

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO KATE CLINTON



Oh, she's beloved, that **Kate Clinton**. You'd have to be to survive twenty-five years in a ruthless game like the comedy biz, particularly as a woman and an out lesbian at that. But survival isn't quite apt, here's a dynamic performer who has prospered, with successful film and television appearances, books, cds, and magazine contributions all under her belt.

Part of the secret to her success has to be her skill at holding a mirror up to reflect the issues that we've all faced over the last twenty-five years – no low-brow yuk-yuk gags here. Clinton hits it home with every zinger of an observation and it has kept audiences begging for more.

The free-wheeling wit brings her celebratory tour 'It's Come To This!' to the We're Funny That Way Comedy Festival this Thursday night at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre. (You'll know she's in the house when the laughter inside blows the roof off.) I chatted with her recently about her political comedy, her continuous work in support of gay rights, and why it's still work getting an audience out to a show, even after all this time.



**What do you have that's gotten you to the 25-year mark in a crazy-assed business like comedy?**



I was out and no one stole my material, but I think the great news is there are more gay and lesbian comedians now, so that I get to kind of specialize. The longer I've done it I do a lot more political material.



**Yes, I've read a few of your columns in the *Advocate*. You do this delicate thing in and around your government where you're angry and bitter without seeming angry and bitter.**



I think we can get paralyzed and think, 'Oh my god we can't do anything.' We need a release for the anger and the bitterness.



**Is it hard to be funny in such an uptight, politically correct atmosphere?**



Yeah. I think people are loosening up, though. Hard was 2002 and the lead up to the war. People were more also willing to laugh when I was doing the gay material because it was safer.



**You're known for your tireless championing of gay rights. What do you think gay Americans think when they see progress north of the border on issues like same-sex marriage?**



A lot of things. For me the most important thing is that it has been a part of a conversation. We came out, but then everyone wanted to be quiet. Now we're sitting at the table and we're bringing up a topic and the conversation goes on. This is the vehicle we can discuss human rights for gay people. It's absolutely unconscionable that the whole gay marriage thing has been used as such a wedge issue here. And the churches! We should tax them they're doing so much political work. We cannot give a dime more to any Democratic candidate unless they guarantee they'll speak out for us, because in the last election they didn't.



**Frustrating.**



Screaming frustrating. It's amazing I have veins left.



**What work needs to be done in both our countries?**



We just had that horrible story about four gay guys in Saint Maarten who got hideously beaten. When you have such federally sanctioned homophobia it is really amazing. I think the critical work ... we can't do it alone. We need a second coming out where we say to our allies we need your help. To our enemies we need to say, 'We need to talk. You have some serious misconceptions about us and frankly we're not too impressed by YOU.' The hypocrisy is stunning. We must be doing something right if they are this upset, but I'm tired of measuring our success by what is up against us. I think we need to talk to African Americans, for example, and say, 'You know what? This is an issue you should be interested in, and by the way, we have a lot of poor gay people as - we can work on a campaign together to change that.' We need to harden the categories.



**Your accomplishments as a comedian range from a gazillion TV appearances, CDs, books, Broadway, Off-Broadway, tours, even *Oprah* for the love of Pete. Aren't you exhausted?**



(Laughs.) Today I am. I have been like a pinball back and forth. I live in Manhattan but have been back and forth to California. I did a show in Fort Worth, Texas. Saturday night I was in San Francisco for NCLR – The National Centre for Lesbian Rights - which is a major sponsor of my tour. There were 2,900 at the dinner, acres and acres of people. I was the emcee and it was great. The focus of this dinner was homophobia and sports. God, it was so inspirational. They gave an award to this young basketball player who sued her coach, whose motto was 'no booze, no drugs, no lesbians'. And this young woman comes along and sues. And wins. The coach – a woman - didn't resign. So it was just so inspiring



**Bette Midler began in gay bathhouses. You began in Unitarian Church basements. What's with that?**



When I was coming up and out I was coming up through a very well-developed and below-the-radar lesbian separatist cultural scene, which had been flowering in the '70s and still going in the '80s, but then people had to get real jobs or retire. That's how I came up because I had an opportunity to work my material that gay comedians don't have now.



**Is it easier these days to be a gay comic?**



(Considers.) It is constant work to develop new audience. The great thing is through the Internet there so many ways to reach people. But to get them to leave their screens? It's another thing. Like at my show in Fort Worth. The fact of the matter is that rising gas prices kept them away driving from hells half acre because people are going 'ticket price / gas / ticket price / gas ...'. There are also so many entertainment choices now for gay people.



**Has anything you dreamed of in a comedy career eluded you?**



That's a great question, you know. One time I was in an elevator after a performance. Madeline Kahn was there too. She turned to me and said, 'You're so funny.' And I said, 'Could you sing 'I'm So Tired', from *Blazing Saddles*?' She threw herself up against the wall and did it. Then the doors opened and we both walked out into a party. That moment did it for me. I couldn't have dreamed it.



**You're satisfied.**



Smug. No, I'm not really smug.



**What will you give a Toronto audience you won't give an audience anywhere else?**



Well I will not give an *L-Word* spoiler. I was in Vancouver and I started to talk about Dana who died of breast cancer but no one in the audience knew that because you see the show after we do. So I will not give away any *L-Word* secrets. I promise.