

Review: Frost/Nixon

Submitted by [KingoftheMods](#) on Mon, 12/08/2008 - 08:28.



Can a smash West End/Broadway play staged between two talking heads translate into stellar cinema? **Kimberly Gadette** reviews *Frost/Nixon*.

In one corner, a British talk show host and one-time comedian, dismissed from US television in 1972, his reputation hanging by a thread.

In the other, the 37th President of the United States, dismissed from the presidency in 1974, his reputation also hanging by a thread. The lightweight funnyman versus the heavyweight felon gone free. Will this be a good clean fight?

Let's hope not.

Based on the historic, 28-hour interview conducted by David Frost for television in 1977, when an international audience held its breath, hoping to hear an apology from Richard M. Nixon that was three years overdue, screenwriter Peter Morgan (*The Queen*, *The Last King of Scotland*) has adapted his award-winning play into a riveting film directed by Ron Howard.

From an opening montage of news clips, popping out on a black screen in neat little squares, looking like an animated game board springing to life, the filmmakers have structured a match that crackles with professionalism from the opening bell to the final knockout.



And what a knockout it is. The scenes are sharp and quick, jabbing at us with just enough information, wit and style to keep the piece constantly moving forward. The usual pitfalls of converting a stage play into film, eg, talky dialogue, flat set pieces, overly theatrical conflict, are non-existent. *Frost/Nixon* looks like it was always meant for the cinema.

So, too, do the lead actors, Frank Langella and Michael Sheen, who have risen to the momentous challenge of relocating their respective characters of Frost and Nixon from center stage to the camera's eye. And even more impressive, they had only five days' respite between the play's final performance and the film's first day of shooting.

Langella's Nixon is an out-and-out wonder – the stooped posture, the quick, odd smiles, the low, rumbling speech, the brain almost smoking with intellectual activity. "I was determined not to do an impression," says Langella, who wanted his performance "not to be mimicry of Nixon but a dedicated interpretation of a fallible man." He's crafty and arrogant, a dethroned king basking in his momentary sun, nearly cackling with glee as he overmatches the amateur Mr. Frost time and again.

Director Howard strings us along, promising that David (à la that similarly-named fellow who mixed it up with Goliath) will eventually figure out how to outwit the giant. Though Sheen's Frost is the less showy part, he plays it perfectly; we see glimpses of a man struggling to hold his life together, small rabbit-like looks of terror flickering across his face, all the while slapping on a hip, merry layer of bravado.

Helping Frost to land – eventually – the fateful one-two punch is his veteran support team, strongly played by Michael Macfadyen, Oliver Platt and Sam Rockwell. In particular, the jocular tone established between Platt and Rockwell adds an extra ingredient of fun to the slugfest.

On the other side, Nixon's somber chief of staff (Kevin Bacon) underscores the true consequence of the moment. And when a slightly dippy Pat Nixon (Patty McCormack, infamous for her starring role in the 1956 *The Bad Seed*) wafts through a prematurely victorious Nixon dinner, sing-songing, "I'm so glad it's all going according to plan," the shame is crushing. Sure, they're winning, their bob-and-weave indeed "going according to plan." But the fact that they need to rely on gamesmanship, rather than any modicum of integrity, is suddenly, terribly felt.

Howard has opened up the play, allowing us a tourist's view of Southern California, '70s style: Casa Pacifica (Nixon's "Western White House"), the Beverly Hilton Hotel, Hollywood's Cinerama Dome and the hippist L.A. eateries. The wardrobe is faithful to the day, but as Howard states in the production notes, he underplayed the outrageous '70s in order to concentrate on the event.

And what an event it was. Given this powerful film, the actual televised interview pales in comparison. Langella, his eyes tap-dancing in fright, fighting for his political life versus the real-life Tricky Dick? Poor Nixon. Maligned again.

Rating on a scale of 5 Golden Gloves: 4.5

– **Kimberly Gadette** on *Frost/Nixon*

Release dates: US: December 5, 2008; UK: January 23

Directed by: Ron Howard

Screenplay and play by: Peter Morgan

Cast: Frank Langella, Michael Sheen, Kevin Bacon, Rebecca Hall, Toby Jones, Matthew Macfadyen, Oliver Platt, Sam Rockwell

Running Time: 122 minutes



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