

REVIEW: “Make America Grin Again,” The Capitol Steps at Cranwell 2018

[Berkshire On Stage](#) / [July 14, 2018](#) by Barbara Walldinger

Democrats are not in the mood to laugh these days, which can make things difficult for the singing impersonators in [The Capitol Steps](#). Audience members, mostly Democrats, as evidenced when they clapped for their party affiliation, were not going to be seduced by juvenile skits. But a kind of miracle happened: despite frustration and anger, the audience was won over by the clever political satire of the performers appearing in the Harvest Barn at [Cranwell](#) in Lenox.

Having worked on Capitol Hill, members of the group, who have been writing their own lyrics to popular songs since 1981, jump at the whiff of a scandal, asking each other: “[1] Is it funny? And [2] what Rhymes with it?” They have recorded thirty-seven albums, appeared on television and radio shows and “performed for five U.S. Presidents (six if you include Hillary).”

Each of their touring companies, and there are many on the road throughout the country at any given time, includes five performers (out of a possible twenty-two) and a pianist (one of five). Adept at comedy and impersonation and aided by innumerable wigs and costumes (designer uncredited), the singers (who for the most part have wonderful voices), send up a host of hapless politicians. The 90-minute performance is very much an ensemble piece—even their comical bios don’t indicate who plays what. Aside from a brief introduction during curtain calls, the only way to link the names to the faces of the performers you are watching is to check the tiny caricatures of all 22 of them in the program!

Some of the political figures parodied onstage are, of course, Trump (sounding very much like Alec Baldwin), Melania, Kellyanne Conway, Paul Manafort, Bernie Sanders (with his namesake Sarah Huckabee Sanders), Obama, Hillary (“*I Will Survive*”), the liberal justices of the Supreme Court (emphasizing the importance of “*Staying Alive*”), Mike Pence (“Pence is from Heaven”), Stormy Daniels (singing, naturally, *Stormy Weather*), Donald Trump, Jr, Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin (“*Putin on a Blitz*”), Ben Carson, Claire McCaskill, Nancy Pelosi (“I’m All About the Base,” sung with a frozen face except for her blinking eyes), Chuck Schumer, Betsy DeVos (“*Don’t Know Much About History*”), Paul Ryan (“*Hang Down Your Head, Paul Ryan*”), Rachel Maddow, and countless others named if not seen.

In this year’s edition, *Make America Grin Again*, the actors portraying this dizzying array of characters are Mike Thornton (who not only plays Trump but also delivers a “talking backward” monologue of spoonerisms at top speed entitled: “*The Train of Rump and Dormy Staniels*” (text available for the audience on their way out), Jon Bell (whose Obama is priceless), Jack Rowles (Bernie, Pence, Putin), Janet Davidson Gordon (Melania, Pelosi, Stormy, Rachel, Hillary), and Bari Biern (whose long dark hair, thick eyebrows and black outfit as Sarah Sanders bring to mind Morticia Addams). Howard Breitbart provides the performers with terrific keyboard accompaniment.

Though the program states that the songs are “constantly changing,” some are recognizable from last year’s show. In its attempt to stay current, the group does insert recent news into an older song (those liberal Supreme Court Justices have more incentive than ever to stay alive now that Kennedy is retiring). And the characters, many of whom appear annually, provide their impersonators with fresh material: (e.g. “*Faking News is Hard To Do*” and “*How Do You Solve a Problem Like Korea?*”).

What is most impressive is that *The Capitol Steps* doesn’t shy away from skewering the people it parodies with their own words and deeds. Because they don’t pull any punches, they are able to appeal to audiences of all persuasions (a tough tightrope to walk in the current climate). Not every skit is equally successful, but even the curmudgeons will find something that tickles their fancy.