Movies

12/20/95

'Nixon': A Heart Of Stone

Superb Bio the Tale Of Two Tortured Men

By Hal Hinson
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Oliver Stone has said that he and Richard Nixon, the subject of his powerful new film, "share the same darkness." But they also share the same troubling combination of genius and self-defeating perversity.

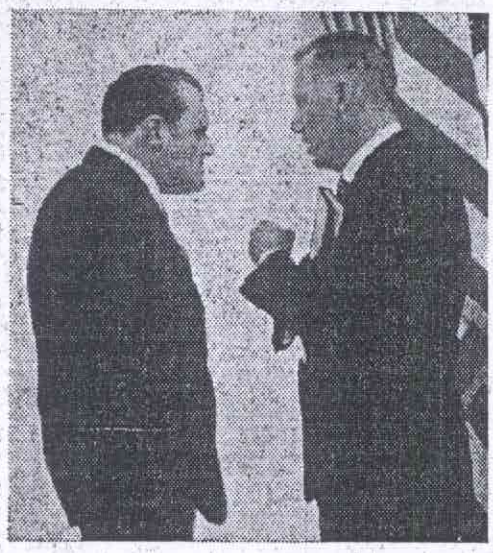
"Nixon" is an audacious biography rich in imagination and originality, with a provocative, often subversive sense of character and history. Dense and challenging, it is also undermined in places by Stone's obsessions just as dramatically as Richard Nixon was undermined by his.

Still, without question, "Nixon" dwarfs everything in the American cinema since "Schindler's List." The movie's landscape is the Cold War at a flash point, when American confidence in the Nixon administration and the war in Vietnam had bottomed out, and the repercussions following the failed Watergate burglary had erupted into a full-blown constitutional crisis. It was an epic time. And not only does "Nixon" convey the gravity of these historic events, it calculates their full weight in human terms as well.

■ *ALSO PLAYING: Poetic and perplexing "Shanghai Triad." Page C4*

"Nixon" doesn't just take you onto the field where history is made, it takes you inside the huddle. But with Stone, you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop—for the "stink bomb." As an artist with an evangelistic social conscience, Stone considers it his responsibility to lob hand grenades into the carefully defended foxholes of conventional wisdom. The problem with Stone's provocations, though, is that they grow out of the same impulse that

See NIXON, C11, Col. 1



Anthony Hopkins as Richard Nixon and James Woods as H.R. Haldeman lead a superlative cast in Oliver Stone's probing biography.

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drove him to slip LSD into his father's evening cocktail, and then brag about it. They're tiresome and simple-minded and in general make you want to kick him in the teeth.

This time, the weak link is Stone's lurid fantasy about Howard Hunt, the Kennedy assassination and the famed 18-minute gap in the tape of a June 17, 1972, conversation between the president and executive assistant H.R. Haldeman—a hallucination guaranteed to make the staunchest Nixon detractor cry foul. But not even the filmmaker's own willfulness can cancel out his achievement.

There is a genuine connection here among Stone, star Anthony Hopkins and their subject. Instead of the juvenile assault many expected, the movie suggests that the director has finally grown up as an artist. Never in his 20-year career has he worked at this level of maturity, empathy or restraint. Though the production weighs in at an unwieldy 190 minutes, every detail is engrossing, from the production design (by Victor Kempster) to the costumes (by Richard Hornung) to the often uncanny work of the actors.

At the top of a long list of superla-

tive supporting players are Joan Allen, who gives the female performance of the year as Pat Nixon; David Hyde Pierce as the mirror image of John Dean; and James Woods as a perfectly steely Haldeman. Best of all is the haunted, virulent performance of Hopkins. From the first glimpse we get of a grotesque, almost bestial Nixon, cowering, deformed, braced for attack, it's clear that the filmmaker and his star are dealing with the inner Nixon and with history as seen through the distorting lens of his subject's raging paranoia.

Stone's portrait begins in November 1973 as the walls of Nixon's character are crumbling. From there, the events of the 37th president's life scatter across the screen like a string of beads. We watch as ambassadorships are exchanged for favors, enemies are threatened with IRS and FBI investigations, secret papers are shredded, and hush money is authorized by the president himself. Stone creates an astounding degree of involvement in the private conduct of these titanic public figures. In every scene the atmosphere is palpably charged, claustrophobic, suffocating. The president and his men speak in a terse, secretive code—the language of lawyers pretending to be jocks and men of war.

You can also sense the longing in Hopkins's Nixon to be a regular guy, to be one of the boys, like his upper-class rival, Jack Kennedy. But there is no lightness in Nixon. He wears his tragedy on his sleeve; shrewdly, Stone has used Nixon's famous "loser" image not to turn the man into a fool but to create a sense of compassion bordering on pity.

Stone seems to come by this sympathy toward Nixon with surprisingly little effort, but it's Hopkins who brings these ideas to life through expert impersonation together with what perhaps should be called alchemy. Even in full Nixon drag, with every gesture and tic down pat, Hopkins never actually resembles the late president. Instead, the actor seems to have made contact with the dark germ of Nixon's self-loathing.

Stone also pays homage to Nixon the warrior, the titan of international diplomacy, architect of detente and the famous opening to China; the Nixon who campaigned on the promise to "Bring Us Together." This is Nixon the master geopolitician, the Nixon who speaks of himself in the third person and is so obsessed with his place in history that he cannot bring himself to destroy the damning tapes.

On the other hand, he is his beloved mother's "faithful dog," the man known at Whittier College as the human tackling dummy, who drove his future wife out on dates with other men.

Who is the real Nixon? the movie asks, echoing (as Stone does repeatedly) that other American epic of power corrupted, "Citizen Kane." Stone's answer is as much of a crock as Orson Welles's was. He is many things, Stone says, but primarily, at his heart, the tortured protagonist is a sort of political Quasimodo, an ugly troll, who sold his soul for high office in hopes that the people would love him.

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Unfortunately, they hated him—or so he thought—and he could never figure out why. Stone offers selected fantasies based on details from Dick Nixon's childhood in Yorba Linda, Calif.—the work ethic, the loss of both brothers to tuberculosis, and, in particular, a pivotal confrontation between the boy (played by Corey Carrier) and his grim-faced Quaker mother (Mary Steenburgen) over a lie—as seeds of the future president's undoing. Though Stone's past films have revolved around dominant father figures, here it is Nixon's mother who instills in her son a sense of higher purpose and pushes the socially maladroit boy into the corrupting public arena.

It's Paul Sorvino's vainly magisterial Henry Kissinger, though, who sums up Stone's take on the man. As he watches Nixon on TV attempting once again to convince the American people that he is not a crook, Kissinger murmurs, "Can you imagine what this man might have been had he ever been loved?"

Ultimately, Stone has Nixon suggest that his own head was the sacrifice required by the gods of war over Vietnam. Stone's final sense of the character is ambiguous, but to the extent that he accepts Nixon's view of himself as a victim of bad mythic timing, he reduces the magnitude of his transgressions. In the end, Stone's attitude is something of a cheat. After all the crimes and expletives undeleted, the director seems to be saying that Nixon was a man like any other—partly good, partly bad. In doing so he does what all sons symbolically do to their fathers: He cuts him down to size.

Nixon, *at area theaters, is rated R for language.*

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