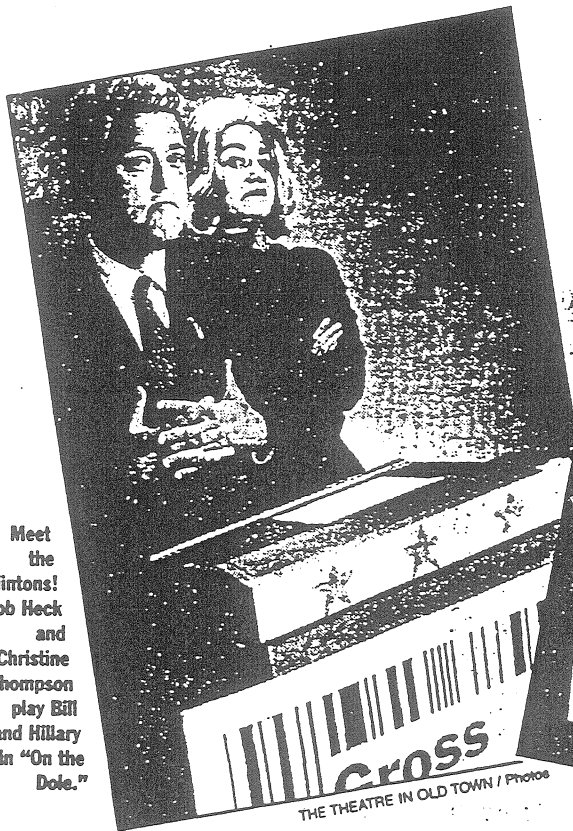


Beltway  
improv troupe  
sharpening its  
skewers for  
gig during  
convention



Meet the Clintons! Bob Heck and Christine Thompson play Bill and Hillary in "On the Dole."



Meet the Doles! Christine Thompson and GNP founder John Simmons are Liddy and Bob.

# HELL TO THE CHIEF

By Michael Phillips  
THEATER CRITIC

Right hook! "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America," intones Bob Dole, as played by John Simmons. "And to the Republicans, for which it stands/One nation, under Bob, invisible/With no liberal justices at all."

Left jab! Yes, concedes President Bill Clinton, "I did promise a middle-class tax cut. But I made that promise when I was middle class."

Aaaaaaaaand we're ringside with Gross National Product, the Washington D.C.-based comedy troupe that never met a scandal, hypocrisy or windbag it didn't like. For 16 years the acclaimed, improvisationally savvy satirists have served, collectively, as the unofficial thorn in the side of national politics.

Next week, GNP makes its San Diego debut with its latest show, "On the Dole" — just in time for (down the highway from) the Republican National Convention.

"It's gonna be fun," says the hearty Simmons by phone from Silver Spring, Md. He's the founder of the troupe; like the Groundlings in Los Angeles, Second City in Chicago and Dudley Riggs in Minneapolis, GNP has become a trusted brand name in regional improv-based humor.

"San Diego could really turn into a bloodbath," he says, audibly crossing his fingers. "And just being out there, right in the madness, with our good friend Newt, and Pat Buchanan, of course . . . I don't know, it feels like a disaster waiting to happen."

"And us, being the vultures we are, we'll swoop down for a few days' worth of cheap laughs."

No matter what, says the 40-year-old Simmons, a trip to San Diego will serve as a break from "our vapid little world here inside the Beltway."

During the 1988-1992 years, GNP's "unartistic director" was best known for his George Bush. These days, Simmons spends most of his stage time doing Dole, although he's also ready and willing when it comes to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno ("Not since J. Edgar Hoover has law enforcement looked so good in a dress!").

In "On the Dole," GNP veteran Bob Heck does Clinton, Newt Gingrich and, in Simmons' estimation, "an obnoxiously horrifying Larry King." One *Washington Post* writer praised Heck by pointed out "not only how much (his) Clinton and Gingrich resemble each other, but how much both resemble the Pillsbury dough boy."

The GNP company of seven also features Christine Thompson (who stars in

the mini-musical "Hillary Superstar"), Liz Demery, Kevin Brown (on hand to portray, among others, Colin Powell), Doug Cox and musical director David Zee.

Simmons started GNP in 1980. At the time, he was a reporter for the *Commerce Clearinghouse* journal. After a two-year hiatus in L.A., thanks largely to the satirist's dream known as the Iran-Contra affair, Simmons returned to D.C. and began getting in his satiric licks full time.

Debuting in 1988, the GNP hit "Bushcapes: An Administration on Thin Ice" ran four years. Working at Arena Stage's Old Vat theater and the Bayou in Georgetown, GNP has since presented, among other shows, "Clintoons: The First Hundred Daze" and "A Newt World Order."

GNP also offers a bus tour of Washington called Scandal Tours. GNP actors on board play various resume-smearing figures, pointing out, among other landmarks, the Watergate Hotel and the Vista Hotel, where Mayor Marion Barry was videotaped smoking crack cocaine.

That is there; "On the Dole" is here, and soon.

"You'll find we're a combination of a lot of things," Simmons says. As Dole, Simmons begins the evening with an audi-

ence question-and-answer session. A musical parody of "Tommy," retitled "Bobby," features the Solid Dole Dancers. The Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed introduces the "Christian History of America" classroom lesson.

"If there's too many Christians in the audience, they might lyachus," he says.

Still: "We've had

some RNC guys see the show (in Washington), and they seemed to like it.

There'll be something in it for everybody, even though the focus in San Diego will naturally be on the Republicans." And as the convention week goes on, he says, "we'll no doubt add and subtract things."

Whatever happens, the Theatre in Old Town gig is a "perfect opportunity to come out to a nice city and throw rocks at these guys. And at the 'other' guys, too. I mean, we're Washingtonians. We've seen all these bozos come and go in our town."

## DATEBOOK

"Gross National Product: On the Dole"

8 p.m. Monday-Wednesday; 8 and 10 p.m. Aug. 15-17; 3 p.m. Aug. 18. *The Theatre in Old Town*, 4040 Twigg St., Old Town. \$19.96. 688-2494.