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'Frost/Nixon' face-off still powerful

By Jayne Blanchard

Of the many terms you might associate with former President Richard M. Nixon (even those of the four-letter variety), you probably would not think of him as an artistic muse. Yet our 37th president thus far has spawned the plays "An Evening With Richard Nixon" and "Nixon's Nixon"; an opera, "Nixon in China"; and now the absorbing and cunningly entertaining drama "Frost/Nixon."

Peter Morgan, the superb British screenplay writer, has had experience with larger-than-life figures, having tackled both the glorified (Elizabeth II in "The Queen") and the vilified (Idi Amin in "The Last King of Scotland"). With his first stage play, Mr. Morgan takes on the fascinating conundrum of Richard Nixon, and the results avoid patent caricatures to create something quite elegant and polished - two more words not usually connected with the former commander in chief.

The setting for "Frost/Nixon" is the period of tense events and negotiations leading up to the 1977 televised interviews between British talk-show host David Frost (Alan Cox) and Mr. Nixon (Stacy Keach). Mr. Nixon had not spoken publicly about his resignation or the Watergate scandal, and Mr. Frost was embroiled in a multimillion-dollar gamble to nail the interviews and also had to fight against a reputation as a playboy gadfly. Both had much at stake and were girded for battle.

For those who view Mr. Nixon solely as a political cartoon come to life - the jowls, the hooded eyes and five o'clock shadow, the slumped shoulders and sweaty brow - it may come as something of a revelation to see him as collected and often witty, a champion strategist who knows how to control the situation. Throughout most of the interviews, Nixon is on top, regaling the unseen TV audience with cozy anecdotes and neatly evading the hard questions with labyrinthine answers - much to the agony of Frost's advisers, journalists Jim Reston (Brian Sgambati) and Bob Zelnick (Bob Ari).

At the 11th hour, Frost pulls it off - adroitly cornering Nixon into tacitly admitting criminal wrongdoing with Watergate and leading him into an astonishing apology to the American people.

It was a television moment like no other.

"Frost/Nixon" captures the anxious and revelatory moments leading up to Mr. Nixon's confession in a swift-moving play that carries you along on a jittery momentum as if you're seeing these events unfold for the first time. A bank of TV screens looms above the sleek wood-paneled set with Big Brother intensity, affording discomfiting and revealing close-ups of both Nixon and Frost.

It would be such a crowd-pleasing temptation to portray Mr. Nixon as the V-sign-waving "Tricky Dick." Mr. Keach, however, avoids this, instead giving us a flavor of the president that is elegant and masterful, especially in regard to the Nixonian vocal intonations. Mr. Cox's David Frost is equally urbane and subtle, showing the serious side and vulnerabilities of a peacock-ish media figure. In supporting roles, Stephen Rowe has a scene-stealing turn as Nixon's reptilian agent, Swifty Lazar, and Roxanna Hope shines as Frost's confident girlfriend, Caroline Cushing.

We don't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore. As "Frost/Nixon" proves, Mr. Nixon may be considered either the ultimate scapegoat or the penultimate abuser of power. Yet, more than three decades after his disgrace, our fascination with him hasn't diminished.