Los Angeles Times

Strong Candidates for a Joke

Politicians have brought comedians out in droves this year

but keeping up with the races isn't easy

By ROBERT KOEHLER

"George Bush has a kinder, gentler health program for the nation, in three simple words: Don't Get Sick."

Buh-da-boom.

"Hey, if Japan wants to make better cars, fine, let them. We'll just make better haiku."

Buh-da-boom.

"It's too bad that we weren't able to capture Saddam Hussein. If we had, we could have turned him over to the LAPD."

Buh-da-boom.

The previous unpaid political announcements have been brought to you by, in order, comedy team Gross National Product, and comedians Beth Lapides and Steve Morris. They're part of a campaign season that has absolutely nothing to do with the draft movement for H. Ross Perot: political comedy.

In an era of stand-up routines obsessed with last night's dating nightmare, political comedy sounds like an oxymoron. (Some might chime in that it's already monopolized by the candidates themselves.) But Morris, Lapides and the folks from GNP are insisting on some equal time to lampoon the national nightmare, and they appear to be getting it.

Morris is doing his late-night solo show, "This Will All Make Sense in a Minute," at the Burbage Theatre; Lapides' self-styled campaign for First Lady is dovetailing with her "Un-Cabaret," co-starring Taylor Negron and Judy Toll, to open May 16 at Highways; and GNP hits the Odyssey Theatre on May 16.

Perhaps there's nothing more to this trend than a campaign season that, just as the World Series turns everyone into baseball fans for a week, is creating a crowd of political junkies.

Gross National Product also seems pleased that candidacies are sprouting up everywhere—all the more to lampoon. "We're not partisan," says GNP's John Simmons, "so we stick it to everybody."

There are so many to stick it to that GNP, while continuing to perform its ongoing "Bushcapades: An Administration on Thin Ice" in their Washington, D.C., home base, has been able to send a national touring group across the country. At the Odyssey, it includes tour founders Simmons and Marianne Curan, Dai Kornberg of New York's "First Amendment," Larry Coven of Chicago's Second City, Doug Cox of The Groundlings and John Rourke, who was Ronald Reagan in the long-running L.A. production of "Rap Master Ronnie" and George Bush in "Naked Gun 2½."

"We can form a national company," Simmons continues, "because there are so many cities full of comedy improv groups now, and improv is a big part of what we do."

It had better be, because in a topsy-turvy political year—the most volatile, as veteran pundit/reporter Jack Germond has observed, since 1968—who's in and who's out has become a full-time job for some of these comics.

"Since the start of the show's run in March," Morris says, "Tom Harkin has gone, Bob Kerrey has gone—though we still have a slide of him in the show because he photographs so funny—Paul Tsongas was going down, then out, then almost back in again, then out again. I've thrown out tons of material, and then add new stuff, like that ridiculous Newsweek cover of Bill Clinton. These campaigns create and destroy heroes so quickly that Clinton is now an incumbent candidate."

GNP's Curan moans at the loss of Tsongas: "Oohh, I'm so sorry he's gone. What a great subject. I had worked out this whole sketch with him resurrecting himself for the campaign at Easter, and then, we had to drop it. Just like we had to drop a skit on the 'Democratic downhill slalom.'"

Simmons: "We all check out the papers every day, especially the L.A. Times, the Washington Post, the New York Times, and then we pull out ideas and try to bring them together. I'll look at CNN's Headline News before the show, in case there's any fast-breaking stuff, which includes making fun of the newscasters, who are just as ridiculous as the politicians." Curan cites C-SPAN's uninterrupted broadcasts of speeches and debates as "great for research."

With all this behind-the-scenes monitoring, the GNPers figure that, within five weeks, 30% to 40% of their show will change.

Gross National Product opens May 16 at the Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles, at 8 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays, and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through June 14. Tickets: $15. Call: (310) 477-2055.

AXEL KOESTER / For The Times

The cast—and characters—of the political comedy group Gross National Product.