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Oil Strike

Gary Austin's provocative new play comes to Bas Bleu.

By Jason Heller

"This isn't a Michael Moore movie," Gary Austin says of his new one-man stage show, *Oil*. "I'm entertaining an audience in the same way that any theatrical presentation is meant to. But I want to actually inform as well as entertain. That's how I get my point across."

When it comes to entertainment, Austin knows his biz. He got his break in the '60s alongside such future stars as Rob Reiner and Howard Hesseman in the legendary improv troupe the Committee. In 1974, he founded the Groundlings, one of Los Angeles's longest-running and most highly regarded theater companies. After serving as director of the Groundlings for years, Austin began teaching as well as acting; his star-studded list of protégés includes Lisa Kudrow, Paul Reubens and Oscar winner Helen Hunt.

Austin's origins, though, couldn't have been farther from the glitz of Tinseltown. The son of an oilman employed by the megalithic Halliburton corporation, he was raised in a succession of "oil camps" spread across the dusty plains of Oklahoma and Texas. "They were just a few acres with houses and warehouses on them," he says. "It was a way to provide cheap housing to the workers. Halliburton didn't pay that well, and there were no unions. Drilling for oil is a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day process, so everyone had to be ready at all times to run right out and do what needed to be done."

"Still," he adds, "I was never critical. I thought what my father did and what Halliburton did was terrific. It was the only life I knew."

Austin began to change his views of the petroleum industry while attending college in San Francisco. Now, after years of research and trying out satirical skits in various stage shows, he's brought his experiences together to form *Oil*. Switching between monologue and song (the first weekend of the show will feature guitar accompaniment by famed session player and Warren Zevon sideman Matt Cartsonis), Austin portrays a slew of characters in his pointed critiques of Halliburton, the United States government and our oil-driven culture in general. "Since I was a kid, Halliburton has become so much more than it was. They do everything now, including cooking dinners for soldiers in Iraq. It's really like a quasi-government agency, an unofficial arm of the federal government. Based on what I can tell, Halliburton is running the whole situation in Iraq."

It's no surprise that Austin also takes on the president in *Oil* -- especially seeing as how George W. Bush grew up just twenty miles from one of Austin's childhood camps in West Texas. "At one point in the show," he elaborates, "I pretend that I'm the guy taking care of the kids while their parents are touring the Petroleum Hall of Fame in Midland, Texas, which really exists. I tell them about Dubya's life as an oil executive. He's like the little engine that could, only he just keeps failing. I'm calling Bush for what he was -- a terrible businessman. He always was, and he still is."

But *Oil* isn't all so lighthearted; besides poking fun, Austin examines such destructive drilling practices as hydraulic fracturing and sends up an alarm about the geopolitical implications of oil dependency. "There



Make my day: Gary Austin takes on Halliburton in *Oil*.

Details

Who / What:

Oil

Details:

August 19-September 3, Bas Bleu Theater, 401 Pine Street, Fort Collins, \$10-\$19, 1-970-498-8949 or www.basbleu.org

are lots of laughs in my show, and lots of gasps," he says. "People get engaged and involved. Every time I do the show, I go out into the lobby and meet people. They don't talk to me about show business or even the show itself. They talk to me about the content. These are educated, well-read people, and they're shocked at what I'm telling them. And that means that I've done my job."