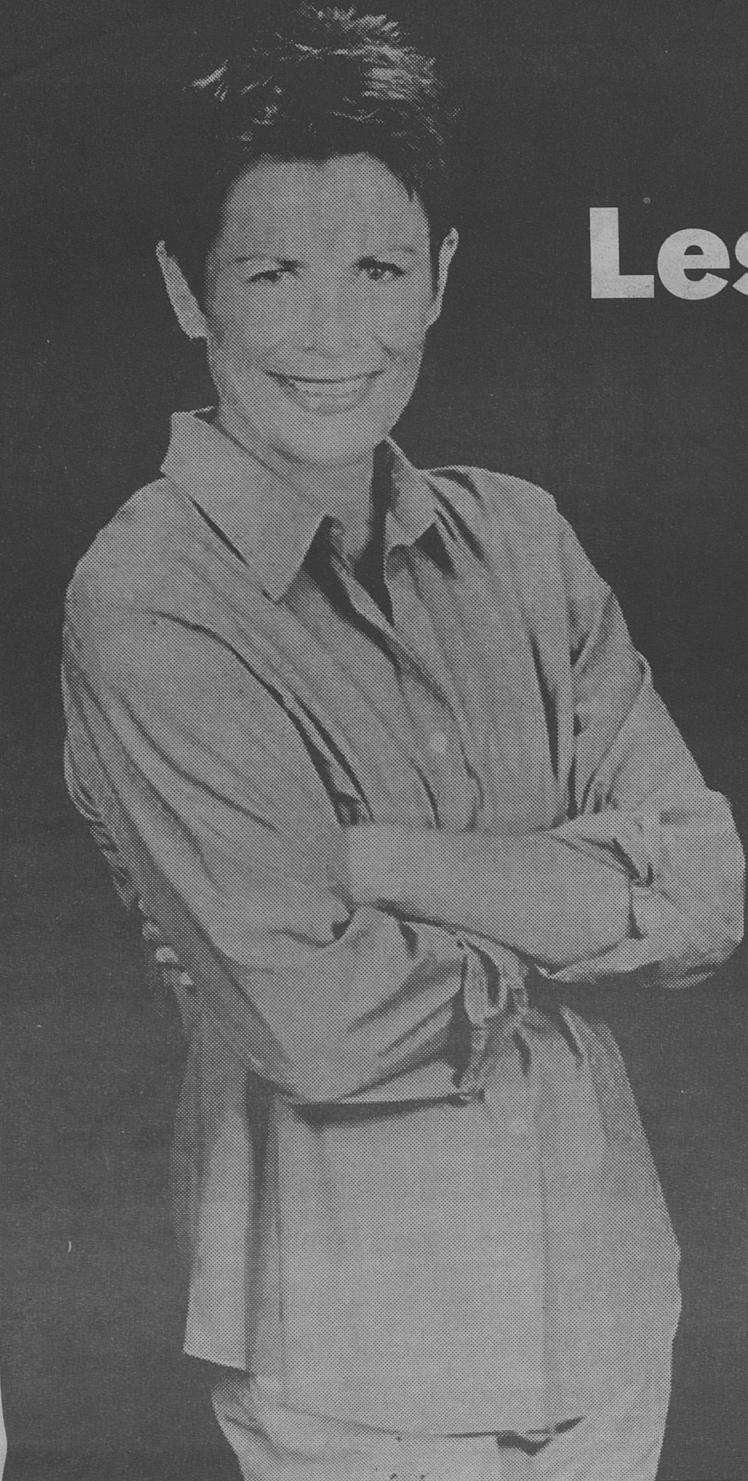


# "Oldest Living Lesbian Comedian" Wows All



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BY KRISTIN PETTIT

**K**ate Clinton wowed the audience at the Barre Opera house in the early 1980s. It was straight stand-up – except that it wasn't straight at all – and that was what really rocked the audience.

I suppose her material that night was as witty, up-front and impudent as it remains to this day, but the lasting impact of that night on those of us in our late 20s to late 30s was her seemingly assured daring in throwing over her high school English teacher career to come out and play – literally and figuratively – in the tight-knit, hot-house world of the stand-up comedians.

I tried to imagine the life she had led before she hit the road in 1981. I concocted a Clark Kent/Superman scenario: mild-mannered *Macbeth* pusher by day, and gay gadabout by night, the kind of hilarious, irreverent cut-up whose friends were always saying, "Gee, Kate, you oughta go into show business ..."

