

**ARTS**

# Hippodrome to kick off 51st season with 'POTUS' comedy

**Ron Cunningham** Correspondent

Published 5:37 a.m. ET Sept. 5, 2023

Dusty is the pregnant mistress with an embarrassing “blue raz” slushy problem.

Reporter Chris may just be onto the story of a lifetime. But first, she’s gotta pump some breast milk and check in with the sitter.

Not to forget Stephanie, the painfully shy but delightfully high secretary. Or Bernadette, who has a little felony problem and would dearly love to beg her brother’s pardon.

Let's not forget Harriet, the blindsided chief of staff, Jean, the press secretary grappling with the mother of all PR crises, and Margaret, the first lady trying to salvage her dignity after being called a vile name in public by her beloved dufus In chief.

On Sept. 8, the Hippodrome will open its 51st season with “POTUS” or “Behind Every Great Dumbass Are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive.” The play, which will run through Oct. 1, is the Hipp’s latest collaboration with the University of Florida's School of Theater and Dance.

“POTUS” is one of three plays opening this month.

From Sept. 7-17, the Star Center Theater will present “Ruthless: The Musical.” A comedy about a talented 7-year-old girl, and her wannabe stage mother, who throw both scruples and caution to the wind in an all-out effort to nail down the lead role in her school’s play.

From Sept. 23-Oct. 8 the Gainesville Community Playhouse will present Arthur Miller’s gripping drama “The Crucible,” a retelling of the Salem witch trials and of the hysteria that grips a small New England village after several teenage girls are accused of dabbling in sorcery.

At the Hipp, Selina Fillinger’s all-women political farce takes on a seemingly impossible challenge.

To wit: In a pre-election year in which the real POTUS is routinely portrayed by critics as a doddering old codger while his chief opponent racks up one felony charge after another and the rest of the pack looks increasingly like Disney's seven dwarves.

This year, of all years, Hipp Artistic Director Stephanie Lynge asks "How could we not do a play that is focused on the women" behind the president "juggling all the balls and keeping all the plates in the air just to keep things going" after POTUS screws things up beyond all recognition?

"We never see any of the men who are the instigators of all the chaos. This is about the women and the choices they make," Lynge said. "It is a feminist farce."

**More:** International festival to kickoff Welcoming Week in downtown Gainesville

In "POTUS," the crisis of the moment is touched off after the main character has an epic slip of the tongue at a routine public appearance and calls his wife a name that this family newspaper certainly would not print.

As Margaret fumes and Jean and Harriet scurry to do damage control, further complications arise in the form of the first sister frantic to get a presidential pardon, the abrupt appearance of the first mistress, a news hound fresh off maternity leave and a secretary possessed of an inferiority complex.

Paulina Machado, a junior at UF, plays the presidential secretary Stephanie.

"I feel like I resonate deeply with her," she said. "This young woman who is constantly trying to be strong but is insecure around all these strong women. It's kind of fun to see her grow, even though she is high through most of the play."

Playing pregnant Dusty is actually the subject of UF senior Sophia Paige's thesis.

"I love it that you can so easily underestimate her," she said. "But she is so smart, right on par with the rest of the women. She comes in with a slushy and lives her life, but she's incredible."

**More:** Gainesville Eight anti-war activists honored 50 years after historic local trial

Aneisa Hicks is a professional actor from Chicago who came to Gainesville to play reporter Chris.

"I was drawn to her because in my professional life, I tend to get cast in more serious roles," she said. "It's like 'universe, can I please get a comedy?' She created a story by accident, she's

flying by the seat of her pants and she's wearing a lot of different hats, one of which happens to be mom."

Michelle Bellaver's Bernadette, "is the agent of mayhem" in this show who creates the most chaos. She's an international drug dealer wanted in three countries. It's always interesting playing a character whose outlook on life is completely different from your own.

Seriously though, with this gang of presidential enablers, what could possibly go wrong?