

So You Won't Have Nixon to Kick Around Any More?

A look at “Frost/Nixon” and the real thing.
The villain in the play is *television!*

By Greg Vitiello

Richard M. Nixon was not a likable man. His critics called him “Tricky Dick” and branded him graceless, duplicitous, paranoid and worse. The criticism mounted to a national roar of outrage at his complicity in covering up facts about the Watergate break-in.

So when a new play titled “Frost/Nixon” premiered in London, then came to Broadway in the spring of 2007, you might have assumed the villain in this two-man face-off was the former president.

Wrong.

The villain, in Peter Morgan’s entertaining but facile play, is television. Please bear with me, because this will take a bit of explaining. Morgan’s play is based on television personality David Frost’s 1977 series of interviews with Nixon, which were shown in some 70 countries and garnered the largest global audience of any television news program in history. The conversations spanned many aspects of Nixon’s career, culminating with Watergate – and ending dramatically with a quasi

confession by the former president, in which he admitted to letting the American people down.

The play “Frost/Nixon” draws upon the interviews selectively, often rearranging historic moments for dramatic effect. And though we, as viewers, know the outcome of the interviews, we wait on tenterhooks to see how Frost will catch Nixon. The play’s path to this historically thrilling,

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though contrived, moment is sometimes laborious, especially when it lingers on Frost and his television advisers. With its studio set and large grid of television monitors in the background, “Frost/Nixon” is at its most effective when it presents the confrontation between the two men, particularly during the portion devoted to Watergate.

In the play, each man hopes the



Photofest

The real David Frost (left) with the real Richard Nixon

programs will help restore his career. Nixon has fallen the furthest, from the presidency to the isolation following his impeachment and ensuing resignation. Frost also has fallen, from his glory days of the 1960s and early 1970s when he had popular interview shows in Britain and the United States to his current television base in Australia – too far from the real action for Frost. And indeed, Morgan presents Frost as a journalistic lightweight and playboy,

who dresses like a peacock and needs to be propped up by his advisers as he struggles to find a “hook” on which to impale Nixon.

The play comes to life whenever it focuses on Nixon (played ingeniously by Frank Langella). The former president is seen as canny, though self-pitying, in his eagerness to capitalize on the interviews. He plays hardball with Frost over the payment he’ll receive, extracting a promise of \$600,000



Michael Sheen as David Frost (left) with Frank Langella as Richard Nixon in the Broadway production of “Frost/Nixon”

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plus a share of the profits from the syndicated programs, though Frost is having difficulties generating interest from broadcast networks. Nixon dominates the stage with the force of his grandiosity. Stoop-shouldered and shambling, with a rumbling, pompous voice, Langella interprets the essence of Nixon rather than caricaturing him (as so many cartoonists and mimics have done, accentuating his ski nose, baggy-eyes, jowly cheeks and clumsy manners). In media interviews, Langella has described how he eventually discarded the visual research he'd done on Nixon and homed in on the man's "essence." And here, on the stage, is the essential Nixon, reminiscing self-aggrandizingly about his meetings with Chinese Chairman Mao-Tse-Tung and Russian Premier Leonid Brezhnev and deriding his former rival John F. Kennedy ("that man screwed everything that moved"). With Frost, he tries to be alternatively steely and jocular, as when he suddenly inquires about the interviewer's previous evening: "Did you do any fornicating?"

And yet, despite his gauche asides, Nixon remains in charge almost to the end. We get a privileged glimpse of his inner turmoil, in a scene that is not based on real events, when he phones Frost one evening to confide that he recognizes a bond between them. Drunk and rancorous, Nixon claims that they are both victims of a life-long inferiority complex that manifests itself regardless of how much they achieve in life. "That's our tragedy, isn't it, Mr. Frost? No

matter how high we get, they still look down on us." He continues, "We still feel like the little man. The loser they told us we were. The smart asses at college. The high-ups. The well-born. The people whose respect we really wanted, really craved."

During the next day's taping, Nixon seems to be in total command, engaging in self-serving digressions and skillfully brushing aside the interviewer's efforts to force a confession from him. However, Frost surprises him by quoting from unpublished conversations he had with his chief counsel Charles Colson. Sweaty and twitching, Nixon becomes a trapped man, who suddenly confesses his failures. Pushed by Frost to acknowledge his guilt, Nixon admits: "I let down my friends, I let down my country." The litany continues, punctuated by: "I let the American people down and I have to carry that