I imagined – and who could doubt it, hearing her marvelous, mobile voice and trying to keep up with her quicksilver, articulate command of language – that she loved the English teacher part of herself. So maybe it was-

n't just fear of failing (and perhaps being crucified into the bargain) that made leaving teaching a hard choice.

And she must have wondered who would be her audience. If the classroom sometimes felt like the confines of a ghetto, wouldn't unending gigs in front of another "subset" – the "Birkenstock Brigades" as the cynical sneerers used to say – begin to wear out pretty quickly and leave the promise of Clinton's intellect and wit hemmed in, even stunted?

After all, THEN wasn't NOW for the out front gay performer. Enough said.

In her book *Don't Get Me Started* (Ballantine, 1998) Clinton remarks that Ellen DeGeneres's coming out made some of Clinton's friends, – "jaded hohumasexuals" – very impatient, while the event brought back her own coming out (in the late '70s): "My closet was huge, had a foyer, a turnstile, a few locks, dead bolts, a burglar alarm that needed deactivating before I could even go for the door handle. And then there was a storm door. My televised coming out would have been a Ken Burns 92-part series. Talk about cliffhangers."

And at the same time, she chose to kick over the traces

#### preview

**Kate Clinton**  
October 5, 8pm  
Spaulding Auditorium,  
Hopkins Center, Hanover NH  
Tickets: Hopkins Center box office  
603-646-2422 • www.hop.dartmouth.edu  
\$25 adults / \$5 Dartmouth students  
Adult content.

and go, come what may.

There weren't buckets of bawdy girl-comics – let alone gay girl-comics – out there in those days. And Clinton billed herself as a feminist humorist from which, she says, she got "lots of interviews 'cause nobody could believe the two went together." So when talk-show guys called her up for an interview they were primed to nail her, assuming she would be what they expected – "humorless and horrible." But the interviews were "a blast." Quickly, she attracted serious media attention and her following grew.

Early on, she covered mostly gay issues and current events. She met Urvashi Vaid, then the director of the policy institute of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C., and their meeting 14 years ago prompted Clinton to incorporate politics into her routines. And certainly the AIDS crisis in the

1980s made it all the more imperative for her comedic reach to encompass all institutions in America that had a crucial bearing on the quality and dignity of individuals' lives – especially those individuals who could be, shall we say, shunted aside by all manner of "suits."

A quick check on Clinton's biographical and career stats reveal she's enjoyed a varied, ever-widening experience and today she wears many hats, from comic, writer, commentator, activist, actress (apparently she was outstanding in *The Vagina Monologues*), host and performer. Just last week I read her column "Unplugged" in *The Progressive* (September, 2002).

Apparently all restraint on the part of society's gadflies and jokesters after 9/11 is long over. If Jay Leno is zinging GWB with "dumb jokes," I wasn't really surprised to find Kate "I miss June Jordan" Clinton positively excoriating the Repubs as well as "that eyebrowless Dick Gephart" and all Dems of his ilk (just about all of them, I guess) in her essay "Hormoneland Security." It was a delight, as always, to follow her every word and savor the revealing snapshots of her skewered targets. To get a flavor of Kate today, check it out.

Her recent comic disc

*Read These Lips* came out in fairly early 2001. I listened to it a few days ago, certain I'd love it. But my first reaction was flat. I played it again, but still felt a nervous let-down and wondered how I was going to write favorably about this woman of renown, this trailblazer on so many fronts who even now is having a documentary of her life and times go into final stages of production. And she's coming to our neighborhood – SOON!

Maybe it's because I had to attend cotillion class (don't ask) in the 1950's, but I feel, when reviewing the work of a legitimate artist, one should at least be positive and appreciative if not madly enthusiastic.

So. I backed off for a few days and tried to get a handle on my lukewarm response to *Read These Lips*. Glad I did. I think I've figured it out: other, admittedly younger, comedienne have been turning my head these days with well-produced video or film.

I missed Margaret Cho's comedy film *Notorious C.H.O.* when it was around a few days ago, but I saw *I'm the One That I Want*, courtesy of the local video rental. Her reckless abandon in the baring of her life's most intimate secrets, coupled with her manic physicality and brilliant