

# Groundlings founder to play in Fort Collins

## 'Oil' launches Bas Bleu slate

By John Moore  
Denver Post Theater Critic

Gary Austin, founder of the legendary Los Angeles Groundlings comedy team, is also a playwright who will perform his one-man "Oil" to launch the Bas Bleu Theatre Company's 2004-05 season in Fort Collins beginning Aug. 18.

The world premiere of "Oil" will be staged at the Groundlings' own theater Jan. 10. It is his fact-based, comic look at growing up as the son of life-long Halliburton employee.

"I grew up in the Halliburton oil camps, and I worked for Halliburton one summer when I was in college, so a big part of it is my father's take on what is going on now with Dick Cheney and the Halliburton contracts in Iraq," Austin said.

"My father died a year before 9/11, so I have him come on stage as a character to talk about how he sees all that is going on now. So in large part I have him being an apologist for Halliburton."

Austin's mother was born in 1919 in Oilton, Okla., which was then home to the biggest oil field in the world.

"Back then, there was no absolutely concern about the environmental exploitation caused by the oil industry," Austin said. "Children would come home from school covered in oil because it was in the mist from the derricks that were spilling oil into the air.



Mike Guastella | WireImage.com

Paul Reubens (Pee Wee Herman) presented Gary Austin with an award at the Groundlings' recent 30th anniversary gala in Los Angeles. It was an emotional reunion for the formerly estranged comedy partners.

But "Oil," he swears, is a laugh. Really.

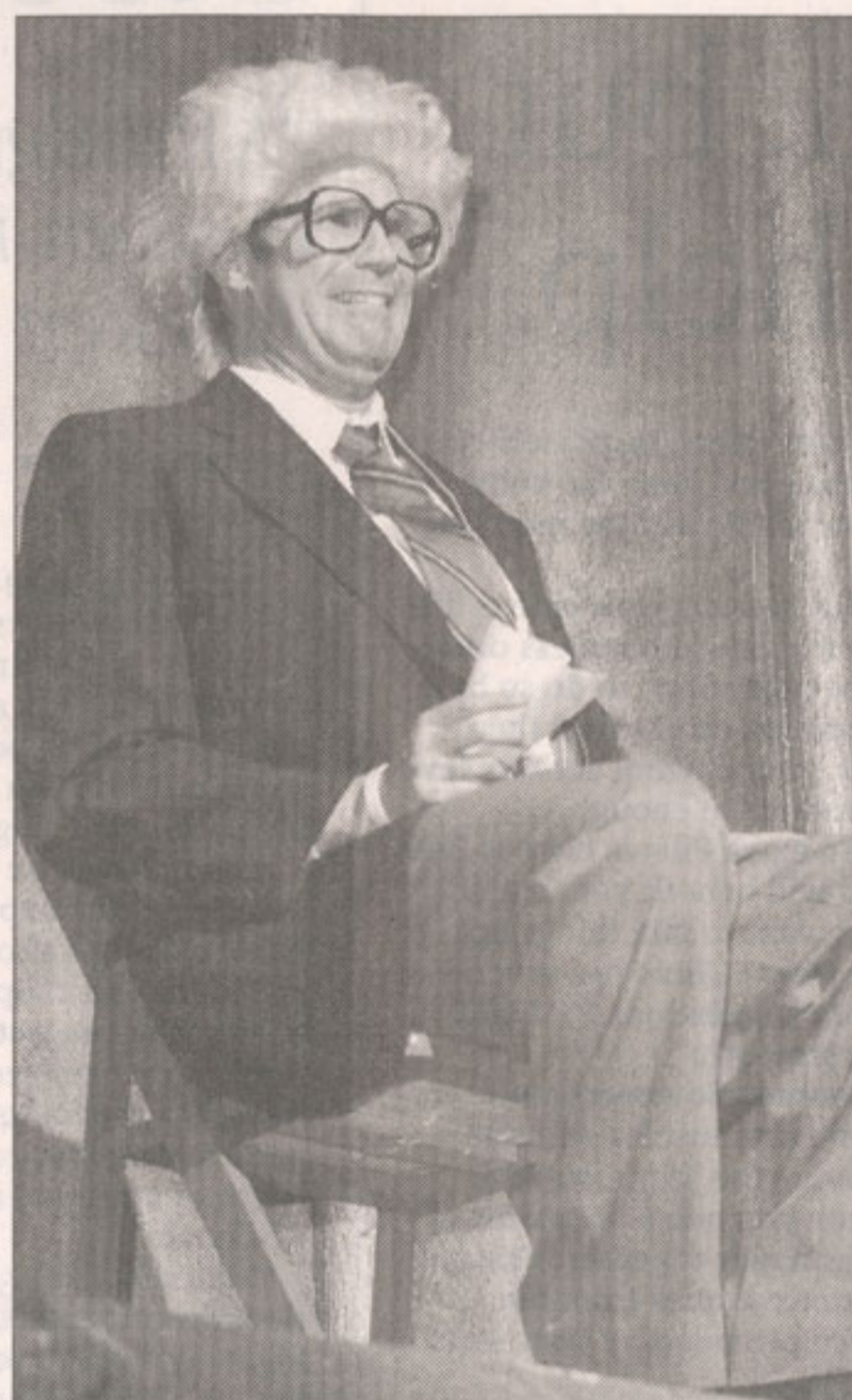
"Human behavior is funny," he said. "I really learned that when 'Candid Camera' was first on. The dupes didn't think it was funny in the moment. They thought it was funny when they got a chance to sit back and laugh at it in a studio

