

inner workings

by Shelly Strickler

We turn up the klieg lights on an unlikely acting troupe that inspired Mayor Bloomberg to hop on a burro and Rudy Giuliani to dress in drag.

Once a year, the mayor of the toughest city in the world endures two hours of ridicule performed by one hundred of New York's finest current and retired reporters. But Hizzoner has the last say, donning an outlandish costume and presenting a self-deprecating rebuttal.

"I love it," says former Mayor Ed Koch. The Inner Circle *is* New York."

From its humble beginnings, the Inner Circle has evolved into an elaborate musical parody written, produced and performed by members of the media—otherwise serious characters who get to let their hair down just once each year.

The first Inner Circle production was held on March 3, 1923, at a dinner given

Mayor Edward I. Koch with a harem of Inner Circle lovelies, in 1985. The author is at left.

Facing page, the program cover for the troupe's 1997 performance. All cover art seen here was designed by illustrator Randy Jones.

at the Hotel Astor. Announced the *New York Times*: "Governor Alfred E. Smith and his supposed political ambitions, with a glance ahead to 1924, will be satirized in a five-act musical comedy entitled 'The Supersmith.' The book and lyrics have been written by members of the organization, and the characters will be taken by the writers. Professional talent is not allowed."

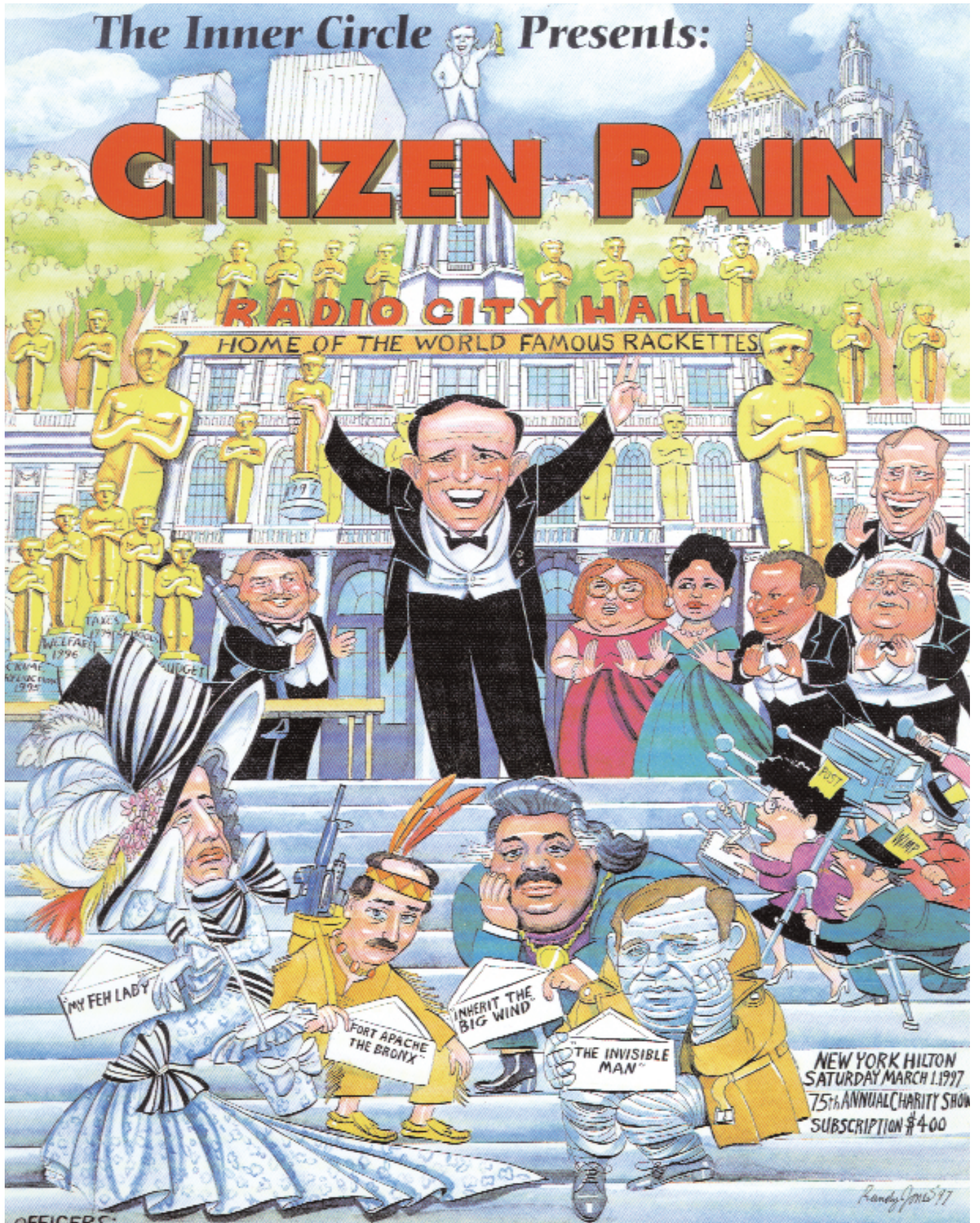
It still isn't! Eighty-three years later, the description still fits, although the show is now performed at the New York Hilton (in two acts instead of five). It is a major char-



