

Nixon undone

S.J. REP PRODUCTION CAPTURES THE DEATH THROES OF A PRESIDENCY

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched: 04/02/2007 01:42:19 AM PDT

An unpopular foreign war haunts the nation. Domestic scandals dominate the headlines. A president sits in disgrace as the very people who put him in office turn against him.

Sound familiar? Shock and awe are appropriate responses to the sheer timeliness of Russell Lees' tour-de-farce "Nixon's Nixon." San Jose Rep's entertaining revival of its 1997 hit, which reunites its original cast and director, taps into the cyclical nature of politics. The playwright peeks behind the scenes at the White House on Aug. 7, 1974, the eve of Nixon's resignation, and promptly blows the lid off the Oval Office. The votes are in: You don't have to be a policy wonk to get the jokes in this comedy of presidential errors.

Impeachment looms on the horizon. Brandy beckons from its snifter. The corridors of power are closing in on Richard Nixon (David Pichette), who finds himself standing alone, well, except for Henry Kissinger (Peter Van Norden). But he's only there under duress. He's desperate to have Nixon put in a good word with the new boss (Gerald Ford). Fat chance. Nixon may be holding forth in the Lincoln Sitting Room (a playfully askew set by Scott Weldin), but he's feeling far from stately. In fact, he feels downright shortchanged by the American public. "They gave me so much power," he whines, "why are they surprised I used it?"

Obsessed with his place in the annals of history, Nixon dreams of making a comeback, like Napoleon's return from Elba (minus the Waterloo, naturally). Even after Vietnam and Watergate and Kent State and the infamous tapes, he still believes that America loves an underdog, that he can turn it all around. He doesn't mean to be unreasonable. He just wants to be carried forth on the shoulders of the army like a conquering hero: "Is that too much to ask?"

Pichette wisely doesn't impersonate Tricky Dick, instead he suggests him with darting eyes, sweaty brow and hunched shoulders. The actor's vocal inflections nail the president's claustrophobic sense of paranoia. Nixon's stuttering monologues of denial and regret are etched with eerie authenticity here.

The more he bullies and cajoles, the more pathetic he seems. He even forces Kissinger to act out his glory days, jousting with John F. Kennedy and schmoozing with Soviet leader Lenoid Brezhnev, because he can't face the future.

Unfortunately, the playwright overdoes the role-playing shtick at points. Not a lot of psychological insight comes out of the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and JFK impersonations. But the comic virtuosity of Van Norden's JFK, dripping Hyannis Port

noblesse oblige, makes up for it. Certainly, director Michael Butler keeps the pace snappy enough to compensate for the fact that the playwright tends to sacrifice depth for punch lines.

Van Norden, for his part, seems born to play Kissinger, "Machiavelli with a belly." He depicts the secretary of state as a teddy bear on the warpath, a consummate statesman with ambitions as pronounced as his jowls. He's only got one agenda here, and it's exit strategy all the way, baby. If he can't convince Nixon to step down, his own foreign policy legacy will get dumped in the dustbin of history. Already, he sighs, no one in the Beltway will take his calls.

Frankly, Lees hints that the most powerful men on the planet are merely little boys playing geopolitics as if it were a board game. Neither is above sleazy chicanery and emotional blackmail, and neither bats an eye tallying the body count, how many have died on their watch (Nixon ballparked it at 800,000).

Heck, at that point, what's a few thousand more? Desperate to stay in power, Nixon hatches a last-ditch scheme. Why not cook up a little international crisis? You know, pull some strings at the CIA, assassinate a few petty foreign officials, maybe threaten a little nuclear action. See if that doesn't turn the tide at the polls. "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," this ain't.