Frost, Nixon and Me

How I discovered what is gained and lost when history is turned into entertainment

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

In May 1976, in a rather dim New York City hotel room filled with David Frost's cigar smoke, the British television personality put an intriguing proposition to me: leave your leafy academic perch for a year and prepare me for what could be a historic interrogation of Richard Nixon about Watergate.

This would be the nation's only chance for no holds barred questioning of Nixon on the scandal that drove him to resign the presidency in 1974. Pardoned by his successor, Gerald Ford, Nixon could never be brought into the dock. Frost had secured the exclusive rights to interview him. Thus the prosecution of Richard Nixon would be left to a television interview by a foreigner.

A movie based on the Frost-Nixon talks (top: in 1977) opened last month. Sheen (left) and Langella starred in the 2006 play.
I took the job.
The resulting Frost-Nixon interviews— one in particular— indeed proved his- toric. On May 4, 1974, forty-five million Americans watched Frost elicit a sov- ereign admission from Nixon that he had been a part in the scandal. “I let down my friends,” the ex-president conceded. “I let down the country. I let down our sys- tem of government, and I let down the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government but now think it too corrupt… . I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me the rest of my life.”

If that interview made both political and broadcast history, it was all but for- gotten two years ago, when the Nixon interviews were radically transformed into a piece of entertainment, first as the play Frost/Nixon, and now as a Hol- lwood film of the same title. For that televisual interview in 1977, four hours of interrogation had been boiled down to 90 minutes. For the stage and screen, this history had been compressed into a deal more, into something resembling comedic tragedy. Having participated in the original event as Ford’s Watergate researcher, and having had a ringside seat at the transformation, I know only too well the thought that’s so often suggested: What is lost when history turns into entertainment.

I had accepted Frost’s offer with some reservations. Nixon was a skilled lawyer who had denied Watergate complicity for two years. He had seethed in exile. For him, the Frost in- terviews were a chance to persuade the American people that he had been done wrong. For his character, you could think a little about what is gained and what is lost when history is turned into entertainment.

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The author (right, with Nixon in 1977) guided Frost’s questioning on Watergate. In An Australian tragedy, the protagonist’s suffering must have a larger mean- ing, and the result of it must be enlight- ening. Nixon’s performance fell short of the classical standard—he had been forced into his admission, and after he delivered it, he quickly reverted to blam- ing others for his transgressions. (His re- version to character was cut from the final broadcast.) With no lasting epiphany, Nixon would remain a sad, less-than-tragic, ambiguous figure.

In An Aristotelian tragedy, the protagon- 0ist’s sense of the dramatic, and the other actors. I said I’d love to.

On the flight to London I reread my 1977 manuscript and I read the play, which had been fashioned as a bout between fading heavyweights, each of whose careers were on the wane, each trying to use the other for resurrection.

The concept was theatrically brilliant, as masterfully rendered as Frost/Nixon. To master the canon of Watergate into a piece of entertainment, first as book, and now as film, required an understanding of the slackness of a globe-trotting gadfly turned statesman. Nixon’s performance fell short of the classical standard—he had been forced into his admission, and after he delivered it, he quickly reverted to blaming others for his transgressions. (His reversion to character was cut from the final broadcast.) With no lasting epiphany, Nixon would remain a sad, less-than-tragic, ambiguous figure.

For me, the transition from history to theater began with a letter from Peter Morgan, the acclaimed British screenwriter (The Queen), announcing his intention to write a play about the Frost-Nixon interviews. Since I loved the theater (and have written plays myself), I was happy to help in whatever seemed then a precious little enterprise.

At lunches in London and Wash- ington, I spilled out my memories. And then I remembered that I had written a narrative of my involvement with Nixon, highlighting various tensions in the Frost camp and criticizing the interviewer for failing, until the end, to apply himself to his historic duty. Out of our conversation, the plan for the play was born. I had published it. My manu- script had lain forgotten in my files for 20 years. With scarcely a glance at it, I filled it with memories of the two days.

In the succeeding months I answered his occasional inquiry without giving the matter much thought. I sent Morgan transcripts of the conversation between Nixon and Colson that I had uncovered for Frost. About a year after first hearing from Morgan, I learned that the play was finished and would premiere at the 200-seat Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London with Frank Langella in the role of Nixon. Morgan asked if I would be willing to come over for a couple of days to talk to Langella and the other actors. I said I’d love to.

For the play’s first reading we sat on the floor of Morgan’s位于 Woolwich, near the docklands of southeast London. He stewed in the role of Nixon, the other actors, and me. In my role as Frost, I thought, as well as entirely accurate. A major strand was the rising frustra- tion of a character called John Reston at the White House. For the play’s first reading we sat on the floor of Morgan’s位于 Woolwich, near the docklands of southeast London. He stewed in the role of Nixon, the other actors, and me. In my role as Frost, I thought, as well as entirely accurate. A major strand was the rising frustra- tion of a character called John Reston at the White House. For the play’s first reading we sat on the floor of Morgan’s位于 Woolwich, near the docklands of southeast London. He stewed in the role of Nixon, the other actors, and me. In my role as Frost, I thought, as well as entirely accurate. A major strand was the rising frustra- tion of a character called John Reston at the White House. 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The Conviction of Richard Nixon: A few days later, I heard from Morgan. Brantley's emphasis on the play's factual alterations was not helpful, he said.

Morgan and I had long disagreed on this issue of artistic license. I regarded it as a legitimate point between two people coming from different value systems. Beyond their historical worth, the 1977 Nixon interviews had been wearing psychotherapy, made all the more so by the uncertainty over their outcome—and the ambiguity that lingered. I did not think they needed much improving. If they were to be compressed, I thought they should reflect an accurate essence.

Morgan's attention was on capturing and keeping his audience. Every line needed to connect to the next, with no lulls or droops in deference to dilatory historical detail. Rearranging facts or lines or chronologies, was, in his view, well within the playwright's mandate. In his research for the play, different participants had given different, Rashoon-like versions of the same event.

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or merely forgotten. As far as I was concerned, there was one true account of the Frost/Nixon interviews—my own. The dramatist’s role is different, I concede, but in historical plays, the author is on the firstrate ground when he does not change known facts but goes beyond them to speculate on the emotional makeup of the historical players. But this was not my play. I was merely a resource; my role was narrow and peripheral. Frost/Nixon—both the play and the movie—transcends history. Perhaps it is not even history at all in Hollywood, the prevailing view is that a “history lesson” is the kiss of commercial death. In reaching for an international audience, one that includes millions unversed in recent American history, Morgan and Ron Howard, the film’s director, make the history virtually irrelevant. In the end it is not about Nixon or Watergate at all. It’s about human behavior, and it rises upon such transcendent themes as guilt and innocence, resistance and enlightenment, confession and redemption. These are themes that straight history can rarely crystallize. In the presence of the playwright’s achievement, the historian—or a participant—can only stand in the wings and applaud.

JAMES RESTON JR. is the author of The Conviction of Richard Nixon and 22 other books.

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