JOE DEMARIA

The Inner Circle Presents:

CITIZEN PAIN



NEW YORK HILTON
 SATURDAY MARCH 1, 1997
 75th ANNUAL CHARITY SHOW
 SUBSCRIPTION \$400

Randy Jones '97

OFFICERS:
 RITA DELFINER...PRES. • JULIET PAPA...VICE PRES. • JUDIE GLAVE...TREAS. • DAVID DIAZ...SEC.

ity event and a must-see production for New York’s political players.

Each year, the show stuns even its creators with its on-target humor and biting look at politics present and future.

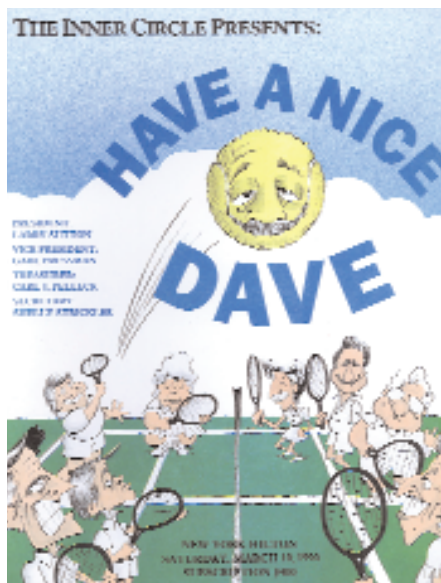
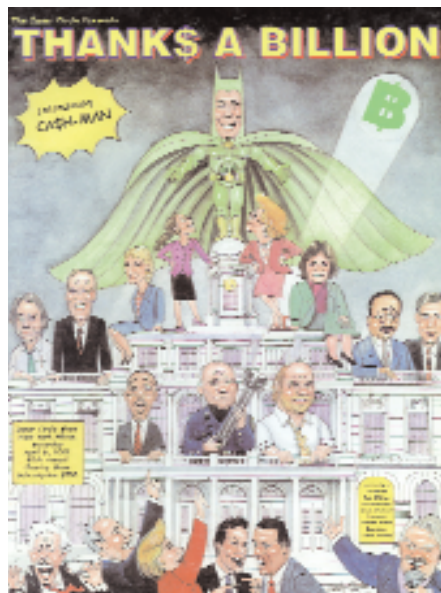
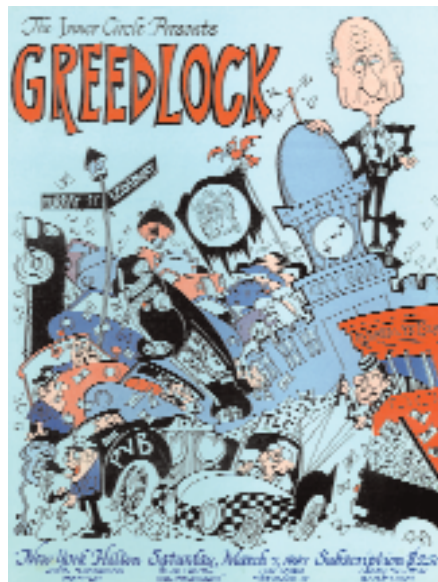
The structure of the Inner Circle has evolved through the decades, mirroring an evolving news establishment and societal change. It started as a men-only club, a clan of white print reporters. (Radio reporters were not admitted and television had yet to be invented).

