

Des Moines Register

September 29, 2008

Keach channels Nixon's post-Watergate soul on stage

David Frost's TV interview brought out the torment the president carried.

By MICHAEL MORAIN

mmorain@dmreg.com

A number of movie stars have played Richard Nixon over the years, but they've all turned in variations of the same neurotic bureaucrat.

There was Rip Torn as a calculating monster in "Blind Ambition," Philip Baker Hall as a paranoid in "Secret Honor" and Anthony Hopkins as a desperate caged animal in "Nixon."

But when Stacy Keach becomes Tricky Dick for the national touring premier of "Frost/Nixon" Tuesday night at the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines, he hopes to deliver something different.

For starters, said the actor known best as TV's Detective Mike Hammer, "I look nothing like Nixon at all. I look like a Chicago gangster."

Costume designers fixed him up with contact lenses, a fake nose, a fake upper lip and even a set of fake teeth but later decided to ditch everything but a wig.

"It's not an impersonation even though I do things that are Nixonian. I'm more concerned about his soul than his speech patterns," he said.

And what a troubled soul it is. The play picks apart the president's psyche in the aftermath of Watergate, when the whole world was waiting for an apology. It finally came in 1977 during a legendary 90-minute interview with the British journalist David Frost.

The play, with Alan Cox as Frost, was written by British screenwriter Peter Morgan ("The Queen," "The Last King of Scotland") and opened in London before moving last year to Broadway for a five-month run. The weeklong stint in Des Moines marks the first stop on a national tour and the first time with Keach in the lead role.

Keach played LBJ

The actor, however, has been ready for years. When Nixon was president, Keach had just finished studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and landed the title role in "MacBird!" The counterculture play satirically depicted Lyndon B. Johnson as Macbeth and Lady Bird Johnson as the scheming Lady Macbeth, insinuating that the Johnsons were responsible for the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"We thought we were going to get shut down, but it didn't happen," said the actor, who splits his time between New York and his wife's native Poland.

After "MacBird!" closed, Keach moved on to other roles, including Hamlet and King Lear, who

reminds him of Nixon.

Vanity spurs downfall

The president "was like Lear in the sense that he made some foolish decisions based on hubris, vanity and self-importance, which became his downfall," Keach said.

Back in the 1970s, the actor would have compared him to Shakespeare's manipulative Richard III, but history has softened his opinion of the leader, who died in 1994.

"I was never aware of Nixon's own self-deprecating sensibilities," Keach said. "He was very self-conscious about being with other people. He worried about his perspiration, about the shadow of his beard. At one point in the play, he says, 'I think the moisture on my upper lip caused me to lose the presidency.' "

There were other quirks, too - his bizarre sense of humor, for instance, and his preference for piano music in the key of G - and it's those details that appeal to the actor most.

"He's a fascinating, compelling character. There's no question about that," Keach said. "The play humanizes him. It doesn't excuse his actions. It doesn't attempt to justify his actions from an external point of view, but it does allow him to try to justify them himself."

In some ways, Keach said, the play resonates with issues in the current administration. The United States was tangled in an unpopular war. The president's critics accused him of acting above the law. Americans were ready to move on but couldn't turn away from the political drama.

"The Watergate hearings were in some ways the beginning of reality television," Keach said. "We were all glued to the television because we were curious to find out what would happen. The play reveals how television manipulates our sensibilities and the way we regard celebrities and political figures."

Reston provides insight

James Reston Jr., who is scheduled to deliver pre- and post-show talks at the Civic Center on Tuesday, had a behind-the-scenes look at Frost's 1977 interview and how it caught the president off guard. (A character named James Reston narrates the play.)

He had been hired eight months earlier to help Frost prepare questions, and he dug up a series of recorded conversations between Nixon and his chief counsel, Charles Colson.

"He was the real bad guy," said Reston, author of "The Conviction of Richard Nixon." "When I found those conversations buried deep in the court records, I thought they could really surprise Nixon and knock him out of his studied defenses - and I believe that's what happened."

Reston remembers organizing the showdown in a rented house near Nixon's home in California. Frost's team camped out in one room, while the president's team holed up in another. Both groups watched the interview on monitors.

"I was in some kind of zone, like in a tennis match or a football game," Reston recalled. "It was hugely important, but there was no sense of how it was going to turn out. And when the apology finally happened, I was ecstatic. That was more than we could have ever hoped for."

