

DATEBOOK

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1998

Beltway Humor in San Francisco

Gross National Product
opening at Plush Room

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The plot shifts so quickly in the Clinton sex scandal that the satirical troupe Gross National Product has already had to change the name of its latest show, and it hasn't even opened.

It was "Sex, Lies & PaulaGate," but after her suit was dismissed it was updated to the generic "Sex, Lies & ZipperGate." With Jones' appeal, "PaulaGate" is timely again. Whatever "Gate" it is will open Thursday at the Plush Room.

The company has been around since 1980, but this is its first test in San Francisco. In Washington, where GNP performs on weekends year-round, people feed off political scandal in the morning, then satire about that scandal in the evening. Whether San Francisco will take to this diet will be determined by the show's run, which is scheduled for two weeks, with a possible extension.

The show, whose full melodramatic title

CLINTON SEX SATIRE

SEX, LIES & ZIPPERGATE opens Thursday at the Plush Room Cabaret, 940 Sutter St., San Francisco. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursdays, 8 and 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Tickets are \$20. Call (415) 885-2800.

is "Sex, Lies & PaulaGate, or Yet Another Right-Wing Conspiracy," is a revue that relies on improvisation and audience participation. The Plush Room is ideally suited to this type of farce. With its straight-backed upholstered chairs and carpet, all it needs is a podium to perfectly evoke a Senate chamber.

GNP already has a television audience. Five half-hour GNP specials have been aired on KQED, most recently "Mock the Vote" before the 1996 presidential election. If the new show is successful, company founder John Simmons wants to move the group to the Bay Area.

"I and my lovely wife, Chris (Thompson, who is also in the show), want to be Californians," he says, "and in order to move, you have to have a job."

Born in the Beltway, Simmons is finally

sick of Washington, but not the characters who provide his grist. In conversation, his mimicking voice shifts from Clinton to Al Gore to Kenneth Starr, with maybe a touch of dry Bob Dole and cherubic Newt Gingrich for balance.

"We're not really liberal and we're not really conservative," he says. "We're just really cynical."

The son of a government spook, Simmons, 42, has so many political jokes that he holds them in an ice chest that takes two men to carry.

He figures there are at least two weeks of life left in this whole Monica Lewinsky-Paula Jones affair, and he intends to bleed it.

"The country is not quite done with it," he says, "but I think that the time that we're here will be enough time to dispense with it."

To do so takes about about 90 minutes. The material is updated constantly. On this day, Simmons is chided by news that Jones will appeal. "She's fairly repulsive in our revue," he says, "and one of our favorite characters."

Another favorite is Lewinsky, who whim-

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pers and sings the blues. Simmons and his cast of five cover all the stereotypes. One man is a fat-faced ringer for Clinton. Local satirist Chris Pray will do Kenneth Starr. Simmons does a manly Janet Reno, with leg hair. He has a little too much head hair for his Gore, but he's tall enough that the audience can't see his lack of a bald spot.

Though the Capitol Steps are

better known as Washington satirists, Simmons says GNP is both older and more irreverent.

"They're more establishment. Up with politics," He says. "We're more 'up yours, politics.' They are more musical and we are more sketch."

Simmons started doing sketches in 1980 when he was a reporter for a journal called Congress Clearinghouse. The job was as dull as the name, but it allowed him to study the style of one of the great presidential gag men —

Ronald Reagan.

Simmons developed "A Bonzo Christmas Carol," which made it off-Broadway. He became so good as Reagan that Doonesbury creator Garry Trudeau hired him to play "Rap Master Ronnie."

Clinton has also been nice to work with.

"One minute he's finished, and the next he's got it with the Dust-buster," Simmons says.

"I look at this as a very special lurid time for our country."



MICHAEL MALONEY / The Chronicle

John Simmons with photos of Gross National Product cast members pasted on his mirror.