The no-women restriction meant that the male players had to appear in drag to portray the few female roles included in the script. Although the reporters’ wives were permitted to attend the show, they were relegated to the balcony, where they watched from so-called “ladies’ seats.” Former writing committee chairman and president Jim Ryan (now of WCBS-TV), recalls that Mary Lindsay, wife of Mayor John V. Lindsay, was so annoyed about her nose-bleed seat that she “lined up peanuts on the balcony railing and flicked them over the side, right onto the heads of male spectators.”

Women were not allowed to join the Inner Circle until 1972. These first females were also female pioneers in newspaper and broadcast employment. Among the very first women to be admitted was Edith Evans Asbury, then of the *New York Times*. Asbury, who is now 95, delights Inner Circle audiences to this day. A few years ago, she drew roars as the new intern hired by the First Lady to replace Monica Lewinsky.

Asbury recalls hearing about the battles among some (“not all,” she stresses) of the men at the prospect of bringing women into the organization. “They were furious. There were terrible fights,” she says. Two men even tussled with one another and as they did so, fell down an escalator, she recalls. Her theory is that “some of the men didn’t want women around because they loved getting away from their wives and drinking.” She also believes “men hated to give up playing the women’s roles.” But in the end, she says, the men “treated us well. They were resigned to their fate.”

To this day, several male Inner Circle members love to play women’s roles. Bob Liff of George Arzt Communications, and David Seifman of the *New*



York Post rocked the audience in 2005, playing Camilla Parker Bowles and Queen Elizabeth, respectively.

The primary goal—handled in the first act—is to lampoon the New York City mayor. The second act concentrates on New York State and the national scene. In the early nineties, pop-culture icons were added to the list of targets, which now includes the likes of Michael Jackson, Jennifer Lopez and Martha Stewart.

As winter sets in each year, Inner Circle writers (about fifteen in all) gather to come up with a title for the following year’s show. Dozens of suggestions are entertained before one is finally selected.

When the city under Mayor Abe Beame was experiencing financial difficulties and problems with some segments of the work force, the title was “Abie’s Irish Woes.” In 1982, with the perceived tougher Mayor Koch choreographing the city like a ballet, the program cover caricatured him in a tutu, directing city officials who were crouching in pain. In 1987, as scandals surfaced, the title was “Greedlock,” with City Hall (spelled “City Haul”) drawn as a giant garbage truck carting the alleged corrupt agencies off to federal prison. In 1989, with crime rampant, “Akochalypse Now” showed the city burning. To the tune of “That Old Gang of Mine,” four pols in hot water sang:

*Gee I'd give up parole to see
That old gang of mine.
They should be doing big campaigns
But they're just doing time.*

In 1990, the first year of the Dinkins administration, the program title was a benign “Have a Nice Dave,” with a tennis ball featuring the face of David Dinkins. By 1993 the concept was less friendly—the mayor was portrayed in a haunted Gracie Mansion surrounded by ghostlike city officials. Rudy Giuliani, who had lost to Dinkins four years earlier, sang these lyrics to the tune of “Man of La Mancha”:

*I am I, Giuliani,
The ruthless avenger,
My ego demands that I run.*

Later that year, Giuliani defeated Dinkins and during the next few years, his

ego gave the Inner Circle plenty to work with. One program cover (1996) had a Roman theme, with the mayor cracking a whip as emperor over his “slave” appointees. The title? “Caligulani.” In 1998, in a Broadway theme, the mayor was depicted as the monarch in *The King and I*, with the title of the show modified to “The King AMI.”

Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s wealth has been milked mightily for laughs. In 2002, his first year in office, the title was “Thanks a Billion,” with the mayor portrayed as the Batman-like “Cash Man.”

As is often the case with politicians, the mayors always get the last word. Or, in this case, the last song. When the reporters’ presentation ends, the thousand or so people who pay to see the production (all proceeds above expenses go to local charities) do not go home. They eagerly await what comes next—the mayor’s turn to take on the reporters.

From the organization’s beginnings, the mayor would take the stage to answer the reporters by doing a short stand-up rebuttal. But during the mayoralty of Fiorello LaGuardia, the bar was raised when he made his entrance atop an elephant.

Mayor Lindsay took the showmanship one step further, turning up in a top hat and cane, with singer and television personality Florence Henderson at his



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side as he performed his rebuttal. A new tradition had been born.

Each year since, mayors Beame, Koch, Dinkins, Giuliani and Bloomberg have followed suit and amazed audiences with their antics. They have brought with them the casts of Broadway shows, the Great White Way plots shortened and adapted for the mayors’ responses.

