

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Nixon's Nixon

by Russell Lees

P&S Productions

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Dunstan Playhouse

Much of what I know about Richard Milhous Nixon came from the unbiased testimony of Hunter S. Thompson. Throughout the Watergate hearings in 1973 he reported for *Rolling Stone*, despatching down his infamous mojo wire the most scabrous accounts of the disgraced president which were duly published alongside exhilaratingly vehement illustrations by Ralph Steadman.

Nixon was fair game. He always had been really. Every cartoonist emphasised his five o'clock shadow and his needle nose - transformed into missiles, and even a penis, by the ferocious Gerald Scarfe. Nixon was always there to kick around - he said so himself. He was Wile E. Coyote to JFK's Roadrunner, the man whose murky aura was exposed in the TV debate against Kennedy in 1960. The man who used his pet spaniel Checkers for an early version of wag the dog, who whined about his wife Pat's cheap coats and his own Orange County car dealer morality.

Richard Nixon always ran second - until he started winning. And in 1968 and 1972 he won with landslides. Then, with the help of Spiro Agnew and John Mitchell, Haldeman and Erlichmann he started his retribution, assembled his lists, hired outlaws like Gordon Liddy for snooping and dirty tricks, and generally got late Roman about it all.

Playwright Russell Lees is at pains to point out that *Nixon's Nixon* is a fiction, a speculation of what might have transpired in a lengthy meeting between the President and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger on the night before Nixon announced his resignation and was air lifted to ignominy in California.

By August 7, 1974 the President's Office had gone from Oval to pear-shaped. Half of Nixon's staff were on their way to jail, the transcripts of White House conversations had been made public to damaging effect and

'expletive deleted' had become the witticism de jour. In Lees' account we see Nixon in the bunker still trying to figure a way to make the stink go away, while Kissinger, the only member of Nixon's staff never to defend him, is angling to be part of the succession and not the problem - paving the way, you might say, for an appointment by the Bush administration nearly thirty years later. Which is the source of the irony and black comedy in *Nixon's Nixon* because we know what happened after Nixon's resignation and, with the passing of time we are more ready to see events from a different perspective. Nixon has become an underdog, quixotically defiant and strangely authentic in contrast to the self-serving and calculating Kissinger. Nixon is all frailty and darkly comic invective. He has Kissinger join him in charades - re-enactments of meetings with Mao and Brezhnev, Nixon is obsessed with his place in history - will his achievements be forever obscured by his disgrace? And he rails against the bust of Abraham Lincoln for the fact that no-one tape-recorded *his* private conversations.

As Nixon, Keith Jochum adroitly steps beyond impersonation - although he bears quite a credible resemblance to his subject - and with Lees' Mamet-like script of grunting syllables, fragmented half sentences and profanities, he captures the crazy energy of the situation, fuelled with weepy bourbon and swinging from sentimentality to venom in an instant. But there is nothing really sinister here. Jochum's Nixon is less like Macbeth and more like Walter Matthau, or a deranged Fred McMurray.

Tim Donoghue's task as Kissinger is more difficult because the character enjoys no favours from the playwright, and the stiff Germanic manner is one-dimensional and literally inhibiting. What is clear, though, is that Kissinger's pre-occupation with retaining favour with in-coming President Gerald Ford and his terror at being exposed on the Watergate tapes shows less gumption than Richard Nixon shaking his fist against the Fates.

Director Charles Towers maintains a fluency with Russell Lees' fast-paced lively dialogue and the actors are clearly very at home with a work they have toured for some time now. *Nixon's Nixon* is witty and asks interesting questions about the so-called verdict of history, but in order to make the play the enjoyable West End success it has become, Russell Lees has not just humanised one of the most problematic American presidents of last century, he has allowed him to slip off the ethical hook. Asking this Nixon about his Nixon is like expecting self-knowledge in Homer Simpson.