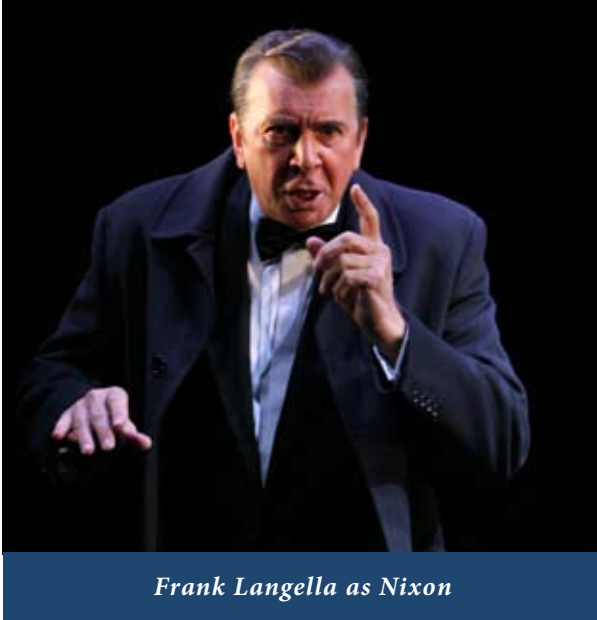


Michael Sheen as David Frost

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burden the rest of my life.”

The moment has resonated through time. Nixon, already a pariah in the three years since he had left office, lost his one chance to reclaim his reputation and become an eminence grise of American



Frank Langella as Nixon

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politics (the fantasy that prompted him to agree to the interviews).

Certainly the revelation qualifies as one of the great moments of American television. Or does it?

In “Frost/Nixon,” just as the audience is relishing the scene’s catharsis, Morgan presents his moral judgment not on the former president but on television. James Reston, Jr., one of Frost’s advisers on the show, steps forward and indicts the medium for trivializing—and, at least implicitly, distorting—history. He sums up television’s culpability by saying: “The first and greatest sin of television is that it simplifies. Diminishes. Great, complex ideas, tranches of time, whole careers, become reduced to a single

snapshot.”

And indeed, in the play’s climactic moment, when Nixon confesses to a degree of complicity, the giant grid of television screens behind him shows the face of the anguished, trapped former president. Morgan has given us the close-up—or snapshot—that demonstrates his premise.

Throughout the play, Reston and other characters have stepped forward to provide context – a primer on the Vietnam War, insights into Nixon. The device is both awkward and intrusive. And here again, at the climactic moment, Morgan can’t resist the chance to enunciate his message.

I think he protests too much. Television has its failings, not least in its frequent oversimplification of news events.

And yet it is capable of more than reductive snapshots. The actual Frost/Nixon television interviews are one cogent example.

The March 1977 discussions comprised 28 hours during 12 days of taping spread over the period of one month. Frost and his team subsequently edited the material

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down to four 90-minute segments for showing to a global audience in the fall of 1977. “The programs were presented in an irregular way,” says Ron Simon, television curator of the Paley Center for Media in New York. “Frost had to create his own

network for these four interviews and offer them as a syndicated series of specials, which was very difficult to pull off.”

Frost’s success in creating a syndicated network hinged on whether the interviews would make news. In the minds of the media and the public, the only newsworthy topic was Nixon’s role in Watergate. But would the former president implicate himself? This was Frost’s challenge. Part of that challenge involved waiting for the proper moment.

Even without Watergate the interviews would have been a riveting experience for viewers with an interest in the conduct and abuses of a presidential administration.

Early conversations about the Nixon Administration’s foreign policy allow the former president to boast of his triumphs, spin out anecdotes and excoriate his many enemies. And yet even in Nixon’s area of greatest strengths, Frost is ready for him. Far from the lightweight we see on stage, Frost reveals himself in the actual interviews as thoroughly prepared, knowledgeable and intrepid. Despite his casual manner, Frost demonstrates real toughness when he quizzes Nixon on subjects such as the CIA’s role in the assassination of Chile’s President Salvador Allende. Nixon rationalizes these actions by saying that Chile and Cuba represented a “Red Sandwich” that might have spread communism throughout Latin America. He supports the right-wing dictatorship

of Augusto Pinochet, which supplanted Allende, “because they don’t threaten our security interests.” Frost quickly rebuts his argument that a right-wing dictatorship is preferable to a left-wing dictatorship by saying: “Under Allende, Chile was a left-wing democracy, not a dictatorship.” Thwarted in the argument, Nixon turns to the all-too-familiar tactics of distorting and demeaning (in this case, attacking the CIA’s intelligence in Latin America and elsewhere).

When the subject switches to domestic politics, Frost again places Nixon on the defensive by challenging his support for former Vice President Spiro Agnew, who left office over allegations of corruption during his term as Governor of Maryland. Nixon blames the press, arguing that because Agnew was a conservative, he got tougher treatment. “He wasn’t a liberal pin-up boy,” Nixon concludes with a sneer.

