

# Review: 'Frost/Nixon' heats up Belk Theatre

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Why should you drop \$20 to \$59 to see “Frost/Nixon” in the flesh at Belk Theatre, if you can watch the Oscar-nominated film for a fraction of that sum across town?

First, to notice how the play by Peter Morgan (who also wrote the screenplay) bears different interpretations when former president Richard Nixon is wryer and more sympathetic, or when talk show host David Frost has a less bendable backbone.

Second, because it's more fun to watch any cat-and-mouse game when the cat and the mouse are in the room with you.

And third, because you see better what the story is really about. Ron Howard's movie so effectively recreates the 1970s that it seems like a brilliant museum exhibit, depicting a sad time when the political ideals of the 1960s had finally died and the insufferable egotism of the Me Generation was about to take their place.

Having breathing actors in front of us, whatever era their droopy hairdos and period clothes may suggest, reminds us that Morgan is writing about an issue – abuse of political power, done for the supposed good of the country – that has never mattered more than it did when this play was first staged in 2006. One of the names in the title may be Nixon's, but Morgan is asking us to think about George Bush and anyone else who might ever advocate an “imperial presidency.”

Stacy Keach is billed above that title on this national tour, and he takes command quickly. His Nixon strides onto the sparse set, which consists mostly of chairs beneath a large panel of multiple television screens, like a constipated turtle late for an appointment: neck withdrawn between shoulders, pumping legs held closely together. He's almost too *present* to be Nixon, who always seemed to slip away from cameras in person; Keach's boulder of a head looks like a chip knocked loose from Mount Rushmore. Yet his Nixon is light on his feet, adroit, possessed of a sense of humor one can never be sure he's using.

Alan Cox is a worthy adversary, a bit more assured and formidable than his screen counterpart. The 1977 interviews on which both pit their futures – Nixon hoping for restoration to political glory, Frost for restoration to media prominence – seem more evenly balanced than they did on screen, where Frank Langella's Nixon loomed (perhaps appropriately) over Michael Sheen's quicksilver Frost.

The supporting cast makes no false moves, from the doctrinaire but likeable corner men – Brian Sgambati's Jim Reston and Ted Koch's dogged Jack Brennan – to Stephen Rowe's Swifty Lazar. (If one could make a living playing hard-bitten literary agents, he'd never be out of work.)

Watching the verbal jousting onstage, one more thing comes to mind: How important it seemed at the time that Nixon accept responsibility for the Watergate cover-up, yet how quickly history passed these men by.

Nixon died 15 years ago in quiet disgrace, his name hardly ever invoked; Frost, who'll be 70 in eight weeks, now produces obscure films (such as the 2007 “In Your Dreams”) and frothy documentaries (such as “Inside Elton's World,” about Elton John).

In the long run, the interviews themselves didn't matter much. But the questions they make us ask – and should forever make us ask – *do* matter. See the play, and you'll know why.