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Comics square off in live 'debate'

Sunday, September 11, 2011

By Glen Schaefer, The Province



Series premiere

The Debaters

When and where: 9: 30 p.m. Wednesdays, CBC

Never having done the "filmed before a live studio audience" thing before, the promise of something new is enough of a lure to get me into the subterranean CBC Vancouver production centre on a balmy afternoon.

Comic Dave Hemstad (left) and host Steve Patterson on CBC's The Debaters.

Photographed by:

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The occasion is a taping of the new CBC series The Debaters - new to television, but a popular draw on CBC radio for the past five years, which explains why the mother corp has no trouble

filling several hundred seats with willing fans on a Friday in April. The transition from television to radio has left the show's premise intact - two comedians square off on a topic, aiming to score in laughs and logic, moderated by host Steve Patterson. You kind of wish these guys could have been giving tips to Ignatieff and Harper during the last federal election debates.

But while the radio show taped in locations throughout the country, the TV series is based in Vancouver, with a glitzy crystal stage set and podiums, flashy graphics and coloured lights to alter the mood.

But the job of getting a laugh from the studio and home audiences still falls to the funny men and women on stage. It starts with an off-camera audience warm-up by show co-ordinator David Jones, who has some housekeeping-type things to say about audience bathroom breaks. They'll be in their seats for a couple of hours as the production shoots two half-hour episodes this day.

A big blond guy in a baggy suit, Jones warns the crowd that if they take the wrong exit out of the studio, they'll wander the bowels of the CBC building, possibly forever.

Show creator Richard Side takes over from Jones, warming them up with trivia questions about past radio Debater episodes. The crowd knows this stuff, shouting answers over top of each other.

"The Debaters takes stand-up to a new level," Side says later, adding that while most comedians deliver sets solo, in the show they spar and riff off another comic.

The comics tackle topics from "Adult children living at home," to "Is it OK to cheat on your spouse?" to "Urban chickens" to "Showers vs. baths." The show gets semi-serious with takes on "The Rise of China," "Scientology," "Walmart," "Is it time to scrap the pride parade?," and "Suzuki or Cherry: Who is the better role model?"

Each episode features two debates between two different comics, among them Scott Thompson (Kids in the Hall), Elvira Kurt, Derek Edwards, Mike Wilmot (It's All Gone Pete Tong), Debra DiGiovanni, Trevor Boris, Patrick McKenna (The Red Green Show), Sean Cullen and Roman Danylo (Comedy Inc.). The winners are determined by the studio audience, which votes with its applause.