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In L.A., stars could outshine politicians

By Andrea Billups
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On Wednesday night, with the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles at full tilt, actor Jimmy Smits is expected to lead a floor discussion on the issue of health care.

Best known as the hunky detective of "NYPD Blue" fame, Mr. Smits' role will be as informed citizen, not as well-known thespian. The likable and strapping actor will no doubt add to the viewer appeal of a political event that promises no shortage of Hollywood glitterati.

Amid the famous, the infamous, and the rich and powerful — both Frank Zappa's widow and Paramount Pictures head Sherry Lansing are voting delegates — Vice President and presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore may have a hard time maintaining his presence as star of the Democratic show.

Some observers fear the appearances of Barbra Streisand, Martin Sheen, and other well-known entertainment-industry liberals may cast a glitzy shadow over Mr. Gore, whose public demeanor, campaign delivery and seeming inability to schmooze could cast him as a wooden Beltway figure in a sea of beautiful people.

"I think that is the risk they are running," says Shanto Iyengar, a professor of communications and political science at Stanford University. "There's a real risk the big-name Hollywood stars will overshadow ... the VP, particularly with the Clinton fund raising that is going on simultaneously."

Gore spokesman Chris Lehane said Thursday he had no fears that the phalanx of stars expected to attend the convention, including actors Woody Harrelson, Ted Danson, and the Creative Coalition's William Baldwin, would steal Mr. Gore's limelight.

"The Hollywood celebs will be like the celebs at the L.A. Lakers games — sitting on the sidelines, focused on Shaq. And Gore is the 'Shaq' at the convention," he said. "Gore is filling Shaq's shoes at the Staples Center."

But has he got game?

"Upstaging is not something



Photo by Cliff Owen/The Washington Times

Downtown Los Angeles, site of the Democratic convention, is shown at dusk.

that is a Gore issue," says Stephen Craig, a professor of political science at the University of Florida. "It's, can he make his case, can he give people a reason to vote for Al Gore?"

All the glamour aside, "he needs to do what he has to do effectively as a candidate. If he doesn't do that, he's got a problem no matter where the convention is held."

Thomas Mann, a political analyst at the Brookings Institution in Washington, says what really matters isn't the barrage of parties and star sightings, but rather what ordinary Americans take away from the limited television coverage they see.

"The things that will penetrate, I'm sure, are the absence of platform fights, President Clinton's speech, and the speeches by [running mate Sen. Joseph I.] Lieberman and Gore," Mr. Mann said.

Democratic political consultant

and strategist Hal Dash agrees.

"Hollywood will get a lot of attention because of this week, but the bottom line of a convention and what the media will focus on is how well Gore does, his vision for the future, his speech, and the interesting angle of the Joe Lieberman factor," said Mr. Dash, president of Los Angeles-based Cerrell Associates.

"Through Monday night, it's Clinton's goodbye," he said. "Tuesday night, it's Gore's convention." The only backlash that could occur is if the American people see too much of stereotypical Hollywood and a parade of limousines, Mr. Craig said.

Mr. Clinton, despite his popularity in Hollywood, will not steal Mr. Gore's thunder, Mr. Mann predicted. Just as then-Vice President George Bush was not upstaged by President Reagan at his convention in 1988, Mr. Gore will not be

eclipsed by Mr. Clinton.

"Clinton wants nothing more than to have Gore elected," Mr. Mann said. "I expect him to give a speech that mobilizes the issues and frames the choices. After a party or two and a little fund raising, he'll go off on vacation. The rest of the week will be Gore's."

The Republicans convening in Philadelphia didn't have the same celebrity issue. While they used high-profile Republicans to draw attention to their events, they selected such people as actor and gun-rights activist Charlton Heston and retired Gen. Colin Powell, who could speak thoughtfully on their issues, Mr. Iyengar said.

The strategy Mr. Gore should employ is to demonstrate that he is in control of the party and can lead it, Mr. Iyengar said.

— Bill Sammon contributed to this report from Atlanta.