

The Prairie Dog That Met the President is a music drama for young audiences that is based on the true exploits of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806. The members of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery were the first white men to record and preserve descriptions of the common plains animal which they named the "prairie dog." The Corps really did spend a day digging and flooding out a prairie dog town and they really did manage to capture a prairie dog who traveled with them north to the Mandan village where Sacajawea lived. The prairie dog and a magpie were sent down the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico and then were shipped past the Florida Keys up the Atlantic coast and arrived, healthy and alive, in Washington D.C. where they were seen by President Thomas Jefferson. The magpie and the prairie dog lived out their days in Philadelphia, in Charles Wilson Peale's Museum in Independence Hall.

The five performers in ***The Prairie Dog That Met the President*** should be simply dressed in human clothes, with their changes of character indicated through their props. The Prairie Dog is dressed in earth tones and carries with him a brown blanket. The Magpie is dressed simply (but elegantly) in black and white and wears a long cape which flashes blue and white in its inner lining. She also carries an elegant black purse from a strap on her shoulder, from which she pulls out props as needed. She has a whistle around her neck which emits a piercing screech (or an mp3 player which plays the magpie call, a sound file of which can be obtained from the authors).

The Trio (soprano, mezzo-soprano and baritone) must be able to change characters quickly. Lewis, Clark and Ordway, all member of the expedition, are indicated by the military hats they wear. Sacajawea wears a beaded head band and a beaded feather necklace. Seaman wears a large dog collar with a big tag reading "Seaman - The Wonder Dog." The Brown Pelican wears a saxophone which suggests the pelican's bill pouch. All three Pink Flamingos carry long pink boas and wear rose pink swimming caps. The Baltimore Oriole sports a black opera hat and wears an orange vest under a black cut away jacket. He carries a walking stick which he uses to beat the Prairie Dog. Thomas Jefferson wears an eighteenth century periwig.

An environmental note may be to the point here. Two hundred years ago, just as now, pink flamingos flew in abundance along the Florida coast. The Brown Pelican, however, has had his own heroic journey, returning from the brink of extinction. These huge birds, in Lewis and Clark's days plentiful in Louisiana, were almost completely wiped out because of DDT, an insecticide widely used in the 1960s which accumulated in the birds bodies and made their eggs fragile and brittle. Through wise conservation and preservation practices the Brown Pelican is once again a resident of the Louisiana jambalaya of life. The lesson that the Brown Pelican teaches the Prairie Dog and which the Prairie Dog teaches the President helped to save the Brown Pelican species, and may serve to help the entire family of life. That, at least, is the deepest wish of the creators of this opera for young, but wise, audiences.

The Prairie Dog That Met the President was composed during a residency at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, New Mexico in May and June, 2003. The composer expresses his gratitude to the Foundation and to Michael Knight, Executive Director of the Foundation. The composer is also deeply indebted to the prairie dogs and magpies of Taos for inspiration.

The string quintet version of ***The Prairie Dog That Met the President*** was commissioned by Dr. Kurt-Alexander Zeller and Dr. Richard Bell of Clayton State University in Morrow, Georgia, and is dedicated to the string performers and cast of the November 2015 production in Spivey Hall.