The interviews provide an in-depth view of Nixon’s policies, tactics and psyche. Even without Watergate, they would have been a riveting experience for viewers with an interest in the conduct and abuses of a presidential administration. And yet without Watergate, Frost would have been unable to sell them. Even with the revelations, he wasn’t able to garner a slate of prestigious advertisers. Instead, he would have to settle for a mixed bag, including commercials for Weed-Eater trimmer, Alpo dog food, Certs breath mints and *Us* magazine.

Frost saved Watergate for the

final hours of his actual interviews and came well prepared. "Frost was a more complex character than the play led us to assume," says Simon. "He'd already shown himself to be quick witted and well prepared in the lengthy interviews he'd done with politicians of all stripes. In the play, they accentuate the collision of entertainment and politics and create more of a cat-and-mouse game, particularly regarding Watergate. But the actual interviews show a different picture."

During one exchange, Nixon tries deflecting Frost's argument by legalistic definitions of the statute involving obstruction of justice, quoting that "one must corruptly impede a judicial endeavor" before adding, "I did not have a corrupt motive." But Frost is intrepid, repeatedly quoting Nixon's remarks from the White House transcripts that were released to the public at the time of the Watergate hearings. Suddenly Nixon becomes testy, saying: "You are doing something I haven't done. When you read something back, it could be out of context." Frost later remarked that Nixon seemed "disconcerted by the amount of research we'd done."

At one point, Nixon tries to rationalize his behavior by saying, "When the President does it, that means it is not illegal." But Frost pushes on, suggesting words Nixon might use to explain his behavior: "I'd like to hear you say, 'First, that there was probably more than mistakes, there was wrongdoing. Second, I did abuse the power I had as the President. Three, I put the

American people through needless agony.'" Nixon tries deflecting Frost's logical build-up of incidents that demonstrated the President's culpability. He becomes maudlin, recalling President Eisenhower's agonies over a scandal involving one of his aides. He gives tearful accounts of the pain inflicted on his own aides, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, when they were forced to resign. He inveighs against the "fifth columnists" in the "five-front war" he was forced to wage because of Watergate. Finally, he says, "I brought myself down. I gave them the sword and they stuck it in and twisted it with relish."

But Frost isn't done. At his prodding, Nixon finally acknowledges his complicity, saying "I let the American people down and have to carry that burden the rest of my life."

Viewers of the play have heard these same words. The difference here is that in the interviews, Frost hasn't had to rely on surprising Nixon. Rather, he has built a case against the former president. And Nixon has inexplicably conceded.

"Historians have used these interviews as part of the process of rethinking Nixon and his era," says Simon.

Frost has achieved this feat through solid journalism, not by simplifying or diminishing history. And that's a standard for which television should always strive.

Richard Nixon must have been an irresistible target for a writer/director with a handy message about television's shortcomings. Sometimes Nixon succeeded in using the medium for his own devices, such as when he made his "Checkers" speech in an effort to rebut charges that he had accepted illegal campaign contributions. (He derided notions of his wealth by pointing out that his wife Pat wore a "respectable Republican cloth coat" and claimed the only gift he'd accepted was the cocker spaniel "Checkers.") At other times, television was his nemesis, most memorably in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates when his five-o'clock shadow and baggy eyes made him appear less vigorous (and dare we say "presidential"?) than Kennedy. In 1962, he went on national television following his defeat in the California gubernatorial election to tell the American public, "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more."

Six years later, in 1968, he was back, savvier about presenting himself on television. I was working in a New York studio when Paul Niven interviewed him for National Educational Television. Nixon's advisers had clearly primed him for the occasion, but were taking no chances by letting anyone distract him before the program began. I argued that our photographer needed access to him so that we could send out publicity pictures of the event. I was told that Nixon would make himself available after the interview. Knowing this was just a ruse, I waited until his assistants had moved from the set to the viewing room. I then told the photographer that as soon as I left the set, he should approach Nixon and begin shooting. I assured him that when Nixon's aides complained, the NET crew would look for me to do something about it. And I was right. The photographer introduced himself to Nixon, explained that he just wanted to take a few shots and was greeted with the future president's most synthetic grin (though not his trademark "V" sign). Snap snap snap went the camera, before I heard my name being called over the intercom. "Vitiello, there's a goddamn photographer on the set. I thought we told you no photos." I ambled back from the bowels of the studio where I'd been hiding. After returning to the set, I thanked Nixon for posing for the photos. I too got the synthetic grin of a man well prepared that day for his encounter with the television medium. In fact, Nixon proved to be a flawless interviewee, skillfully dodging questions that might have proven awkwardly newsworthy, particularly about Vietnam.

Nine years later, he was back, in an improvised studio near his San Clemente, California, home, hoping television would give him the trial – and vindication -- he never had following his resignation in 1974. The Frost interviews and "Frost/Nixon" are the outcome. – G.V.

Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Years of Masterpiece Theatre and Joyce Images. From 1966 to 1972 he wrote for National Educational Television and the Children's Television Workshop.