

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 1987



The cast of the comedy troupe Gross National Product.

Theater

Coming Home to Roast

D.C.'s GNP Skewers the News in 'Man Without a Contra'

By Joe Brown
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Gross National Product is back after a three-year leave of absence—the Washington-born topical comedy troupe has been busy establishing a West Coast chapter—and with "Man Without a Contra," now at d.c. space, it offers just what Powertown needs, a brief and breezy revue that sends up the mighty and fly-by-nightly.

GNP, the cabaret offspring of "SNL" and "SCTV" (the audio-only Firesign is another distant relative), works with a minimum of props, building sound effects and sight gags into 14 or so imaginative sketches, most of which are inspired by TV fodder and the nightly news. The troupe's greatest strengths are a boundless energy and an ability to convert this morning's headlines into this evening's belly laughs, and GNP's improv-ability succeeds where script-bound satires like "Rap Master Ronnie" stumble.

There are plenty of sharp moments in the rapid succession of skits, like a bit that has the pope and the surgeon general squaring off over the condom controversy in "The Papal's Court." And "Cash-a-Musha" is a clever impression of a badly dubbed Japanese movie about the trade imbalance.

All the sketches are liberally peppered with devious ideas, but longer essays such as "Oliver's Travels," a "Mission: Impossible" parody featuring the Contragate characters, and "East Bloc Story," a Soviet sci-fi musical, crumble before they're through. The quick hits are most successful, like "He-Thing," which spoofs antisocial hypermale toys, and "Tiger Beat," in which slumber party girls dish such unlikely, media-made sex objects as Jim Bakker and Gary Hart.

Director Susan Marya Baronoff shows her usual flair for unusual comedy, nimbly pacing seven likable performers. The men tend to try to out-Belushi each other, sometimes overdoing the mugging and clowning, though Wes Johnson's impressions of a stuffed-and-mounted Reagan and a starchy, thatch-roofed Ted Koppel are fine. The women are comparatively restrained and correspondingly funnier, especially Marcia Tilchin, who tickles as a teary Tammy Faye on her comeback talk show.

Man Without a Contra, by Gross National Product. Directed by Susan Marya Baronoff. With Marianne Curan, Wes Johnson, Terri Madden, Brian McNells, Joe Palka, John Simmons, Marcia Tilchin. At d.c. space through July 15.