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THEATER REVIEW

Laughs to the Left, Laughs to the Right

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Heaven only knows what sort of mischief and devilry takes place at Congressional Christmas parties. But occasionally a hint of the goings-on has escaped in the form of "Capitol Steps," the irreverent show that traces its origins to the entertainment provided by a group of aides asked to enliven a Senate Foreign Relations Committee Christmas party in 1981.

Now those irrepressible satirists, who bubble their way to New York every year or two, are puncturing the powerful with their latest scattershot onslaught of comedy, "Capitol Steps: When Bush Comes to Shove," playing through Aug. 31 at the John Houseman Theater.

Mostly political and highly topical, performed by a five-member cast backed by a keyboard, this fast-moving combination of skits and songs ranges from Washington to Kandahar and from Broadway to the Middle and Far East, as it forages for material.

Although the quality ranges from side-splitting to simplistic, the show on the whole provides a happy evening for those who yearn for the lighter side of the news and derive pleasure from seeing the mighty made ridiculous.

Conforming to stereotype, here are the pretzel-loving President Bush as an amiable dope, and his wife, Laura, served up cloyingly sweet. In similar fashion, the comedy — conceived, written and directed by Bill Strauss, Elaina Newport and Mark Eaton — pokes fun at familiar figures like the Clintons; the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan; the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, and the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat; Vice President Dick Cheney; Senator Strom Thurmond; and Tom Ridge, director of homeland security, who reads bedtime stories, including a version of "Snow White" that dispatches its heroine into the remote lair of a bearded clan.

Casting a jaundiced eye on local heroes, the show zings Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg for his weekend disappearances with "Bye Bye Bloomberg," set to the music of "Bye Bye Blackbird"; in "On Broadway," the comics tell where to find the seamy New York that vanished when Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani cleaned up the streets; and in "When You're a Met," music from "West Side Story" underscores the hostility between fans of the Mets and those of the Yankees.

The show reaches its pinnacle with two eruptions of "Lirty Dies," an outpouring of spoonerisms in each act. The first looks back at the 20th century, a time when Richard M. Nixon declared, "I am crot a nook," and Gush and Bore began their runs for the presidency. The second examines the pedophilia scandal involving the Roman Catholic Church.

Aided and abetted by plenty of wigs, beards and props, the versatile cast members draw on popular and show tunes as they set their sights on women in Congress, the Enron scandal, the economy, the far right, environmental issues, Microsoft, airport security, shoe bombers and other

terrorists, pop stars, cloning and — in another highlight — relations with China.

Those who complain that politicians and government are good for nothing are wrong. "Capitol Steps: When Bush Comes to Shove" makes clear that more often than not, they're good for a laugh.

CAPITOL STEPS When Bush Comes to Shove

Conceived, written and directed by Bill Strauss, Elaina Newport and Mark Eaton. Set concept, R. J. Matson; lighting by Krista Martocci; prop and costume design, LindaRose Payne; sound by Jill B. C. DuBoff; technical director, Brad Van Grack; production coordinator, Marina Bridges; production supervisor, Kai Brothers; general management, EKTM Inc., Jonathan Shulman. Presented by Eric Krebs, in association with Capitol Steps. At the John Houseman Theater, 450 West 42nd Street, Clinton.

WITH: Mike Carruthers (Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, George Bush Sr., Alan Greenspan and others), Ann Johnson (Hillary Clinton, Gail Norton and others), Tracey Stephens (Laura Bush, Elizabeth Dole and others), Mike Tilford (Bill Clinton, Senator Strom Thurmond and others) and Jamie Zemarel (President Bush, Jerry Falwell and others).



Richard Termine for The New York Times

From left, Tracey Stephens, Jamie Zemarel, Mike Carruthers and Ann Johnson in "Capitol Steps: When Bush Comes to Shove."