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Bipartisan Satire

For Capitol Steps, Bush Is a Favorite Target, but Democrats Are Not Unscathed



JOHN SHINKLE

■ The Capitol Steps' friendly sting has been felt by many.

BY JEAN CHEMNICK

The Capitol Steps will miss President Bush when he leaves office. Ever the bumbling speaker, he's given the musical and acting troupe a wealth of material to parody – and political cover when an actor flubs his lines.

First of all, he's a sure-fire target. "George Bush is easy to laugh at," said Linda Wilson, a teacher from Lexington, Ky., who last month attended a performance by the group that has become a

Washington institution.

But the president also provides a good excuse for actors who miss their entrances or lines.

Sometimes, they have less than an hour to rehearse a new song, having received it the same day by e-mail, said troupe founder Elaina Newport. It's no surprise, then, that an actor occasionally wanders onstage off cue.

In that situation, actors who play Bush have a decided advantage: The audience thinks it's a joke, particularly

if the actors garble their lines.

Bush isn't the only politician to have felt the friendly sting of the Capitol Steps, a group that began almost by accident at an office Christmas party for then-Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) in 1981.

Led by Percy staffers Newport and Bill Strauss, the staff lampooned their boss and his colleagues through song. Not only did they keep their jobs – but word of their musical satire prowess spread until they were in demand all over Capitol Hill.

Percy was defeated for reelection in 1984, but the Steps continued to perform together. And by the mid-1990s, the expanding troupe was forced to hire actual actors because it had "strip-mined" all the musical talent from the Hill, said company spokesman Bill Hurd.

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Even so, said Newport, about half the current cast of 25 performers are former congressional staffers. Both chambers of Congress are represented, as are

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various political persuasions; the Steps' former bosses run the gamut from the liberal Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) to former Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), a staunch conservative. Newport said the balance keeps the troupe out of trouble and doubles its comedic fodder.

Still, the party in power is always more fun to lampoon and to see lampooned, said Newport. During the Clinton years, for example, Republicans flocked to the twice-weekly shows in the basement of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center to hear "Sixteen Scandals" and "All I Want for Christmas Is a Tax Increase."

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Lately, Bush parodies have drawn a decidedly Democratic crowd.

But locals who attend performances come for more than just partisan jabs. Anne Nelson, a staff assistant for Rep. John W. Olver (D-Mass.) who attended a recent performance, said she and several colleagues chose the event because "political humor takes intelligence and cultural knowledge" to understand.

Matt Grayson, spokesman for the National Tour Association, said the group appeals to outside audiences as well, thanks to the Steps' cross-party razzing. (Private bookings by groups like those that the NTA represents comprise 75 percent of the Steps' annual business. And some of the client organizations, including the Pressure Sensitive Tape Council and the 7th Day Adventist Dentists, sound like something the Steps would make up.)

The program is always evolving to keep up with current events. A recent show included some gems:

■ A 2-foot-tall puppet of Korean President Kim Jong-il appearing in the number "How Do

You Solve a Problem Like Korea" – in this case, not performed by singing nuns.

■ "A Leader Named Barack," playing on "Leader of the Pack," performed by gushing bobby-soxer fans of the Democratic senator (and presidential hopeful) from Illinois, Barack Obama. One featured line: "Is he really black? Not very. Not like Whoopi Goldberg, more like Halle Berry."

■ "Staying Alive," performed by the "Supremes" (Court, that is) with the four liberal justices "moving like a tortoise, and it could be rigor mortis, but we're staying alive, staying alive."

That's not to say the sketches always work. A Shakespearean take on the presidential ambitions of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) appeared to have been written by someone who skipped junior year English, and featured the Clintons in "Hagar the Horrible" costumes cracking political jokes in flowery but non-Elizabethan language.

As the '08 campaign gears up, though, the Steps have already poked fun at candidates on both sides of the aisle.

A host of second-tier contenders – Sens. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio) and former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas – have already been parodied in "76 Unknowns," to the tune of "Seventy-Six Trombones" from "The Music Man." (It features them all going to New Hampshire, received by residents who have no idea who they are.)

And, who knows, the Capitol Steps may re-release some old favorites, given those candidates who are having their second run at the golden ring.

Possible retreads: "I'm So Pretty," about Democratic former vice presidential nominee John Edwards, sung to the tune of "I Feel Pretty" in "West Side Story," and "Who'll Stop McCain?" an eponymous bow to one of the top-tier Republicans, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, sung to the tune of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Who'll Stop the Rain."