

TheBostonChannel.com/ABC

FROST/NIXON: Can We Talk?

By Mike Cole

January 29, 2009

It's fun.

And, yes, I'm talking about the play **Frost/Nixon**.

Not to worry, I'll give you a deeper take on the national tour of Peter Morgan's play that just opened at Boston's Colonial Theatre straight ahead, but I thought a lighter tone was the best way to start.

Why?

Well, for one thing, I think there's a lot of pretentious baggage unfairly attached to this show that can mask a very important fact: Frost/Nixon is an exhilarating night at the theater.

The play itself is solid, but it's the performances that lift it to a higher level. **Stacy Keach**, an actor's actor, gives us a Nixon full of guile and ... dare I say it? ... whimsy. His puffy face sometimes evoking the manic genius of **Jonathan Winters**, before crumbling into a ruined monarch worthy of Lear.

Alan Cox is glib and ambitious as Frost ... Pythonesque at one moment, vulnerable and insecure the next. He's a high stakes gambler putting all his chips on black, and making sure he knows where the back door is if he has to make a run for it.

The fact that this awkward collision of pop culture and history really did happen still has a surreal quality to it. The 1977 TV interview between a disgraced American president and a callow British talk show host had mostly fallen through the cracks of time until Peter Morgan decided to re-tell the tale. He's a writer who understands film and television extremely well, but his instincts told him this should be a play first ... and he was right.

So what turns a media sensation from thirty years ago into compelling, contemporary theater? Clever staging for one. Director **Michael Grandage** uses a jumbo-tron of television screens to help propel the backstory. He also keeps the pacing lively without rushing the plot along ... distilling the story into its most essential moments. It's up to the actors from there.

You might be surprised to know that Frost/Nixon also has a lot more to offer than just Frost and Nixon. The supporting players are terrific. **Brian Sgambati** and **Bob Ari** play Jim Reston and Bob Zelnick ... two American journalists hired by Frost to help him prep for the interview. They bring the appropriate passion and arrogance of "traditional" journalists suddenly thrown into the world of showbiz.

In Nixon's corner there's **Ted Koch** as military man, and Chief of Staff Jack Brennan ... a pit bull for the exiled president. Koch has a soldier's devotion to his boss ... unfortunately he also has a costume that's about a size and a half too small. The last actor to play Brennan may have fit into the uniform, but Koch sure doesn't. Details. Details.

Roxanna Hope also gets to chew a little scenery as Caroline Cushing ... a jet-setting, gal on the make who hooks up with Frost just before the interview deal is struck. And the guy who strikes the deal, none other than Hollywood legend Swifty Lazar, is given a tasty turn by **Stephen Rowe**.

Now, I know you have a choice right now of seeing a movie version, or this stage version of Frost/Nixon and both productions are top notch. But nothing can touch the intimacy and electricity of seeing it on the boards. You're more than a viewer of this iconic moment in history ... you're there.

Frost/Nixon runs at the Colonial through February 8th.