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Backstage

The New Joke In Town

By Pamela Sommers
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Inauguration Day morning found John Simmons, director of the Gross National Product comedy troupe, in an ebullient mood. He'd just pushed the "record" button on his VCR—when your material depends on every political tic, twitch and utterance, you've got to be prepared—and talked gleefully about the eight-member ensemble's new revue, "Clintoons: The First 100 Daze."

"I wasn't looking forward to the Republicans leaving—the hypocrisy level was so high—but I'm surprised at how much material we have from the Democrats already," he said. "What's good about Clinton is that he's created so much language—'renewed hope,' 'new beginnings,' 'change' as a verb, adjective and noun."

"And how he's set himself up as the Plebeian President. . . . We put in a parody of the HBO show at the Lincoln Memorial, with a voice-over—done to 'Fanfare for the Common Man'—announcing 'A National Reunion of Hollywood Elitism! With Seats for All If You Have Connections!'" The sketch grew out of the frustration Simmons felt upon arriving at the Mall with what he—and how many others?—thought were valuable tickets and discovering that HBO had "bleached off the stage and set up a monitor that wasn't even working."

GNP, whose shows are about 30 percent improvised and hence as up-to-the-minute as possible, has put together an evening that pokes holes in everything from the confirmation hearings to the Sidwell Friends controversy. Its take on homosexuals in the military—penned by gay writers—features an experimental platoon whose central characters are more than a little reminiscent of Gomer Pyle and Sgt. Carter. "Safe Socks" chronicles the adventures of the First Feline, who, "after being hassled by the media, runs away and gets entangled with some shadowy alley cats. It's a fluffy little piece." Then there's the interview Larry King does—with himself. And the episode titled "The Saddam Seal," in which he plays a devilish game of chess opposite Bush and then Clinton.

Simmons, who played Bush in GNP's long-running revue "BushCapades," isn't the least bit sad about retiring that role.

"Actually, I'm pretty tired of it. The whole game of impersonating a president is hard work." But he says he did



Gross National Product carries on: "... I'm surprised at how much material we have from the Democrats already," says director John Simmons.

have fun the other night, portraying the outgoing prez in a sketch in which he tuned into CNN and "me and Bar loved the fireworks in Washington and Baghdad."

As thrilled as the troupe is to make mincemeat of the new administration, Simmons sees certain basic similarities between past and present: "If Clinton keeps to his pledge of 'continuity in government,' we can count on the same lying, cheating and mismanagement as before."

"Clintoons" previews tonight at 7:30 and opens Feb. 6 at the Bayou, 3135 K St. NW. Call 202-783-7212 or 301-587-4291.