

Cleveland Plain Dealer

National tour of 'Frost/Nixon' makes for compelling theater

[Donald Rosenberg / Plain Dealer Reporter](#)

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REVIEW

Frost/Nixon

What: The national tour of the Broadway play by Peter Morgan, directed by Michael Grandage.

When: Through Sunday, Jan. 25.

Where: Palace Theatre, PlayhouseSquare, Cleveland.

Tickets: \$10-\$25. Call 216-241-6000 or go to www.playhousesquare.org.

For the next 10 days, there are two ways to enjoy "Frost/Nixon," Peter Morgan's absorbing study of one of the 20th century's oddest couples.

Head to your local movie house to take in Ron Howard's vibrant film version starring Frank Langella and Michael Sheen. Or make your way to PlayhouseSquare, where Stacy Keach and Alan Cox are giving compelling performances in the play's national touring production.

The film and the play are dramatic apples and oranges. The former is a sweeping, linear depiction of events surrounding the famous 1977 television interviews featuring British talk-show host David Frost pitted against a shamed ex-president, Richard M. Nixon. Onstage, Morgan's creation takes a more ironic and documentary approach, presenting this clash of hapless titans with narrated passages, taped clips and real-time video.

The touring production, staged by Michael Grandage, is swift in pacing and seamless in execution. There hardly can be much suspense when the outcome of the interviews has been known for more than three decades. Still, Morgan is such a savvy theatrical craftsman that the build-up to Nixon's admission of guilt is fraught with tension.

The anxiety on both sides is often hilarious, despite the final, tragic implications of Nixon's confession. Both men seek to restore their credibility. Frost, a breezy showman who's also considered a journalistic lightweight, desperately wants to regain success in the U.S. Nixon, three years after being forced from office, hopes to achieve political resurrection.

As they place egos before each other, Frost and Nixon ride a roller coaster of emotions. Frost begins badly, allowing his wily guest to orate with far too much alacrity. But the talk-show host eventually finds his bearing and courage, which leaves Nixon defensive and pitiable.

The ascents and descents are fascinating to observe, especially with such superb foils as Keach and Cox heading enthusiastically into battle. Keach bears only faint resemblance to Nixon, even with broad shoulders and slicked-down black hair, and he doesn't attempt to mimic the former president's patterns of speech, though you'd swear you're hearing Nixonian inflections as the night wears on. (Bob Ari does the broadest Nixon imitation as the newsman Bob Zelnick, and he's Keach's understudy.)

Keach wraps his gravelly voice around Nixon's lines with prideful relish, capturing the man's ticks and reveling in his blend of intelligence and guile. It is a commanding performance that never draws attention away from the character.

As Frost, Cox bounces giddily about the stage, his eagerness masking insecurity and a latent strain of chutzpah. Frost appears to be too innocent and likable to be a hard-driving interviewer, but Cox shows how he rises almost heroically to the occasion.

Along with Ari's Zelnick, Frost's excellent coterie of advisers includes John Birt, his British producer (Antony Hagopian), and Jim Reston (Brian Sgambati), the nerdy liberal journalist who pushes the interviewer to go for the jugular. Ted Koch makes an aptly uptight Nixon military spokesman, Roxanna Hope is radiant as Caroline Cushing, Frost's girlfriend, and Stephen Rowe deftly animates the roles of Swifty Lazar and Mike Wallace.

In the end, we root for the play's central figures, who turn out to be as weird and entertaining a duo in art as they were in life.