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Patrick Rowland as Obama and Carol Bontakoe as his Aunt Carol in "Barack All Night!" (/ August 21, 2012)

By Kerry Reid, Special to the Tribune

5:15 p.m. CDT, August 22, 2012

Look, it's an election year, folks. And that means the choice is clear — you can either curl up in the fetal position with your hands over your ears until Nov. 7, or you can fortify yourself with booze and banter to get past the parade of attack ads and chest-thumping punditry. A pair of back-to-back late-night Saturday options at iO provides respite from the rhetoric, both courtesy of Jason Chin, creator of iO's long-running current-events hit, "Whirled News Tonight."

"Saturday/Saturday"

"Saturday/Saturday" is like a post-modernist take on "The Ed

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Sullivan Show" with a topical spin. Hosted by Chin, the show features a rotating lineup of musicians, magicians, comedians and audience-participation game-show routines, many with an overt political bent.

On the night I attended, an audience member had to choose which biographical factoids and quotes belonged to which of two famous Wisconsinites: GOP vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, or serial killer/cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer. Also, at risk of "deportation," a panel of three young women from the audience answered questions taken from the test given to prospective U.S. citizens. I've also seen this gambit used in the long-running occasional late-night variety show "The Game Show Show ... and Stuff."

From the results at iO, I'd say beer and retention of high-school civics and history do not mix.

Fears about the future came out in song form with the trio the Shock T's, who expressed their angst about being in the 99 percent. "What's it like to have a dining room? I eat waffles over the sink."

They also delivered a sardonic view on our age of social networking with "half-grieving," in which they pondered the etiquette of dealing with the death of someone you only sorta-kind know — especially if the deceased has defriended you on Facebook before their untimely demise.

Not everything had a topical slant. John Sturk, magic's answer to John Hodgman, charmed the audience with mind-bending feats involving metal rings and steely asides.

And if there is indeed a war on women, one would do well to bet on Erin Schaut to be the last one standing. In the edgiest portion of the evening, Schaut's rage-infused folkie interrogated members of the audience about their own relationships with take-no-prisoners glee. No matter who wins in November, somebody always goes home with a broken heart — and somebody else figures out how to laugh about it.

"Barack All Night!"

The president gets his own talk show in the slightly more-structured offering "Barack All Night!," directed by Chin and starring Patrick Rowland as President Barack Obama (who of course breaks into a cappella renditions of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" at the slightest provocation) and Linus Lee and Chris Fair as the pair of Secret Service agents who seem to harbor some showbiz

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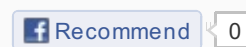
aspirations of their own.

On the night I attended, the guest list for the POTUS gabfest included Batman. "We have a lot in common," Rowland's Obama observed. "You have Alfred. I have Joe Biden. You take on criminally insane people bent on destroying the world. I fight Republicans."

Rowland nailed the oft-noted paradoxical blend of aloof-and-affable present in the real president during his audience interactions. "Do you have a job?" he asked one patron. On hearing the affirmative answer, he responded "You're welcome."

The show could use smoother transitions between segments, and the political comedy isn't as hard-hitting or cerebral as what one finds on "The Daily Show" or "The Colbert Report." But then, those guys don't have to hold the attention of a primarily young and bibulous live audience. Taken together, "Saturday/Saturday" and "Barack All Night!" provide comedic nightcaps with just enough bite to leave mental marks for the next day.

"Saturday/Saturday" is 10:30 p.m. Saturdays, \$15; "Barack All Night!" is midnight Saturdays \$5. Both at iO Theater, 3541 N. Clark St.; 773-880-0199 and ioimprov.com



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