audience."

In "Oil," Austin said, "I sing. I play guitar, I play a lot of characters, and I play myself.

"At one point we are at the Petroleum Hall of Fame, which actually exists in Midland, Texas. The premise is that while the parents are taking a tour, I take care of the kids. The audi-

ence becomes those kids, and so I read them a kid's book that's all about George Bush's success as an oil exec — and of course there was none, because he failed five times as a CEO. So I sing a song just like 'The Little Engine Who Could.' We are really pulling for George, but he just keeps failing."



John Sciulli | WireImage.com

Will Ferrell was the hit of the gala, taking questions from the crowd as Harry Carey in heaven, where he shares a dorm room with Jim Morrison.

But "Oil" is not, he said, a play solely about Bush or the Republican Party. "It's about the fact that corporations run the world now," he said. "It's a show about the exploitation of the planet and of human beings by oil, specifically. And you could apply that to the whole corporate world."

## The Groundlings' alumni

(from among a list of 264)

- Jennifer Coolidge
- Will Ferrell
- Will Forte
- Ana Gastayer
- Kathy Griffin
- Phil Hartman
- Cheryl Hines
- Chris Kattan
- Lisa Kudrow
- Jon Lovitz
- Edie McClurg
- Michael McDonald
- Laraine Newman
- Sheri Oteri
- Paul Reubens (Pee-Wee Herman)
- Maya Rudolph
- Julia Sweeney
- Mindy Sterling

## History

**1972** | Gary Austin starts improvisational workshops in Los Angeles.

**1974** | Austin incorporates as the nonprofit Groundlings. The name refers to the poorer audience members who in Elizabethan times had to stand on the ground in front of the stage to see Shakespeare plays.

**1978** | Groundlings School of Improvisation opens for 17 students; now boasting annual enrollment of 4,200

**1979** | Groundlings open 99-seat improv theater; Austin resigns.

Austin first learned of Bas Bleu in 1999 when a Colorado State University student took one of his improvisation classes in L.A. and told him he needed to come to Colorado. At Bas Bleu he developed and debuted his solo show "Church," which he might revive in rep with "Oil" in Fort Collins.

"Church" is about growing up in the Nazarene church, and has since been reworked with Hank Azaria.