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### **The Capitol Steps Take on the 2016 Presidential Election Season**

Backstage was abuzz with five headliners cloistered around a piano making last minute edits to the show while audience members with cocktails waited patiently outside closed doors for their cue to take their seats.

On Saturday night, the amphitheater on the concourse level of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center was filled with tourists and local residents who had gathered to see the city's renowned comedy troupe put the "mock" in democracy.

The Capitol Steps have been mocking politics and politicians for 35 years, updating their material as often as the news headlines change. It all started in December 1981 when a group of Senate staffers came together to create a show that satirized the very institutions that employed them.

Now, with Donald Trump's impending presidency, the troupe is faced with the challenge of crafting new material that sufficiently mocks the president-elect while remaining sensitive to topics that have upset women and minority groups throughout the campaign.

"Who knew Trump would win, but what a great character," said Mark Eaton, one of the script writers for the Capitol Steps. "We just have to make the sensitive topics humorous and

keep rolling along with the jokes about Trump when he enters office. At the end of the day, the audience members are the arbiters of what's funny and what's not."

Trump has been written into the Capitol Steps shows since he first announced his bid for the presidency in June 2015.

Since his victory on Nov. 8, sketches about Trump's behavior and antics have appeared up to four times in each of the troupe's shows, which is a lot even for the future president, according to Eaton.

"We just have to do silly stuff that makes people laugh at Trump," Eaton said. "This week, we are adding a new Donald Trump Twitter song to the tune of 'Rockin' Robin' about how he is so fond of tweeting and we have a silly bit where he's debating Hillary Clinton in a flashback of the debate just to make it easier for them to have a joke telling contest."

The Dec. 2 Capitol Steps performance featured a classic "Why did the chicken cross the road?" question for both Trump and Hillary. Trump's response? "Because there was no wall, and then it took a job from an American and the chicken is probably a racist."

Eaton and his team decide which jokes to keep and which jokes to get rid of based on audience reaction.

“There are times when we write things that we think are uproariously funny to ourselves but the audience thinks otherwise,” Eaton said. “We are going to get to a point where it’s harder to be funnier than the actual candidate.”

In the last weeks of the campaign season, in anticipation of the election results, Eaton and his team spent hours behind closed doors brainstorming ways to make the most out of such an unconventional election season.

“We sat down and wrote out all of these lyrics and said, ‘Okay, here’s what will happen in the song if Hillary wins and here’s what will happen if Trump wins,’” said Eaton. “And then we waited.”

Although Trump has attacked news networks and comedy shows for depicting him in a negative light, the Capitol Steps are not worried about upsetting Trump with their material, according to Bill Hurd, the troupe’s press secretary general.

“As important as we’d like to think we are, we highly doubt our brand is on the president-elect’s radar,” said Hurd. “The Capitol Steps’ policy is always to make fun of those in power and we will sing about anyone from either party who practices the ancient art of incompetency.”

Satirizing Trump, however, isn't easy for everyone in the troupe. Mike Thornton, one of the Capitol Steps performers, said he isn't looking forward to impersonating Trump for the next four years.

Thornton has performed as both Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush in his 18 years with the troupe, but Trump presents a new type of character. Thornton said he worries that some audience members won't find humor in jokes about Trump because much of what Trump said on the campaign trail was considered offensive by women, immigrants, and other minority groups.

"People look at Trump badly, so I'm not seeing it as any kind of joy or favorite of mine at all," Thornton said. "I guess the challenge would be to try to make him funny, keep him interesting and stay ahead of what he does everyday."

Thornton, depicting Trump, was greeted by a tough crowd on Saturday when he first appeared, but Thornton immediately launched into jokes that mocked Trump's speeches throughout the campaign, beginning with, "Congratulations, I'm here."

"So, I was talking to my African American today," Thornton continued. "He's fantastic, everyone should have one."

The crowd began to loosen up. In Trump fashion, Thornton went on to discuss how much he loves America.

“I love the Statue of Liberty, but she’s a litter overweight,” Thornton said. “You just have to grab these statues by the pedestal if you know what I mean.”

The audience wasn’t entirely amused, but Thornton kept going.

“Come on people, I’m going to be president. Get with it,” he said.

Although the Trump material has elicited mixed responses, the troupe’s ticket sales soared around the time of the election. The Capitol Steps now sell about 200 tickets per show, according to Hurd. With a Trump presidency, it is unclear what will happen with ticket sales in the long run.

“I have no idea. No earthly idea whether sales will increase or decrease,” said Eaton. “We hope sales will increase, but we don’t know. We were as shocked as everybody else.”

Students and members of the military can get tickets for \$33, while a standard ticket sells for \$36. According to Hurd, the Capitol Steps seem to operate on a school-year calendar, meaning that the troupe is very busy in the fall and during election time, slows down a bit in the winter and becomes busy again in the spring.

“This past year we sold out a ton of shows,” Hurd said. “Obviously the frenzy around the election was a ton of the reason, but we’d like to think we were somewhat responsible as well.”

The Capitol Steps have been featured on NBC, CBS, ABC, and PBS and for years have gained publicity by word of mouth in D.C.

Marie Medeck, a retired IRS executive from Arnold, Md., had been trying to see the Capitol Steps for years after rave reviews from friends.

On Saturday, one of Medeck’s long-time friends treated her to a show for her birthday. Medeck, a Democrat, said she was anxious about how Trump would be portrayed in light of his unprecedented campaign.

“The election results made me want to come more because I’m trying to savor the last few months before the world changes as I’ve known it,” Medeck said. “I’m actually a little scared because I don’t know what we are going to see now, given that it has to be very on point for the day.”

Medeck has lived in the suburbs of Annapolis for 10 years. She said she felt like if there was any time to see the Capitol Steps, it was now.

“I’m hoping that regardless of what the show conveys, it conveys a sense of hope and unity because the past year has been full of a lot of hate and division,” Medeck said. “That’s what I’m looking for.”

The Capitol Steps have sold out venues in Washington state, New Hampshire, Iowa, North Carolina, Virginia, Colorado, Massachusetts, Texas, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center.

The troupe draws a mix of tourists and local residents, many of whom are repeat customers who bring their families, according to Hurd.

“Would you go to Paris and not see the Eiffel Tower? Then why go to D.C. and not see the Capitol Steps?” Hurd said.

The Capitol Steps, with four touring casts, will continue mocking the political system throughout the Trump administration as they have for the past 35 years every Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

“Until Inauguration Day, the show will be a bit of a review of the whole election season with many Trump appearances even though we now know the results,” said script writer Eaton. “There will always be issues surrounding Trump and fights on the Hill that provide plenty of characters for us.”