

# The New York Times

## Seeing Faces Just Made for Radio

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In a rehearsal for the first New York City performance of “Wait, Wait ... Don’t Tell Me,” Peter Sagal stood on the stage and refined his answer to the age-old question, “How do you get to [Carnegie Hall](#)?”

Patience and practice are not sufficiently funny answers for this [National Public Radio](#) weekend comedy quiz show. Mr. Sagal, the sardonic host, tried this instead: “You write them a large check, period. You wouldn’t believe the security deposit we had to put down.”

The joke survived rewrite, and three hours later, as a rapt audience watched and listened, the program’s scorekeeper, Carl Kasell, added a punch line to the routine. “Peter, don’t break anything, or they get to keep me,” he said, to a roar of laughter.

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Stage shows in local markets have been a staple of “Wait, Wait” for 4 of its 11 years on NPR. Still, Thursday’s taping was momentous for the hosts and panelists, and not only because of the auspicious setting. Family members, donors and television agents were all in the sold-out hall.

“Man, am I gonna [Twitter](#) this,” Mr. Sagal remarked as he walked onstage, and Twitter this he did, taking a camera-phone picture from stage and uploading it after the show. During a break, Mr. Sagal, a native of Berkeley Heights, N.J., waved to his three daughters in the first row and jokingly wondered if they had fallen asleep yet.

With an estimated 2.75 million listeners a week on radio and another one million who subscribe to the podcast of the program, “Wait, Wait” ranks as one of public radio’s foremost hits. Mr. Sagal, naturally, has a joke about that.

“We provide a break from NPR’s relentless self-seriousness — which is part of what makes it great, but you know, every now and then you’ve gotta eat a doughnut, right?” he said. “We’re the doughnut amid the nutritious meal that is public radio.”

“Wait, Wait” is what “The Daily Show” would be if [Jon Stewart](#) peddled stories about crime-fighting leeches, or what “Jeopardy” would be if Alex Trebek asked fill-in-the-blank questions about Iranian nuclear negotiations. Three panelists ham it up and take whacks at Mr. Sagal’s questions. Play-at-home contestants who join by telephone try to earn the program’s sole prize, a voice-mail message recorded by Mr. Kasell and sent to the winners on CDs.

On the program a straight-news report about cuts to Wall Street bonus checks becomes fodder for banks-as-discounters jokes, as in “[Merrill Lynch](#)’s house of bargains.” Word of a Russian plot to reduce snowfall by seeding approaching storm fronts with chemicals segues to imagined carols like “I’m Dreaming of a Nontoxic Christmas.”

For its first seven years, “Wait, Wait” was produced without a live audience to supply the laugh track. When looking back, the producers say, those episodes seem like rehearsals. In 2005 the program, a co-production with Chicago Public Radio, added a studio audience in Chicago, and now 12 times a year the show, which annually produces about 44 new installments, travels to other cities.

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NPR said the New York show had sold out in about 90 minutes. “We’ll be back next year, I’m sure,” the show’s creator, Doug Berman, said in an interview.

The road shows are fund-raisers for the local stations and a friend-maker for the “Wait, Wait” staff members. The Carnegie taping also served as a thank you to WNYC, the NPR station in New York, which this month moved “Wait, Wait” to a prime slot for public radio, Saturdays at 11 a.m. It had previously been heard at two different times on the station’s AM and FM frequencies.

In front of their New York fans, the cast members taped two hours of material, which was condensed to about 50 minutes by editors on Friday.

“Wait, Wait” has intrigued television producers for years, and NPR contemplated a TV pilot with CBS last year. That project did not go forward, but “there are other interested parties now,” some of whom attended Thursday’s taping, Mr. Berman said.

Even when it is experienced with the grand lighting and enviable acoustics of Carnegie Hall, it is hard to tell whether “Wait, Wait” would translate to another medium. Mr. Sagal said he valued the intimacy and the spontaneity of the current format. “We’re a bunch of guys who like joking around with each other,” he said.

The fans on Thursday said that much was evident — even if it was, as Rebecca Brill, 23, who lives in Battery Park City in Manhattan, said, momentarily jarring to see “bodies attached to the voices I hear every week.”

Like Mr. Stewart’s “Daily Show,” she said, “Wait, Wait” “always finds the humor in the news, and I am not ashamed that it’s my go-to for a recap of the week’s top stories.”