

by Steven Libowitz

Hard-Boiled Truths Emerge in One-Woman Show

The genesis of *One Good Egg*, the one-woman show written and performed by Elaine Gale which has its world premiere this weekend at the Center Stage Theater, dates back to five years ago. That's when Gale, who then lived in Sacramento, created a nonfiction reading series called "True Story", where members of the community are invited to share stories in a coffee shop jam.

"I told some stories and also did stand-up comedy and improv," she recalled earlier this week. "But I wanted a deeper story, a bigger arc that circled back to connections."

The catalyst for the show's creation was her move two years ago to Santa Barbara, where her husband was beginning a program at Pacifica Graduate Institute. "There's something about this place that's so creative, it just electrifies me," she explained. "One day I woke up and wrote 'One Woman Show' on my white board without having any idea what I was going to do."

But in truth, the tale begins much further back and farther away, in Nebraska, where Gale grew up as a sixth-generation Cornhusker before leaving for a career in journalism, where she covered religion and pop culture for alternative papers (*Boston Phoenix* and *Utne Reader*) and major publications (*Entertainment Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Times*), followed by a decade in academia (Gale is currently the interim chair of the BA program at Antioch University Santa Barbara while on leave from her tenured position at CSU Sacramento).

"You're a good egg" is a popular



Gale force: Rod Lathim oversees Elaine Gale's *One Good Egg*



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expression in the Midwest. But the story is much more about family and community – both of origin and ones we self-create, Gale explained.

"It's about belonging, family, home, and how you find it," she said on the patio outside the theater at Paseo Nuevo, as lighting and the set were being installed. "How do you belong, and to whom?"

As the title suggests, *One Good Egg*

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also touches on issues of family as it relates to fertility, delving into Gale's own difficulties with giving birth and other "messes of life," examining "how we can go through losses and still celebrate life," she said. "The egg was the perfect metaphor and representation of something that can be dented and cracked and flawed, and yet beautiful."

The unflinchingly revealing yet humorous autobiographical work about her own journey has circled back to her desire to create community.

"It's convinced me that telling non-fiction stories in a public forum is an important way to connect to each other," she said. "It's super-liberating to sit and hear a true story about what it's like for another person to live their life. It connects us to our common humanity at a time when there is so much that divides us. My commitment as a human being is to do things that bring us together and help us relate to each other. And hopefully call forth love."

Love, not coincidentally, is also the glue that holds *One Good Egg* together. "It's a love letter to my husband, to life, to eggs, and also to community. It's the resonant theme. How can we free ourselves to love a little more?"

(Elaine Gale performs *One Good Egg*, directed by **Rod Lathim**, at 7:30 pm Friday & Saturday, and 2 & 7:30 pm Sunday at Center Stage Theater. Tickets cost \$25 general, \$20 for students. Friday's performance, a benefit for Direct Relief Women and Hospice of Santa Barbara, costs \$100. More information at www.onegoodegg-show.com or 963-0408.)

Country Cry-fest

Americana/country songwriting legend **Rodney Crowell** dug deep into his personal well for the autobiographical themes on *Close Ties*, the latest album from the Nashville-based elder statesman. The tracks harken back to his upbringing in Texas, his early days in Music City, and memories and moments with former loves and close friends, many of whom recently passed away.

Crowell talked about the new record and his process over the phone in advance of Sunday's Sings Like Hell concert at the Lobero.

Q. *Close Ties* seems very much to be an album of reflection on mortality, with you having lost several friends in recent years. Was that an intentional theme or did it naturally develop?

A. I don't generally set out to do anything except write songs. I identify myself as an album maker. I write songs much the way a painter might do when they have a show. I'm always looking for a theme or thread that runs

things together. I have to let the songs tell me what they want to be. It comes up from the subconscious mind.

It's been a season of mortality. Five of my really close friends died while I was writing and recording the album. That definitely put me into a frame of mind of thinking about myself and where I fit in this world, and how do I continue on when some people very close to me are gone.

Does composing and playing these songs ease the pain or clarify your emotions?

It can be cathartic. The process itself can be. Writing "Life without


Susanna" certainly was. The moment came when I decided to be that truthful about my emotions. From there, the song made itself... but if you're just paying attention to your craft, the work, the cathartic moment could happen any time. I could be performing anywhere on a given night, and suddenly that moment happens when I connect with the song in front of an audience in a way I never have before. I've had that experience of going "Oh, that's what this song is about." Sometimes it's a slow dawning, an understanding on deeper levels than I've intended.

I think it comes from my method. I

learned very early on to let the song tell me what it wants to be. I try to keep my intellect out of the process, not try to make it anything. I just have to be patient, turn over all the rocks, and look under them and see what's there.

