

Movie Review: Frost/Nixon

Written by {ga=mitch}

Wednesday, February 18 2009 7:00 PM -

As we do every year, we are running reviews from Mitch on all five Best Picture candidates in the week leading up to Oscar weekend. We've already run Mitch's reviews of "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button", "Milk", and "The Reader" ... and now we get to the two films Mitch loved, and the films he feels will battle it out for Best Picture of 2008. Tonight, we run his review of "Frost/Nixon" and Saturday we will run his review of "Slumdog Millionaire". And Sunday morning we will run Mitch's Oscar preview.



Frost/Nixon is the second best movie I have seen all year (you'll have to wait until Saturday to see if I rated "Slumdog Millionaire" higher, or if I'm sticking with "Wall-E" as the year's best movie). But of all of the Oscar contenders, it is the one drawing the lowest box-office numbers, despite a stellar cast (led by Oscar nominee Frank Langella as Nixon), an incredibly crisp script, and all the prestige that comes from having such Hollywood heavyweights as Ron Howard as director and Brian Grazer as producer.

So why have people been staying away from this movie in droves? My own personal speculation is that it is a movie about politics, focusing on a very controversial, extremely disliked figure from America's semi-recent past, and most people are, at this point in early 2009, burnt out on politics.

Those that supported Barack Obama in his quest for the presidency would rather focus on the hope of the future than the tawdriness of the past.

Those that opposed Obama would probably see this as just another "liberal media" attempt to slam another Republican.

You can also speculate that many people would look upon the subject matter; the events

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surrounding a simple television interview back in 1977, one in which we already know the results, and think "this would be boring".

And it's all a shame, because "Frost/Nixon" is an incredible movie that is entertaining, informing, and moving. It takes a "known" event, and infuses it with fresh insight, fascinating character studies, and some very unique viewpoints to create a movie that is actually a spellbinding thriller. It is, in my opinion, the best political movie I have seen since "All the President's Men".

Quite ironic, as both films are about journalists trying to get to the bottom of the Watergate Scandal.

How this all came about is almost a tale in itself. The interviews, while having the effect of blunting Nixon's comeback attempt three years after he resigned the presidency in disgrace, were certainly not something everyone still talked about 29 years later.

But British playwright Peter Morgan took the events of those interviews and created the Tony Award winning play in 2006.

The play, not coincidentally, also starred Michael Sheen and Frank Langella in both its London grand opening and the Broadway premier.

In one of the smartest moves the studio made, Morgan was hired to write the screenplay, rather than handing it off to someone less familiar with the subject matter.

As the movie unfolds, it is just as much of a documentary of the television industry as it is of the actual interviews. It starts out right as Nixon resigns, reluctantly heading into a life of solitude and shame. Halfway around the world, another man is enduring a career downturn, television host David Frost, now bouncing back and forth between London and Australia, trying to keep his own star afloat following the cancellation of his syndicated show in America.

Frost, like so many Europeans (including, obviously, Peter Morgan), was enthralled by the whole sordid tale of political corruption. Europeans follow these types of scandals in their own countries like soccer matches, so when it happened in the U.S., they were glued to the story.

Since Nixon had refused to sit down with anyone in the American press corps to discuss any

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events of his presidency, Frost saw it as a Golden Opportunity, thinking that he just might be able to convince Nixon to talk to him due to being an Englishman, and therefore one who could be perceived as a neutral outsider.

Much of the first half of the movie follows Frost and his Amazing Chutzpah about the globe, first working to schmooze Nixon into agreeing to the interviews, and then trying to secure the necessary funding.

The convincing Nixon part of it was actually easier than expected. Nixon's chief advisor, Jack Brennan (Kevin Bacon), encouraged him to agree to the interviews.

Frost was perceived by Brennan not as an outsider, but as a lightweight, and the perfect patsy that a politician as skilled as Nixon needed so that he could control the interviews on his own terms, and frame them so that he would be viewed in a more flattering light.

(To put it into terms relevant to today, it would be like Ryan Seacrest interviewing the Pope).

Nixon was depicted as being obsessed with getting back "into the game" of being a Washington Insider.

He was also said by historians to be an amazingly greedy miser, so when Frost came up with a dollar figure that no "respectable" news organization would touch, \$600,000 paid directly to Nixon, the former President's camp quickly agreed.

The harder part was coming up with the money to finance not only Nixon's portion, but the entire operation. Frost had no luck in getting any network to agree to subsidize, promote, and televise the interviews. Eventually, he had to stake every penny he had, and well as lots of money from friends, family, and colleagues, to finally put everything together to create the syndicated shows.

