

# Unleashing Her Inner Leading Lady

MAUREEN KEILLER IN SPOTLIGHT AS STAR OF 'LITTLE DOG'

By Terry Byrne

MAUREEN KEILLER HAS played plenty of sidekicks and second bananas in her years on Boston stages, but the spotlight has always eluded her. Until now.

Keiller captivates from the moment she steps onto the Wimberly Theatre stage and delivers the Hollywood agent's opening monologue in "The Little Dog Laughed." Douglas Carter Beane's biting comedy about the hypocrisy of Hollywood follows the agent, named Diane, as she manipulates and maneuvers her hapless client Mitchell to stardom. Along the way, she must woo a naïve playwright for the rights to turn his play into a film and keep her closeted client from coming out before she's ridden his coattails to fame and fortune.

Beane's dialogue is bracingly funny and frighteningly fast-paced, requiring an actress to be on top of her game every moment of the play. Although the role was written for Cynthia Nixon ("Sex and the City") and won Julie White a Tony award for her performance last year, Keiller makes the role her own in the SpeakEasy Stage Company production, which finishes its run this weekend. So why has it taken her so long to step into the driver's seat?

"I guess I need a Diane of my own to get me going," Keiller says over lunch in the South End. "It's hard for me to be aggressive about roles for myself."

"I'm not lazy. I just don't want to lay myself out on the line. I don't like to be that vulnerable."

In person, Keiller seems more like Diane's polar opposite, warm and open if a little uncomfortable talking about herself. But her features give her a Rosalind Russell-style poise, capable of being commanding and comical.

Theater was Keiller's original career goal, and she left college early to move to New York, but after what she describes as "a disastrous New York audition, where I just wasn't prepared," she made a detour to Boston and became a hairdresser.

"I loved the social aspect of hairdressing," she says, "but I missed performing."



Maureen Keiller (with Robert Serrell in "The Little Dog Laughed") says she is mostly seen as the comic foil. (MIKE LOVETT)

It took several years before she started inching her way back to the stage, first as a singer in a cover band that performed on the South Shore before finally dipping her toe into theater with a role in "Psycho Beach Party," upstairs at the now-defunct Little Flags Theatre in Cambridge in 1995. Since then, she's worked at most of the area's theaters, playing a gossip friend in SpeakEasy's "The Women," the upstairs neighbor in New Repertory Theatre's production of "A Streetcar Named Desire," and a worldly-wise nightclub owner in Boston Theatre Works' production of "Pulp."

On film, she's been featured as a rabid Red Sox fan in "Fever Pitch" ("Talk about typecasting," she says with a laugh) and a seamstress for Kate Hudson in the upcoming "My Best Friend's Girl."

ALTHOUGH SHE'S AN EXPERIENCED singer, Keiller says she shies away from musical theater. "I auditioned for SpeakEasy's production of 'Kiss of the Spider Woman,' " she says, "But when they got to the dance routine, I was totally lost. I turned to the director and said, 'Um, I think I left my car running,' and left."

Keiller says she's mostly seen as the comic foil, and in some ways, Diane is an extension

of that. "She's very funny, even though she's also ruthless," she says. "She opens the play with a bang and never lets up. She's the engine that drives the show, and that was a challenge for me."

Casting the pivotal role was also a challenge for SpeakEasy's artistic director Paul Daigneault. The production represents a big step for his company, which moved into the larger Wimberly for the first time and had to be careful to find an actress who could fill more seats. The play was originally going to be a co-production with Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre, which would have been responsible for casting and direction, but after they dropped out, the entire financial burden fell on SpeakEasy.

Although American Repertory Theatre veteran Karen MacDonald was originally slated to play Diane, a scheduling switch there meant she was committed to "Copenhagen" and unavailable for "Little Dog." But Daigneault says Keiller was always on his list.

"Maureen auditioned last spring when we thought Wellfleet would do the production in the summer, and she was terrific, but Karen was already slated to do it," he explains. "When things changed, Paul (Melone, the play's director) and I just went with our gut." ■