I understand it was really slow going with "I'm Tied to Ya", the collaboration with Sheryl Crow.

Yeah, I first started that song in 1997 in Ireland on a cultural exchange outing, where I was writing with an Irish classical composer, Michael



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McGlynn. The melody part that Sheryl sings, the verse part, I wrote that with a bluesy notion, but the words just weren't right. I just never could unlock the key to the words for that part of the song, even though I tinkered with them, hacked on them, for almost 20 years. Then when I fell into a conversation with Sheryl about doing something together, she liked the song. My pride kicked in, and I felt like I had to uncover the language, so she would feel good about singing it. Which she did, as soon as I showed the lyrics to her. I thought, "Whew, I'm saved." It only took 20 years. But there's "Fever on the Bayou" on my last album, which I wrote with **Will Jennings**, my close friend and collaborator who lives out there in Montecito. That took 30 years to write together. So this was shorter. I'm proud of the fact that I won't let the songs go until they're right, or at least when I think they're right.

How do you know when a song is done?

I have no idea. To say that I know anything about songwriting would jinx the whole method, which is a mystery to me. Somehow I manage to do it, which is pretty cool. But hold on, I have a more honest answer: I know a song is done when I can look you in the eye and sing every word and never avert my gaze. If I have to look away, then it must still be (crap).

You've sworn your allegiance to Americana as a genre. What does it mean to you and why does it matter so much?

I have a very broad interpretation of it. But I know it's much more authentic than commercial country radio pop music. Americana music embraces the poet's soul. I understand the cleverness of country pop, and there is a craft involved. But I come in with Hank Williams and Bob Dylan. So, I pledged my allegiance to Americana in its infancy because it was poised to embrace John Prine, Guy Clark, and Townes Van Zandt, who are the poets of our generation. I want my hat in that ring.

Parody Trumps Politics

Capitol Steps's **Mark Eaton** knows which side his bread is buttered on. And it's neither Democratic nor Republican.

"The greatest enemy of our company is politics that actually work," said the nearly 25-year member of the now 36-year-old Washington, D.C., comedy troupe that mines the Beltway and beyond for jokes and parodies. "The only danger is people doing their job effectively and well, meaning a Congress and government functioning like it should."

The surprising results last Election Day meant the Cap Steps were set for another four years.

"Actually, we weren't concerned because we were going to have a mountain of material either way. If Hillary won, it meant Bill coming back to the White House, so we were good. But, it was a shocker that Trump actually won. We're almost to the point where if the real life White House is becoming a parody, what are we supposed to parody?"

Whether Trump's victory was good for the country is a whole different question, one that Eaton and his colleagues in the troupe take pains to avoid. It's enough, he said, that the Capitol Steps – which returns to Santa Barbara on Monday night, May 8, for its annual appearance at the Lobero Theatre – provides a little comic relief to lessen the pain, no matter which side of the political spectrum you fall on.

"We're always aware that there's a serious underlying aspect to what we do," Eaton admitted. "But when you're mocking and ridiculing people in power, it equalizes them a bit. Think of it as post-election healing. It's a great stress relief. People who are depressed about the results can come out and laugh when we ridicule those who won. It helps, even if only a little bit."

Still, the veteran punster has noticed some changes in the audience reactions since January 20. "We introduce

MOVIE



The Lobero hosts Capitol Steps's political parody the players by saying they recently refused to play Trump's Inauguration – even though they weren't asked. The place always erupts with boisterous laughter and applause even before we get to the punch line."

If that sounds like Eaton pulls Democratic levers at the polling place, don't be so sure. Like all of the early Steps, the wordsmith was a congressional staffer before joining the company, which got its start at an office Christmas party for senator Charles Percy in the early 1980s. His boss? Former North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, considered one of the most

conservative members of the upper chamber in generations.

"It's hard to believe, but I actually do walk upright," Eaton said with a laugh, noting that maintaining a political balance is crucial to the Cap Steps's success "We swing the whole political spectrum around here. We're equal opportunity offenders."

Eaton started with the Steps as a performer only before eventually joining founder **Elaina Newport** as chief writers of both the sketches and song parodies that have kept the company popular for more than three decades. He's responsible for two of the more enduring "hits" in the company's tongue-in-cheek repertoire: "God Bless My SUV" (sung to the tune of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA") and "Don't Go Fakin' You're Smart" ("Don't Go Breaking My Heart"), which Laura Bush sings to her husband, George W., as a warning.

Having hobnobbed with and/or harassed some of the most well-known folks in politics, you'd think Eaton might be immune to celebrity worship. But one show in Santa Barbara years ago gave him some pause.

"I heard that John Cleese came to one of our shows at the Lobero," he recalled. "I thought, 'If he laughed at anything I wrote, that would make my life.'" *•/17*



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