Once the certainty of the interviews had been established, "Frost/Nixon" turns into what could best be described as an intellectual boxing match. Both 'sides' have their corner men working hard to keep their guy focused and prepared for the battle, and both swarming around their contestant during breaks, analyzing the previous 'round', offering advice and encouragement just like they were in a ring.

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For Nixon, it was a team consisting primarily of Jack Brennan and his publicist Swifty Lazar, along with a gaggle of journalists performing a duty that is now (unfortunately) too common in politics...providing Nixon with ways to "spin" everything to his favor. This group included, to my surprise, Diane Sawyer.

In the other "corner", Frost had his longtime producer John Brit (Matthew Macfayden, almost unrecognizable in his long, bleach blonde hair), producer Bob Zelnick (Oliver Platt), and firebrand writer/researcher James Reston (Sam Rockwell, excellent as always).

Reston and Zelnick knew that the interviews had to be controversial to succeed. Reston had the extra motivation of being a true Nixon hater, and wanted to ensure that Nixon "got the trial we were cheated out of when Ford pardoned him";

Brennan and Nixon were positive that Frost had no chance with him, and gleefully were anticipating their invitations back into the Republican Inner Circle.

It certainly looked as if it would play out that way after the first few sessions. Nixon baited Frost, distracted him right before the cameras went live, and then tossed aside any question he didn't like by launching into long homilies about his meetings with Mao or Brezhnev.

Facing financial and career ruin, Frost had no choice but to find some way to get the upper hand in the final interview, the climax of the film.

The story itself is utterly fascinating to watch. However, it is just as enjoyable to sit back and watch two incredible actors get completely into the skins of two real-life people.

Much has been made about Langella, and I will get to that in just a moment, but I would be remiss if I were not to also heap praise upon Michael Sheen for his performance as David Frost.

First of all, he looks almost nothing like Frost, other than the hair.

But Sheen got the voice pattern down perfectly, and more so, seems to have gotten inside of the very heart and soul of him.

This was no heroic ideologue after the truth, such as how Woodward and Bernstein were portrayed in "All the President's Men";

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Frost was into this because he loved and lived for the limelight, and this was a way for him to get it back shining brightly on himself.

He is shown as vain, selfish, lazy, and an unapologetic womanizing hedonist, who had no problems missing preparation sessions to run out to publicity junkets with his latest eye candy hanging on his arm.

You might think this would make him unsympathetic, but that's not the case with Sheen's interpretation.

You also see the humanity, the insecurity, the despair, and also the value he places in his friends.

And when his back is truly up against the wall, you see the determination, intelligence, and force of will required for someone to truly be successful in the entertainment business.

It is one of the best examples I could give you as far as an actor giving a full three-dimensional look at a character.

I would personally say that Michael Sheen was more deserving of a nomination for Best Actor than Brad Pitt for "Benjamin Button";

However, as great as Sheen was, the performance everyone is talking about was made by Frank Langella as the bowed-but-not-broken 37th President of the United States. As with Sheen, Langella really doesn't look that much like Richard Nixon, and while he has his speech patterns and accent down, it's not a Rich Little level knock-off impression of him.

No, he may not look like him...but he BECOMES Nixon.

He has the subtleties and mannerisms down perfectly, and he gives us a very personal glimpse into the man himself; not just a characterization.

It would have been easy just to play up Nixon's greed, paranoia, and quick temper in showing a man who should be scorned.

Langella doesn't take that route.

You see the pain in Nixon's eyes, hear the disappointment in his voice, and feel the weight of the world on his slouched shoulders.

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No matter what your opinion was of Richard Nixon before seeing this film, it will change afterwards. For those hating the man, you can see that he was a human being. He was a very guarded person, from a time when men just didn't show that much intimacy or warmth; but that didn't mean that he was unfeeling.

You see the affection he had for others and the love, as best as he could show it, for his family and closest friends.

You will also see that he was as human as the next person, plagued by insecurity and self-doubt...a man who really WANTED to do the right thing, even if he did go about it in the wrong way.

For those going in thinking Nixon was unfairly persecuted, you see the best imagery possible of the personality weaknesses and the colossal ego that could lead a man of the highest power to betray his oath of office, and accordingly, his country and its people.

As good as Anthony Hopkins was in Oliver Stone's "Nixon", Frank Langella's performance will go down in history as the quintessential Richard Milhous Nixon.

Director Ron Howard handles this project like a premier maestro would handle the London Symphony. The result is a film that well deserves its nomination as Best Picture, and would be a worthy winner. See it if you can at the theater...but certainly make it a point to rent this remarkable film when it comes out on DVD.

My Rating - Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)