LGBT community. Are young and old queers learning how to support each other?

Well, I think it really requires willingness. I mean Urvashi [Vaid] and I look at our circle of friends and think, Fuck, we don't have young people in our lives to mentor, to really say, "Come over," that kind of thing. I look at my own youth. I wish I had been nicer to [gay rights activist] Barbara Gittings. Oh God, she was probably my age now when I was like, "Uh, get out of the way." But I don't think it's a gay problem. It's young and old people everywhere.

You support transgender inclusion in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Not every-



one who came of age during second-wave feminism has done this. Did it take you some time and some work to come to these conclusions?

Yes, I would definitely say that. My first reaction—especially in young women transitioning, becoming FTMs—was, It's so permanent. I felt like, Get a tattoo and call me later. It also feels like such an individual action. Instead of making the world safe for butch women, you're becoming an FTM. I still have a little of that, but you only have to meet and know someone who is transitioning and is clearly more comfortable as a man, or clearly more comfortable as a female. Then you can't argue against it.

Do you find that it's a different experience to perform in, say, Columbus, Ohio, than in New York City, even if both audiences are majority gay?

I think that after performing for a number of years I could do a blind test. You could put me in front of three different cities and I could tell who they are by their reactions. Columbus, Ohio, is sort of Germanic, slow to get going,

might not quite trust you, but once they get going they don't stop. New York is more of a prove-it-to-me vibe. The difference I've noticed over time is that, sadly, because of 24/7 cable news and just plain old capitalism, there's been a trend toward homogeneity that has destroyed the distinct flavor.

Of all the women performers in Provincetown, it seems like you attract the most gender-mixed crowd. Why is that?

The guy who runs the Crown and Anchor came to me before a show recently and asked, "Are you transitioning? I have never seen so many guys here!" [Laughs] It has always been a goal of mine to get men in the audience. It's a weird kind of validation, like if you're seen on television. Also, ultimately, I still remind guys of their high school English teacher—you know, the one they liked.

You and Urvashi are the original lesbian power duo. What makes your relationship work?

We never made a huge public thing of our relationship. It puts too much pressure on it. We are truly a marriage of comedy and tragedy, but I'm never saying which one I am. The secret is that we have made a commitment to keep talking and to have fun. It's been 20 years now—but then, some afternoons seem 20 years long.

On your site, you mentioned a fan who once came up to you after a show and said, "Kate Clinton! You made me want to fuck again!" Is comedy sexy?

[Laughs] Oh yes, I think comedy is really sexy. Laughing is very good practice for sex. And hopefully, with both you have an out-loud reaction. ■