

Nixon power play relevant in reprise at S.J. Rep

By Karen D'Souza
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Tricky Dick rides again. With the nation engaged in a war often likened to Vietnam, and questions being raised about the use and abuse of presidential power, Richard Milhous Nixon seems a figure as timely as he is historical.

Those vibes have been felt for a while now on Broadway, where a critically acclaimed British production of "Frost/Nixon" starring Frank Langella is about to open, and off-Broadway, where "Nixon's Nixon" by Russell Lees generated tons of buzz last year.

All of which makes it seem like perfect timing for the San Jose Repertory Theatre's revival of its own hit production (from 1997) of the Lees play, again directed by Michael Butler with David Pichette and Peter Van Norden reprising their roles as Nixon and Henry Kissinger, respectively. It opens Friday.

Set the night before the president announced his resignation in 1974, the satire mines laughs from the booze-soaked repartee as Nixon already hopes desperately for a comeback and Kissinger plots his own future. They touch on everything from Vietnam to Chairman Mao to detente.

But Butler, a former resident artist at the Rep who now is artistic director of Walnut Creek's Center Rep, says the play is as much about personality and psychology as it is about such specific places, people and events. We recently chatted him up about returning to the Rep (where his wife, Timothy Near, is artistic director), the politics of comedy and the Nixon mystique.

QYou hadn't worked at the Rep since you directed "The Haunting of Winchester" there in 2005. Did you miss it?

AOh, yeah, it's a great theater. Just the physical space itself is so fantastic. That is one beautiful theater, and the production company is so good. It's a great place to work. But I'm having a blast in Walnut Creek. It's been wonderful and overwhelming all at the same time.

QHad you ever been an artistic director before?

ANo, never. I had my own little informal company for many years in New York, but we were kind of a guerrilla theater. We didn't have a permanent space. We didn't have offices. We just made work and found places to do it. We didn't even have a name. ... Of course, it was the '80s, so we did a lot of performance art. Remember performance art?

QSounds like the polar opposite of Center Rep.

AAlthough not as much as you might think. The style I like, I still do that. I just bring it to different material. But I still bring a pretty extreme visual style to it, and I think it's a pretty artistic style and that works just fine. It's going very well. They seem to like me, and I like them. It's a good fit.

QDo you think you'll start to do more shows down here as well?

AI don't know. It's pretty hard to pull off. This one is unusual because it's a remount. So it made it less demanding in terms of preparation. We are doing the same production with the same people. It's the same staging, the same set. It's just 10 years later, so we had to do some memory recovery.

QAre there any aspects of the show that you wanted to work on or do differently?

ANot really. I was open to that possibility, but it is one of the few productions in my life that I felt so positive about. ... I didn't feel like I didn't solve some of it.

Although now, we're different, and the world's different.

QHow have the political resonances shifted since you last did it?

AThat's really different. It's hard to know. The play is very funny, and I think it'll still be funny, even though 10 years ago we weren't at war. It was before 9/11. There was a Democrat in office. Clinton was president.

QA whole different universe.

AYeah. But really, the thing that makes the play work is that in its heart of hearts, it's not about these particular historical figures and how they're impersonated onstage. It's about how people deal with the idea of legacy. How do you give up great power and move on? It's very human.

QI take it Nixon had a little trouble relinquishing power.

AAs anyone would. Facing resignation. I mean, we forget, this was the comeback kid. His entire political life was about being counted out, and making a comeback - the most famous of which was that after having two terms as vice president under Eisenhower, he lost the 1960 presidential campaign to Kennedy, really narrowly lost. ... Then he ran for governor of California and lost *that* and delivered his famous "you won't have Richard Nixon to kick around anymore" speech and decided to retire, and then came back in 1968 and won the presidency.

QSo secretly, even after Watergate, he may have thought he could turn things around?

AWell, you know, in 1972, he won by the largest landslide in the history of American

politics.

QLooking back, it's a little hard to grasp the source of his popularity.

AI know. To us, he seems almost like an outsized Shakespearean villain kind of character, almost preposterous in his public persona.

But you know, he was the one who popularized that term "the silent majority," appealing to the ordinary American, and maybe some part of his apparent discomfort with the media, the suits that didn't fit quite right, maybe that made him seem like a regular guy.

`Nixon's Nixon'

By Russell Lees

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

When: Opens Friday. Performances 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Saturdays, and 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays through April 22 (no matinee April 8).

Tickets: \$14-\$56; (408) 367-7255, www.sjrep.org