

## Intrigue-filled 'Lips' is political, provocative – and funny

By Jim Carnes  
 jcarnes@sacbee.com

### THEATER REVIEW

The phrases "ripped from the headlines" and "history repeats itself" spring to mind when you think of "Lips," the provocative political satire now playing at the California Stage.

A president involved in a sex scandal, a recalcitrant Senate, moralists and religious homophobes become embroiled in a fight for the nation's collective soul.

Layers of intrigue and complexities of relationships and motives are ever-evolving and being revealed. Naïveté and cynicism co-exist – sometimes within the same character.

And, it's funny.

Lips  
 ★★★

KOLT Run Creations, a new Sacramento theater company that is producing this play, presented its first production – the abortion drama "Keely and Du" – in May 2007. For its second show, the company that says its focus is on works that tackle current societal, political and cultural issues lives up to its promise with "Lips."

Written by Constance Congdon ("Gilgamesh," "Dog Opera," "Tales of the Lost Formicans" and "The Automata Pieta"), the play was published in 2000,

inspired by the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair. Set in the future, when the first female president – not Hillary – has been elected, it explores questions of "what if" – what if the politician involved in the affair were a woman; and what if the "other person" was not a man.

KOLT co-founder Lisa Thew directs the play with a tension and momentum that keeps slightly one step ahead of the audience at all times. The fine cast features Shelly Sandford as President Joni; KOLT's other co-founder, Kelley Ogden, as Rachel, "the other woman"; and Brian Rife as Andy, the president's assistant and a man with a history with Rachel. These three

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KOLT Run Creations  
 Brian Rife, left, Shelly Sandford and Kelley Ogden give the audience laughs and plenty to think about in "Lips."

## 'Lips': Cast members at ease

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also worked together in "Keely and Du," and their comfort level with each other shows here.

Sandford's president is a complex character. A former senator from Vermont, President Joni concedes that she was elected partly because her biography was "safer and more boring than David Souter's." And yet, this woman with a loving husband seems willing to risk that reputation in a sex scandal just to ... what? Focus the nation's attention on equality of rights for individuals of all sexual persuasions. Can that be? Can goals be so clear-cut and actions so direct?

"Why are liberals always mired in complexities and ambiguities?" one character asks. Good question.

Sanford is perfectly cast as this expert politician – calm, poised, verging on cold in public, yet warm and personable in private. She does what she does to provoke her country to think and to act on what is her No. 1

### LIPS

**WHEN:** Continues at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays, through April 27

**WHERE:** California Stage, 1723 25th St.

**TIME:** Approximately 2½ hours, including intermission

**TICKETS:** \$15 general

**INFORMATION:** (916) 254-8120

objective – justice.

Ogden's Rachel is more complicated. A computer criminal given early release to participate in the president's plan, she has a (sometimes well-placed) distrust of all things political, a child she wants to regain custody of and a taste for drugs. Her inside knowledge of the criminal justice system provides some of the play's other cogent political commentary – on the disparity of treatment

between rich and poor, white and black or brown. Ogden is adept at revealing herself at just the right time, and in just the right way.

In some ways, the character of Andy is the most interesting but also the least-well-written. The son of a noted feminist, he has motives that are never fully articulated. He appears to be a champion of equal rights for all sexual identities because he believes it's right. He also seems to be motivated by a desire – never achieved – to please his mother. And he gives off a vibe that, despite his having fathered a child, he might have sexual interests himself that would give a third reason why he does what he does.

Rife gets about as much as he can out of the character (clearly not the playwright's main focus) and is best in a telephone call to his disinterested mother that helps underscore at least part of Andy's motivation and conflict.

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Call The Bee's Jim Carnes,  
 (916) 321-1130.