

Campaign *fully* Funny

By Roger Plantadosi



EVEN WHEN IT shuts down, your federal government is not going to shut up. This is especially true right here in Beltway City, and it goes double in a presidential election year—a special time when, like it or not, your emotions and opinions will be repeatedly messed with by professionals.

In such trying times it helps to stay informed, if only as an act of self-defense. Sometimes, however, trying to keep up by buying the newspaper or scanning CNN is just...too much. Too scary. If presidential primaries seem strange, ugly and confusing, it's because—they are.

I mean, *we* are.

This brings us to political satire.

Politics may not be pretty, but politics can be pretty funny—and if you'd at least occasionally refrain from watching "The McLaughlin Group" on a 42-inch rear-projection home theater system, you'd notice this more often. That well-meaning bureaucrats and politicians often write some of our culture's best double-meaning one-liners might explain why, unlike federal budget talks or city-owned snowplows or the Draft Colin Powell juggernaut, the political satire business in Washington just keeps going and going and...

In fact, the first qualification for a political satirist is to have access to some high-quality, constantly rechargeable batteries.

We wanted to know exactly how political satirists deal with the ever-shifting winds of a spring primary season. It turns out they deal with it the same way as you and I—with one significant exception. After they, like us, roll their eyes, shake their heads, check their watches or pat their jackets to make sure there's still a mortgage deduction in there, they sit down, take a deep breath—and then start typing for about 48 hours straight.

John Simmons was doing a lot of typing a couple of weeks ago. As the self-named "unartistic director" of Gross National Product, the topical theater/improv troupe behind such headline-driven revues as "BushCapades," "Clintoons," "A Newt World Order" and, most recently, "GNP: On the Dole," it usually falls on writer-actor-producer Simmons to come up with a new show's title.

And, sitting at the dual-computer comedy bunker in his Silver Spring basement, headquarters of both the 16-year-old GNP Empire (which has also done four public TV specials) and the household laundry operation, Simmons wonders aloud whether "On the Dole" could turn out to be a mistake: The day before, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan had won the New Hampshire primary.

"We're thinking now of calling it, 'GNP: A Clean Race, a Good Race, a Master Race,'" he says.

For now Simmons says he'll stick with "On the Dole," which opened last weekend at Arena Stage's Old Vat Theater; the

posters are already printed, after all. Also, native Washingtonian Simmons, who moved to L.A. briefly in the '80s but was lured back by, among other things, the satiric possibilities of Iran-contra, says he trusts his own judgment as a political guru.

"It's funny, I sat next to one of those [political consultant] guys on a plane once, and he was saying things like, 'Yeah, it's gonna be so-and-so in so-and-so,' and I said to him, 'Hey, I do the same thing'—and I do. I always have to be looking down the line."

Meanwhile, whatever it's titled, the GNP show itself, like all GNP shows, will keep changing. Besides the regular audience-charging improvs, there are the current bits: Bob Heck as a beaming motor-mouth Clinton, or as an about-to-go-off Buchanan, or as a fully bespectacled and suspended Larry King, working the audience like a borscht-belt emcee on acid. There are newer sketches ("Republican Place, 20109") and speeches, including the opener: Simmons as a doddering hard-guy Dole ("Bob Dole stands for family values. Not like Bill and Hillary with this Whitewater S&M crisis, or that Paula Jones thing—heck, I may be old-fashioned but I remember when harass was two words—but more like Bob and Liddy. We enjoy a totally monotonous relationship.")

The newest stuff, Simmons says, of course tries to reflect what's happening in the polls and primaries—but in a fun house-mirror kinda way.

In the sinfully one-sided "Christian History of America" sketch, for instance, the high-school-age Kids of the Heavenly Kingdom—Matthew, Mark, Ruth and, um, Schlomo—reenact important events in American history, including the Pilgrims' first meeting with a Native American.

Matt: *How, backward heathen.*

Mark: *We are Pilgrims fleeing England.*

Matt: *In search of a land free of religious intolerance, where all may worship as they want.*

Schlomo [dressed as an Indian]: *That's interesting. [speaking rapidly] You know, we worship the Great Spirit found in all nature, with particular emphasis on our place within an ecologically harmonious and highly spiritual... [Matt and Mark aim their muskets at Schlomo. He reconsiders.] We have heap big friend in Jesus.*

"People want us to be harder-hitting, because it seems that things have become more...hard, in the '90s," Simmons says. "It's not a soft time."

Nor a restful time. As the new Arena show opening approached, Simmons had been working more or less nonstop on the rehearsals and particularly on the writing, which he does with fellow GNP cast member Chris Thompson and Los Angeles-based former GNPers Marianne Curan, Joel Perry, Doug Cox and John Moody, while still tweaking and performing in the ongoing "Newt World Order" show at the Bayou.

"Basically," Simmons says, back in his bunker, lapsing into a Dole-full cadence as his guest rises to leave, "I'd just like to say that...ah...I'm tired."



Gross National Product's John Simmons does Dole, Bob Heck does Clinton, and Chris Thompson does Hillary.