

# The Boston Globe

## In 'POTUS,' the West Wing is nothing like 'The West Wing'

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Director Paula Plum shown at a rehearsal for SpeakEasy Stage Company's "POTUS." NILE SCOTT STUDIOS

In a rehearsal room, actors bump into each other, talk over one another, slap Post-It notes on people instead of paper, and generally try not to burst out laughing as they work through a scene in “POTUS: Or, Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive.”

“Farce requires slamming doors and high-speed chases,” says Paula Plum, who is directing “POTUS” for SpeakEasy Stage Company (Sept. 15-Oct. 15). “But this is also an empowering play for women, because it shows them engaging in Olympic problem-solving to resolve a situation they did not create.”

The action takes place behind the scenes of the Oval Office, where the president’s staff is on damage control. In playwright Selina Fillinger’s farce,

the sexist behavior of the president — he remains unseen in the play — has crossed a line, endangering international diplomacy. That might be enough of a scandal to contain, but the arrival of his pregnant girlfriend, his soon-to-be ex-con sister, and a stressed-out reporter desperate for a scoop, combined with one staffer's inappropriate self-medication, make for a potent comic cocktail.

“This is one of the funniest scripts my husband Richard [Snee, a noted comic actor] and I have read in a long time,” says Plum, whose resume is chock-full of comedies as both an actor and director. “It’s witty and accurate in terms of politics, and with the inclusion of multi-generational and multi-ethnic women’s voices, it is so satisfying to put this on the stage.”

Because the laughs come fast and furious, Plum says her ensemble has to lock into their characters immediately.

“We all grew up with “The West Wing,”” she says, “so we have a basic knowledge of these job descriptions, but even if we hadn’t, we know the juggling acts women play to keep life running smoothly.”

The roles are recognizable even when they are in the heightened theatrical world of the White House. They include the put-upon wife (Crystin Gilmore), the harried chief of staff (Lisa Yuen), the harassed press officer desperately grasping for a positive spin (Laura Latreille), the over-qualified but under-confident secretary (Marianna Bassham), the ditzy young girlfriend (Monique Ward Lonergan), the overworked and underappreciated mom/reporter (Catia), and the president’s exploitative sister (Johanna Carlisle-Zepeda).

The challenge for Plum is keeping each actor grounded in her character while the action spins faster and faster.

“We are working with fight and intimacy choreographer Angie Jepson,” says Plum, “who is providing structure for the chaos.” (The brawls Jepson staged in Gloucester Stage Company’s “Private Lives” nearly stole the show.)

And although the cast represents a great mix of some of Boston’s best women performers, they haven’t all worked together before.

“Theater is like a microwave,” says Plum, “strong friendships form fast. I was blessed with an embarrassment of riches at auditions, and these women

understand the intensity of each character’s desire to find the solution they need.”

One actor who has become a face to watch on Boston stages is Johanna Carlisle-Zepeda, who has made memorable appearances in “Matilda” and “In the Heights” (both at Wheelock Family Theatre), “The View Upstairs” (SpeakEasy), “Oliver” (New Repertory Theatre), and “Miss You Like Hell” (Company One), despite making her home in Arizona.

“I was so excited when I heard SpeakEasy was producing ‘POTUS,’” says Carlisle-Zepeda before the start of rehearsal. “I saw it on Broadway five times because I heard different things at each performance, and different audiences reacted and responded to different moments.”

Carlisle-Zepeda is playing Bernadette, the president’s scheming ex-con sister, who was portrayed by Lea DeLaria on Broadway.

“She’s a big presence onstage,” Carlisle-Zepeda says of DeLaria, “but so am I. And while her performance inspires me, I am definitely creating my own interpretation of the role.”

Carlisle-Zepeda says the rehearsal room is full of strong women with big ideas.

“Paula had us spend three days at the table exploring our characters, their relationships, and the boundaries that we had with each other before we ever stood up and started moving in the space,” she says.

“Our biggest challenge is avoiding laughing when the lights come up,” says Carlisle-Zepeda, “but I think that offers the audience an element of reality and adds to the fun.”

The play, Plum and Carlisle-Zepeda agree, is a comic romp grounded in the reality of the demands made on women no matter where they are or what they do.

“Fillinger is burning down the house,” says Plum. “Our job is to help her light the fire.”

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