

Today: Becoming cloudy, breezy. High 60. Low 53.
Saturday: Windy, rain.
High 71. Low 42.

Details, Page B10

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This may vary in some other publications.
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On the Town

NIGHTWATCH • SPOTLIGHT • RECORDINGS • FARE MINDED

By RICHARD HARRINGTON
Washington Post Staff Writer

“W”E’VE BEEN through wars, pestilence, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton,” says Elaine Newport, co-founder and producer of the Capitol Steps. “You need humor through all that stuff.”

Nightwatch

The Capitol Steps have filled that need for more than two decades. You can read all about it in “Sixteen Scandals: 20 Years of Sex, Lies and Other Habits of Our Great Leaders.” Published last fall, it includes an hour-long CD with more than 50 examples of the political comedy group’s clever word-play and musical mischief.

Or you can catch the Capitol Steps’ current show, “Who Put the Mock in Democracy?,” every Friday and Saturday at the Ronald Reagan Building Amphitheatre. That, too, is testimony to the group’s longevity. They got their start during Reagan’s presidency and now perform in a building named after one of their first and favorite subjects, one who, incidentally, loved the Capitol Steps. At a 1988 command performance at the White House before much of Congress and his cabinet, the president requested an all-Reagan repertoire.

Another sign the Steps have been around awhile: Historic events have become current events all over again, allowing the ensemble to recycle material like “Bomb Bomb Iraq” (sung to the Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann”). Songs about a President Bush, Iraq, Saddam Hussein and the French have needed only minor tweaking for what actor-writer Mark Eaton refers to as “the mother of all replays.”

“I’m a firm believer that when things are the worst is when people really want to laugh about this stuff, because if you really obsess, you’re going to go crazy,” Eaton says. “Obviously, there are changes the material has to take if we are at war. But people still appreciate laughing and it’s nice we have the opportunity to make them do that.”

Having gone through both Desert Storm and Sept. 11, 2001, Newport is conscious about issues of sensitivity and taste even without the specter of war.

“For instance, the Middle East is not really funny because there are tragedies and incidents every day and they’re not funny at all,” Newport says. “What you do in those circumstances is go after the politicians themselves, like Arafat and Sharon [featured in a caustic duet of “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers”]. You can make Saddam into a buffoon. And you can always make fun of the French.”

“You go after the public figures, the people that are fair game, who are in the headlines and have put themselves in that position. Even Tom Ridge and



Elaine Newport, Jamie Williams and Janet Gordon of the Capitol Steps, who have been performing for 20-plus years.

All the News That Fits, With Wit

his color-coded system of alerts deserves to be made fun of.”

Thanks to that and duct tape, the Secretary of Homeland Security has become a one-man economic stimulus package for the comedy industry. The current show features “Singing States of Alert” and a series of “Tom Ridge Bedtime Stories.” You’ll also hear about Vice President Cheney’s health (“The Angina Monologues”), Trent Lott in the wake of Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party (“It’s Not Easy Being White”), John Ashcroft (“The Loonies of the Right,” revived from the Newt Gingrich era), airport security (“Pack the Knife”) and weapons inspections à la Aretha Franklin (“I-N-S-P-E-C-T/Show me where the warheads be”).

It’s not all politics, of course: Martha Stewart and Sam Waksal, Michael Jackson, cloning and SUV lovers all figure in the merciless mirth of a constantly changing show. “If Michael Jackson dangles a baby, we’ll dangle a baby,” Newport says. “We try to deal with everything in the headlines. Frankly, you couldn’t really stand an hour and a half of just talk about George Bush or foreign policy. You’ve got to have Bill Gates and Michael Jackson and Anna Nicole Smith, too.”

That wasn’t always the case. The Capitol Steps first came together in 1981 for a Senate Foreign Relations Committee Christmas party. Newport and co-founder Bill Strauss, who both worked for Sen. Charles Percy, originally wanted to do a nativity play but



Elaine Newport, sans wig, is the Capitol Steps’ co-founder and producer.

in all of Congress they couldn’t find three wise men or a virgin (this is the oldest Capitol Steps joke, by necessity). Instead, the all-Hill staffer ensemble opted for a few politically focused musical parodies. One, the James Watt-inspired “Mine Ev’ry Mountain” (to “Climb Ev’ry Mountain”), is still in the show.

