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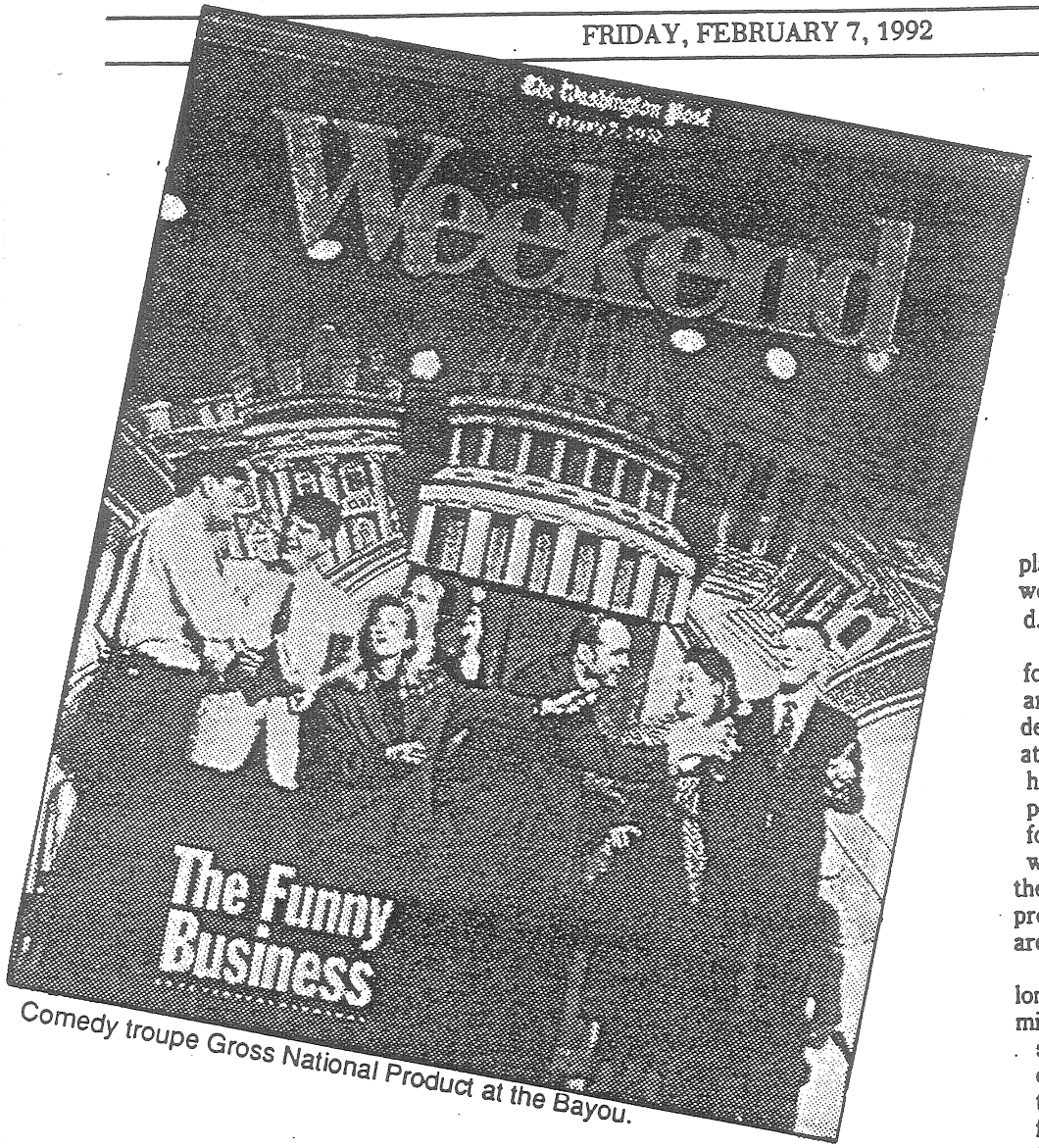

Comedy troupe Gross National Product at the Bayou.

Comedy Tonight

The longest-running and most successful sketch troupe in Washington is Gross National Product, founded about 13 years ago after Reagan's election and the "mother" of the Saturday matinee "Scandal Tour," a mobile Enquirer that buses the audience from the Tidal Basin to Gary Hart's town house.

It is Gross National Product, which identifies with its audience rather than with its subjects, that pretty much cut the pattern for sketch humor around here. Back when there were no comedy venues in Washington, as founder Simmons recalls, GNP had to break in using rock clubs, so as a front GNP formed the Warsaw Pact—"progressive rock from the Eastern bloc" with lead and rhythm accordions—and when the band played the Psyche Delly or d.c. space, GNP would open. (The joke is it's the Delly and d.c. space that need an opening now.)

Politicians are GNP's raison d'etre, its focus the executive branch, "the power arm." The show is populated with presidents, veeps, snoops and creeps, impersonated by mannerism and prop. (Simmons himself earns about $400 a shot plus expenses as Bush, and is in constant demand for convention shows and parties, especially with "Millie" in tow.) Because it's so topical, the script changes constantly, and requires professional actors of quick wit; GNP shows are a third to a half improv.

GNP prospers not only because of its long, strong reputation but because of its mid-range price—$15 for a 90-minute show; considering psychiatrists get upwards of $60 an hour, Simmons calls it "cheap therapy for the audience." It also benefits from a choice venue at the heart of Georgetown, the Bayou, with shows early enough to attract both Saturday night diners (plan to eat elsewhere; the Bayou serves mostly basket snacks) and progressive club crawlers just getting warmed up. Although seating at the Bayou is a mixed blessing, and the smoke tends to be thick, the stage is a good five feet high, so the actors are visible from almost everywhere; the sound is pro.

GNP's shows are so politically motivated that it already has bookings at the New York Improv timed to coincide with the New Hampshire primary, the New York primary and the Democratic National Convention; more "legitimately," a GNP show will run for six weeks at the Odyssey Theatre in Los Angeles leading up to the June 2 California primary.

GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT — Saturdays at the Bayou, Wisconsin and K streets NW. 202/783-7212.