

## REVIEW

### This role-playing 'Nixon' even more pertinent in current political climate

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Nixon's Nixon: Comedy. By Russell Lees. Directed by Michael Butler. (Through April 22. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. 90 minutes. Tickets \$14-\$56. Call (408) 367-7255 or go to [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).)

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Richard Nixon impersonates Leonid Brezhnev and casts himself as Napoleon, returning from exile to take power once more. Henry Kissinger plays Mao, John F. Kennedy and Nixon himself, as his boss insists on reliving famed incidents from his career.

Nobody except Kissinger knows what happened in the White House Lincoln Sitting Room on the night of Aug. 7, 1974, the eve of Nixon's historic resignation, when the president asked his secretary of state in for a chat. Russell Lees' "Nixon's Nixon" gets a good deal of comic mileage from the scene's natural schadenfreude factor alone, and achieves something more as well. In some respects, his curiously light comedy takes on more resonance in the current political climate than when it first appeared in the mid-'90s.

"Nixon" was a hit for San Jose Repertory Theatre in '97 as the last play it staged in the Montgomery Theatre, just before moving to its much-better-equipped and audience-friendly new home. It reopened Friday for a 10th anniversary revival, staged, as before, by Michael Butler (now artistic director of Walnut Creek's Center Rep, where he'll repeat the show next season) with almost exactly the same cast and design team.

David Pichette reprises his sly, mercurial portrait of Nixon as a crafty, secretive, beleaguered and unbalanced president with delusions of grandeur and righteousness, as well as an odd penchant for role-playing games. Peter Van Norden is back as a comically wary, overstuffed ("my Machiavelli with a belly," in Nixon's words) and befuddled Kissinger, worried about protecting his legacy, nervous that his delusional boss might not resign and obsessed with securing his role in the incoming Ford administration.

The late Scott Weldin's cream-colored office set, which burst through the Montgomery's proscenium, fits nicely on the Rep's stage, its nightmarishly skewed

office door and ceiling molding floating in black space. Kurt Landisman's color-shifting lights and Jeff Mockus' ambient sound effects enhance the fantasy sequences as Kissinger indulges Nixon by playing out their meeting with Mao or visit to the Great Wall.

A sharp, spit-and-polish Michael Taylor, a senior at Mount Pleasant High and Marine Corps JROTC member, executes a first-rate and very funny drill-team present-arms routine with a rolled-up projection screen to set up an opening slideshow. It's revealing, however, how much more incisive the David Levine caricatures projected in the slide show are than Lees' depictions of the two main characters.

It's funny, at times chilling and very capably paced and executed by Butler and his actors. Lees' "Nixon" is still a somewhat soft-focus portrait, in keeping with the set's empty frame that leans beside the images of Eisenhower and Lincoln. The Tricky Dick of the smear campaigns and illegal activities isn't much in evidence and Kissinger is more pompous than crafty. Nixon swears quite a bit, but not nearly as much as on the infamous tapes (and without the ethnic slurs). His vicious side comes through most in the wariness of Van Norden's Kissinger.

Not that "Nixon" is without its political import, most of which takes on greater resonance in the latter years of the current Bush regime. Nixon gets to Kissinger with a mention of tapes that might reveal the secretary's role in the murder of Chile's President Salvador Allende, and the right-wing reign of terror that ensued. The casualness with which the men plot the secret bombing of neutral Cambodia is chilling, as is their calculation of the victims of their policies (800,000, plus the students killed at Kent State University).

The result is a strangely creative tension between revulsion and nostalgia for Nixon's brand of frank opportunism and cold-blooded "realpolitik" -- given an incumbent who makes any of his predecessors look good, Nixon, Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce included. Lees' "Nixon" hasn't changed, but the times have, lending a more nightmarish immediacy to the enthusiasm with which this Nixon and Kissinger plot an international crisis to stay in power.

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