Washington was, as the Pentagon might put it, a “target-rich environment,” which explains how the Capitol Steps gradually grew to become (according to the San Francisco Examiner) “Washington’s longest running comedy act—after the Congress.” It’s also the most successful theatrical pro-

duction ever exported from the nation’s capital, with a third of its 500 shows a year performed on the road.

There are now four casts, each with five performers and a pianist, and an eight-person creative/booking team working out of the Capitol Steps’ Alexandria town-house headquarters. The cast members rotate, though “the people who play George Bush never see each other, of course,” says Newport, who left the Hill to become a full-time Stepper in 1988, two years after Strauss did the same. For the first 15 years, cast members were required to have some Capitol Hill staff experience, says Newport, but “in 1996, we started touring so much, we had to relax that and work with theater people or we couldn’t have got it done.”

The Capitol Steps’ repertoire plays off of Broadway musicals, golden oldies, Top 40 favorites from the ‘60s and ‘70s and current megahits. Newport suggests that because there’s really no consensus Top 40 radio now, it can be “hard to find a new song that’s really in everyone’s consciousness.” One exception: Ricky Martin’s “Livin’ la Vida Loca,” recast as “Clinton’s Libido Loco.” You can monitor the mischief of the group’s annual albums, the 22nd and latest being “When Bush Comes to Show,” with such audience favorites as “Da Doo En-ron,” “Osama, Come Out Tomorrow” and “Con-did-it.” Of course, it sometimes sounds like the songs have written themselves, and quickly at that. Sometimes in as little as 12

hours, according to Newport. “It’s always a good sign when it writes itself so fast. You’ve got to have a good hook of a cover—that’s what we pride ourselves on, trying to closely mirror something on the cover end. Like George Bush’s ‘Don’t Go Thinking You’re Smart’ to Elton John’s ‘Don’t Go Breaking My Heart,’ where you just pop a couple of jokes in.”

The Capitol Steps are song-focused but also serve up sketches and usually one or two of their signature “Lirty Dies.” Strauss revived the vaudeville-era spoonerism routine in which the first letters of key words and phrases are switched. It’s wickedly funny and, no matter the topic, hilariously suggestive. It also sounds very difficult to master.

When the writers occasionally get stuck, they can turn to their computer rhyming dictionary. “We heard that [composer Stephen] Sondheim used one and we felt much better about it,” Newport says.

The Capitol Steps have other aids: select props and costumes and a variety of wigs, plus fake eyebrows and mustaches to heighten their caricatures. A computer comes in handy here, too, according to Newport. “Early on, Bill used to steal props from his children; now we do a lot of Internet research. When mad cows are in the news, we can type in ‘cow costume, extra large,’ and in 10 minutes we can find an extra-large men’s cow costume. It really makes our job easier.”

The heart of the matter, of course, is still people in power.

“The people who are getting headlines are going to occupy most of the news, so you’re going to have to deal with them the most,” Newport admits. “We try to be bipartisan. Which is really a challenge right now because the Republicans have the House, Senate and White House, so you’re looking for a funny Democrat. Thank goodness Bill Clinton’s back on ‘60 Minutes,’ and thank goodness that every once in a while you have a funny Democrat like Al Sharpton running around. You want to be bipartisan, but it’s not always easy.”

In the Capitol Steps book, co-written by Strauss and Newport, Clinton rates as the funniest president and funniest elected official in U.S. history. His Elvis-like image and habits still elicit guffaws and groans. The current President Bush is a good subject, too, Newport says. “His malapropisms are fun and he’s gotten himself into a bunch of controversial issues. His father was actually a little tougher but, fortunately, he had Dan Quayle, which was a great even-er-upper.”

THE CAPITOL STEPS — Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 in the Amphitheater of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW. 202-312-1555. They also produce four “Politics Takes a Holiday” specials for National Public Radio. The next one is April Fools’ Day. It soon will be available for downloading at www.capsteps.com/radio