NEW YORK POST
LATE CITY FINAL
SATURDAY, MARCH 4; SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 1995 / Cloudy today, 45, chance of showers tomorrow, 44-49 / Details, Page 20 ★★
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By RICHARD JOHNSON
with KIMBERLEY RYAN

Press prankster fakes out Fleet St.

NO one is safe from media hoaxer **Joey Skaggs**, not even the hardened hacks on Fleet Street. Skaggs is the inventor of Port-o-fess, a portable confessional booth; the Fat Squad, burly security men hired to keep people on their diets; and a baldness cure that involved transplanting scalps from cadavers. When producers for "The Word," on Ch. 4 in England, were preparing a segment on Skaggs some months ago, they asked him if he could pull a hoax in London. They didn't have to ask twice. Soon, Skaggs, in the guise of self-styled Lion King Baba Wa Simba (simba is the Swahili word for lion), was leading members of his cult, dubbed The Pride, in transcendental self-help exercises designed to "heal the wounded animal inside." Baba Wa Simba had his disciples start by getting on the floor on all fours and growling at each other, graduating to full-throated roars. Finally, the guru would toss raw meat to his followers, who would devour it cat-like without using their hands, and finish by licking each other's faces. "Society's normal restraints are left at the door of our meetings," Baba Wa Simba told one gullible reporter. "By roaring and eating meat together as a family group, the Pride is able to tap into a primal, almost trancelike state." The story of Baba Wa Simba and his cult was widely reported in newspapers and on television, and "The Word" got footage of newsmen as they fell for the hoax. They didn't know they'd been had until "The Word" aired last night. Skaggs, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts here, said, "It's actually easier to hoax the European press because they look for wacky American stories. That's how they like to portray Americans. I guess now they could call me the Lyin' King."