

# Inaugural Gala

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By Tom Shales January 20, 1981

As a celebration and cross-section of American bad taste, it was not all inclusive, but not for lack of trying. The "All Star Inaugural Gala" on ABC last night came across as a tacky combination of a Hollywood awards show, a Kiwanis club talent contest and a telethon stocked with fewer greats than near-greats and even more pure mediocrities.

The program, broadcast by tape delay from the Capital Centre, certainly had its moments. Grace Bumbry was electrifying singing opera and popera. And it was nothing if not touching to see the honored guest, President-elect Ronald Reagan, smartly returning a salute to fellow actor and military man Jimmy Stewart. Stewart shared the stage with General Omar Bradley, who was confined to a wheelchair and said not one single word.

The program really had no announced theme or evident sense of purpose, except to serve as an appropriately show-bizzy curtain-raiser for an administration that bombastically bills itself as "a new beginning." The air was thick with glitz, hype and what probably passes in Hollywood for pomp, Johnny Carson wore white tie and tails - that's how classy this clambake was.

But basically it boiled down to a lot of rattle-taggle acts thrown together in no apparent order and to only a numbing effect. Much of the singing was in the brassy and braying Las Vegas style, and the two-hour special, edited down from a three-hour show, amounted to nothing more than further evidence that vaudeville is dead -- again -- on television.

Among the most dubiously appropriate contributions was that of Ben Vereen, the singer-dancer, who chose to perform his shopworn tribute to musical hall performer Bert Williams, who used to appear in blackface even though he was black. Vereen's routine, ripped out of the context of his nightclub act, seemed unfortunately shuffly and Uncle Tom-ish -- especially considering the fact that the Reagan administration has already been criticized for insensitivity to racial realities.

It also seems strange that, at least in the first 90 minutes of the program, not a single reference was made to the plight of the hostages in Iran. The only even veiled reference was in a Bob Hope joke alluding to cold weather in Washington. "The Iranians aren't the only ones with frozen assests," said Hope, his eyes glued to cue cards that seemed to be in the orchestra pit.

Reagan and his wife, Nancy, sat in large stuffed blue chairs to watch the prodeedings unfold noisily before them. If this hinted of a return to an imperial presidency, it should also be noted that a chummy informality was the order of the night. Hope kept referring to the president-elect simply as "Reagan," Stewart called him "Ron," and Donny Osmond, performing with his equally vapid sister Marie, called the president "Ronnie" as he sang in his unspeakably ineffectual way a revised version of an old rhythm and blues song, so that it came out "Ronnie B. Good."

Ethel Merman, first musical act, also changed the lyrics, this time from her Broadway classic "Everything's Coming Up Roses." When she sang the opening line, "I had a dream, a dream about you, baby," she pointed at Reagan -- perhaps the first president in some time to be called baby -- and changed a reference from "bright lights and lollipops" to "bright lights and jelly beans" in honor of Reagan's favorite candy treat.

Reagan's smile at the word "Baby" made him appear genuinely amused, and throughout the evening, in reaction shots, he looked hearty and appreciative and a little bit surprised to be there. If it was a performance on his part, it was an engaging one -- charming even in the herky-jerky way he tried to clap along in rhythm on some songs -- and when the entertainment was excruciatingly bad, the sight of him having a jolly good time helped salvage the evening.

The name of Frank Sinatra was featured prominently in the opening credits, in which Ol' Blue Eyes was called the "producer-director and director of entertainment." Through the magic of videotape editing, Sinatra was able to enter the hall in the spotlight twice -- once accompanying George Bush and then accompanying the Reagans. It looked as though Reagan were trying to ignore Sinatra, but maybe that's just wishful thinking. Sinatra came on near the closing of the show for a mini-concert in which the old witchcraft seemed to elude him. It couldn't have been nerves, could it? No, it couldn't.

Sinatra did some lyrical revisions of his own, offering "something special for our new first lady . . . I hope you like this, Nancy." And with that, and with Nancy Reagan's face superimposed on the screen, Sinatra sang a gushy "Nancy with the Reagan Face" -- formerly "Nancy with the Laughing Face." Sample lyrics: "You must have noticed she's also beaming" and "when she smiles, it's like mission bells ringing in D.C. or L.A."

At the end of this ditty, Nancy Reagan could be seen dabbing what appeared to be a tear from her eye.

The reagans themselves took to the stage after that, and the president-elect, working with a hand mike expressed heartfelt and infectious gratitude. He referred to the show as "this wonderful affair." Sinatra had called the lineup "the greatest talents America could offer to any audience."

But it's doubtful they'll keep the show together and take it on the road.

Airtime for the special was bought from ABC by the inaugural committee, which sold commercial time to such firms as Merrill Lynch, Prudential, American Express, Eastern Airlines, and Atlantic Richfield ("We're a different kind of company"). The ever-adept Marty Pasettas produced and directed it for television, keeping up the illusion of fervor throughout the evening. It sounded as if Pasetta were trying to use some augmented or at least transplanted laughter and applause to enhance the show;

occasionally there was a loud blurple of audience noise that seemed to be coming in from another planet. Perhaps someone had pressed the wrong button in the control room.

Whatever else you could say about it, the gala could in no way be called auspicious or impressive. As a television program, it made one long for the days of Ed Sullivan. Heck, it even made one long for the days of Ted Mack.