

Invasion of the lesbian playwright

Jess Martin moves on to a new stage

By Thomas Garvey

“Perky” and “lesbian”?

The two words are rarely in conjunction, but gay playwright Jess Martin is just so fresh and energetic it's hard to resist the label. She's a perky lesbian, goddamnit, even if she's got a butch haircut and looks like she could easily tune up your Harley.

And these days Martin has a lot to be upbeat about. The talented writer was recently awarded a \$5,000 grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council to develop her script “My Yolanda Love,” which Martin describes as having “haunted” her for a year.

“I realized the Council was considering plays this time around,” she says (the awards go to playwrights bi-annually). “And I had the required thirty pages sitting in my drawer, so I thought to myself — oh, why not?”

The drama marks something of a departure for the playwright, who is best known for such queer parodies as *Invasion of Pleasure Valley* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's High School Re-union*, which Martin wrote for Queer Soup, the lesbian theater group she founded with Renee Farster, Karen Malme, and Kimberley Hoff in 2002. But “Yolanda” is



Playwright Jess Martin.

no witty goof on pop culture; instead it's a darker look at love gone wrong. “It's an homage to a road trip I took through New Mexico,” she explains. “Which was this incredible visual awakening. The air is so empty and dry there it feels like there's nothing between you and this surreal landscape of red and orange.” When I mention Sam Shepard, Martin nods in agreement. “The play is *definitely* in Shepard territory. It takes place in this sleazy hotel room, where a student

is holed up who's so obsessed with her professor that she'll do anything, give up everything in her life, for the chance to be with her.”

Martin pauses significantly. “Only the professor wants to call it off.”

Oh, my. It's clearly a far cry from the chatty six-foot dildos from Mars that the playwright has written about in the past. “I *do* love writing comedy, and I've always had a thing for monster movies,” she laughs. “But now it's time for something different.” Martin feels confident she has the chops to take on the deeper requirements of drama — even if “now the pressure's on” — because she has the imprimatur of no less an authority than Edward Albee. “I realized I was a playwright,” Martin explains, “when I submitted a script to Albee to take his master class at the University of Houston. And he let me into the seminar.” The latest award is yet another form of validation “because I'm being judged solely on my writing. Not on the production, not on the look or the design, but just on my writing.”

And this time she's writing about love first, and lesbianism second. “It's a human story, which to me supercedes gender and sexual identity. How you identify is only part of who you are.” Martin admits some of her friends have been slow to catch on to the drama's larger concerns. “They've assumed the protagonist's friends are lesbians, too. Only they're not. I didn't write them that way, and they're not intended that way.”

So does she have her eye on a larger, cross-over audience? “Hopefully the play will speak to a larger audience than the queer community,” she ventures, although her initial reaction on hearing of the grant was simply “Now I can pay the cast!” Martin explains she had already determined to produce “Yolanda” in 2006 — only “now we don't have to raise the money ourselves.” Like many determined local troupes, Queer Soup has so far funded its impressive productions from its members' bank accounts. “Which still beats sitting around waiting to be discovered,” Martin sighs. And the troupe has a loyal champion in Kate Snodgrass at the BU Playwrights' Theatre (Martin got her MFA at BU). “Kate actually showed me the theatre and said, ‘Think of this as your home.’ So during downtime in the summer I'll call her up and say, ‘Hi, Kate — can I come over and play?’”

In fact the Playwrights' Theatre has already signed up to host a series of staged readings for the group, collectively labeled “Queer Soup's Summer Simmer.” Those wanting a sneak peek at “My Yolanda Love” should mark their calendars for the staged reading on August 15 and 16. Meanwhile those seeking a taste of Martin's warped jones for '50s science fiction can indulge in the “Summer Creature Double Feature” — which includes the hilarious “Interview with the Fifty-Foot Woman” — at the Boston Playwrights' Theater on the weekend of July 29 and 30. “It's about this fifty-foot femme with a normal-size lover,” Martin giggles. “And the ensuing complications.”

Well, good thing size doesn't matter.