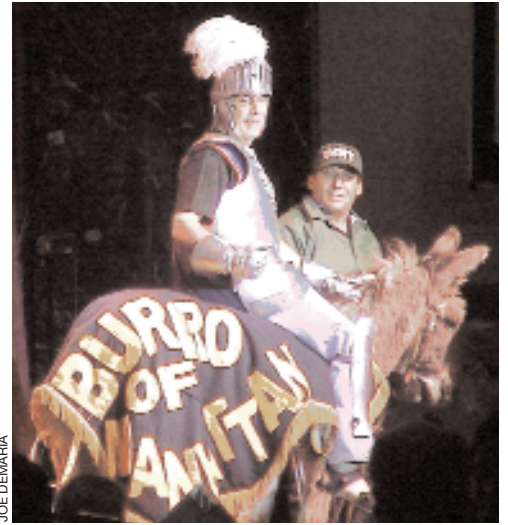
All of these performances have been memorable, but there have been some over-the-top standouts. There was the time Ed Koch enlisted the services of choreographer Tommy Tune and created a rebuttal around the theme of *My One and Only*. To spoof his concern about his legacy, Koch posed as a Central Park statue. “Tommy Tune told me to wear a gold lamé suit with two pigeons on my head,” said Koch, “I did not protest, even though I looked ri-dic-u-lous. I got the biggest laugh with that shtick,” he recalls with a chuckle. Another time, in the LaGuardia tradition, Koch appeared atop a camel.

The animal theme has proven to be a popular one. Dinkins rode onstage on a horse. Bloomberg exited the stage on a donkey that was draped in a blanket reading: “Burro of Manhattan.” The mayor’s parting line? “If you don’t like the way I’m running the city, you can kiss my ass!”

But perhaps the quintessential and most memorable mayoral moment was the year Giuliani devoted his rebuttal effort to showing that he does have a softer side. To do so he appeared with the cast of *Victor/Victoria* in an elaborate Marilyn Monroe-style costume and identified himself as “Rudia.” Since then, any time someone asks a performer what the Inner Circle is, he or she need only reply: “Remember those front-page pictures with Mayor Giuliani in drag?” Everyone nods and smiles.

The mayors for the most part have been wonderful sports, most of them looking forward to the performances. Giuliani spokeswoman Sunny Mindel says Giuliani approached the show as he

The photo of tough-as-nails Rudy Giuliani in a blonde wig and a pink dress is one of the most enduring images of the mayor’s tenure.



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“If you don’t like the way I’m running the city,” said knight in shining armor Mayor Bloomberg in 2003, “you can kiss my ass!”

approaches everything he does. “He was hands-on,” she says, very involved in the pre-show meetings and writing.

But not everyone takes so kindly to the Inner Circle’s brand of humor. Although the parodies are not meant to be mean-spirited, there have been times when politicians sat stone-faced through a number.

Then-governor Mario Cuomo never attended another performance after seeing a skit that spoofed his Italian heritage. The late congresswoman Bella Abzug was reportedly reduced to tears during a number roasting her. In 1993, after Elizabeth Holtzman’s unsuccessful run for senator, she was portrayed as a witch and had a difficult time hiding her dismay. Congressman Charles Rangel was taken aback when Mayor Koch donned an Afro wig during a rebuttal several years ago. But both Holtzman and Rangel have since returned.

Inner Circle night is not just a time for levity. Before the show and between the acts, important politicking goes on. Many politicians see it as a must-attend schmoozathon. And some would rather be spoofed than not spoofed at all, the omission suggesting that the politician is insignificant.

There have been many other memorable Inner Circle moments. There was the 1993 show when I played Hillary Clinton, just a few months after her husband’s first inauguration. I wore a replica



Left, the writer—before her wardrobe malfunction—does the First Lady as dominatrix. Below, years later with the real Hillary, who was just a few months into her freshman term as a New York senator.



of the staid suit and hat she had worn for the occasion. The suit was a tear-away, designed so that at one point in the number I could rip open the velcro to reveal a leather dominatrix outfit underneath. Somehow, the short skirt rode up, and when I ripped open the dress there was a roar from the audience. Musical director Kathy Beaver was so stunned that the whip she had expertly tossed to me during rehearsals flew past my reach. I recovered, pulled down the skirt, picked up the whip and proceeded. Jim Ryan, who was playing President Clinton, ad-libbed brilliantly, and the show went on. But on Tuesday, the *New York Post's* "Page Six" reported, "WOR's Shelly Strickler swears she was wearing underwear when she portrayed Hillary Clinton."

