

VARIETY®

Bush Wars

(Collective: Unconscious; 53 Seats; \$30 top)

By Mark Blankenship

A Help Is on the Way presentation of a musical in one act conceived by Jim Russek and written by Nancy Holson. Directed by Holson and Jay Falzone. Choreography, Falzone. Musical direction, Alex Rovang.

With: Jay Falzone, Jason Levinson, Andrea McCormick, Abigail Nessen, Chris Van Hoy.

"Bush Wars," a musical revue written and co-directed by Nancy Holson, has the dubious luck of preeming after Joshua Rosenblum's "Bush Is Bad," meaning the show is Gotham's second collection of far-left song-and-dance numbers attacking the current administration. But arriving second doesn't mean taking second place. On the contrary, "Bush Wars" proves to be a political satire so smart and so surprising that it deserves to be compared not to "Bush Is Bad" but to timelessly effective works like Joan Littlewood's "Oh! What a Lovely War."



Obviously there's no avoiding the production's bias, but auds of any political persuasion should be able to appreciate how well Holson and Jay Falzone (co-director, choreographer and cast member) understand what makes comedy work. Each of the 15 skits finds some way to pierce expectations, be it with a risky premise, a surprising twist ending or a palpable dose of the anger that always infuses a satirist's work.

For an example of all three, take the scene "Bill Frist," in which Falzone apes the Senate majority leader by claiming he can diagnose anyone's illness. The piece begins rather tamely, with Falzone inventing various maladies for audience members, but the envelope gets pushed hard when a hospital intern (Chris van Hoy) wheels out Terry Schiavo (Andrea McCormick). Frist looks at the comatose woman and immediately declares her healthy. Then a romantic melody begins to play, and he invites her to dance.

A more predictable staging might send Schiavo waltzing with Frist around the room, but McCormick stays seated and immobile. That leaves Frist to insist she's "dancing beautifully," and what could have

been a silly bit suddenly becomes much darker. The moment is still funny, but Falzone's manic oblivion to his patient's state becomes an acid comment on what politicians are willing to ignore.

Like the rest of the production, the Schiavo scene features lovely music, played by music director-pianist Alex Rovang. The cast also have excellent voices, perfectly designed to belt power ballads like "Don't Lie Out Loud," a Karl Rove-inspired parody of Melissa Manchester's "Don't Cry Out Loud."

The quality of the music and singing means "Bush Wars" succeeds not only as satire but also as pure entertainment.

There's beautiful four-part harmony, for instance, as the ensemble wails "When the Saints Go Marching Out," a riff on Hurricane Katrina victims waiting for the New Orleans Saints to leave the Superdome so they can move in. Dressed in tattered rags, the survivors evoke genuine sympathy, even as their high-spirited, hand-clapping gospel draws laughs.

That's another truth that Holson understands: The best satire mixes its anger with vulnerability. The writer's own sadness, fear and frustration are apparent in her writing, which makes her comedy ring viciously true.

Though they sometimes slip into mugging, the cast generally trust Holson's material enough to underplay it. Falzone sets the bar with his sly timing, taking even the occasional missteps -- do we need another "perfect suburban family" gone awry? -- and finding ways to make them fresh.

As Dubya, Jason Levinson refreshingly chooses not to play the president like a crazed cowboy. Instead, he gives the character a gleeful innocence, as though he were a puppy who was thrilled to run around the backyard. His goofiness blends well with Falzone's knowing malice, particularly in the scene where Falzone plays Jesus, come down to help the president permanently fuse church and state.

Even for New York, it's fairly shocking that Jesus is a singin'-and-dancin' character in this show, but Holson justifies her audacity by using his presence to make an intelligent point. There's no doubt that the scene -- along with most of the others in "Bush Wars" -- will offend some people, but excellent satire can't work any other way. When comedy demands a reaction, it's doing something right.

Sets and props, Patrice Escandon; costumes, Elizabeth Payne; lighting, Scott Borowka; production stage manager, Christine D. Goutmann. Opened Jan. 22, 2006. Reviewed Jan. 19. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.