Though the old adage says that the show must go on, the Inner Circle paused for three years during World War II. In 1964, the show was postponed when Susan Wagner, wife of then-mayor Robert Wagner, died. And in 2005, there was some last-minute juggling when Pope John Paul II died on the day of the performance. At times throughout the weekend, it seemed that as many as seven or eight newspeople/cast members were being called

in to work. There was even talk of canceling the show. Juliet Papa, of 1010 WINS, was scheduled to appear in a major production number but got a call the day before the performance that she had to go to Rome. She packed frantically, putting her travel bag next to the one containing her scanty Inner Circle costume. "I had to be careful," she says. "What if I grabbed the wrong one and ended up with only a flimsy pink teddy to wear in St. Peter's Square?" Somehow, everyone but Juliet managed to do the show—despite some hectic sprints between the New York Hilton and several studios and newsrooms. Rich Lamb, of WCBS Newsradio 880, who was cast as Bloomberg, did go to Rome, but was able to leave the day after the show.

The mayor himself had planned to perform his rebuttal with the cast of *Mamma Mia!*, but out of respect for the pontiff, decided against an elaborate production. He did attend the send-up and made very tasteful remarks about the Pope and managed to provide a little humor as well, wondering aloud why Rich Lamb and not a Hollywood actor was portraying him as mayor.

Although all of the actors are amateurs, the organization does bring in some professional assistance. For example, Kathy Beaver has been the show's musical director for fourteen years, having started eleven years before as one of the musicians. Of the members in her talented orchestra, all of them culled from Broadway, she says: "This is the gig they most look forward to all year. You'll have to ask them why—maybe it's those sandwiches." (Tuna- and egg-salad sandwiches are provided at rehearsals for the starving reporters who come straggling in after work, three times a week for three months.)

The writing committee, headed by the indispensable Larry Sutton, of *People* magazine, usually gets started in mid-December. Perhaps the most delicate part of the entire process is casting. Just about everyone in the organization would like to play the juicy roles. Lobbying for parts starts as early as the day after the previous year's show and the politicking that goes on rivals that of the real pols. The choice evolves out of the writing process, the committee's perception of who would best fit each role, with the final decision

left to the president. The president, as one might imagine, is very popular for a year.

Why do the members love doing this show? There's the gratification of writing a spoof, putting up a mirror to the city's power brokers. There is also the satisfaction of knowing that the Inner Circle is donating proceeds to local charities. (In recent years, performances have been raising in the neighborhood of \$100,000.)

But, there's also this... Most members love it because they get a chance to cavort on stage and for two nights be the hams so many news people really are.

Tune: "Before the Parade Passes By" from *Hello Dolly*.

...We're gonna go again!
Show after show again,
We're gonna break your hearts,
So you will know it when,
Inner Circle Parade
Passes by!

CIRCLING THE WAGONS

The organization's bylaws permit no more than a hundred members at any given time. Thus, openings arise only when a current Inner Circle member steps down. Interested reporters can contact David Seifman of the *New York Post*, who is the chairman of the membership committee (dseifman@nypost.com). At the first general membership meeting, a vote is taken on new applicants. Those accepted then "audition" at the first rehearsal, held in January. Existing members often hope that the applicants can't sing or dance, so as to increase their own chances of landing a good part.

The next Inner Circle show, under the watch of this year's president, Carol Anne Riddell, of WNBC-TV, is "Spent," a takeoff on the long-running show *Rent*. The performance is scheduled for Saturday, March 11, 2006, at the New York Hilton. As is tradition, a dress rehearsal is performed the night before in front of friends, family and colleagues. For ticket details, visit innercircleshow.org. Or, for further information, contact Mark Lieberman at 212-326-6107 or mark.lieberman@wamu.com. 📞



Most members love the Inner Circle because they get a chance to cavort on stage and for two nights be the hams so many news people really are.



Teaching a motley crew of journalists how to sing and dance is no mean feat, as seen in these photos taken by anchorman Marvin Scott. Charged with the task of putting Inner Circle cast members through their paces is musical director Kathy Beaver (top photo, with baton).