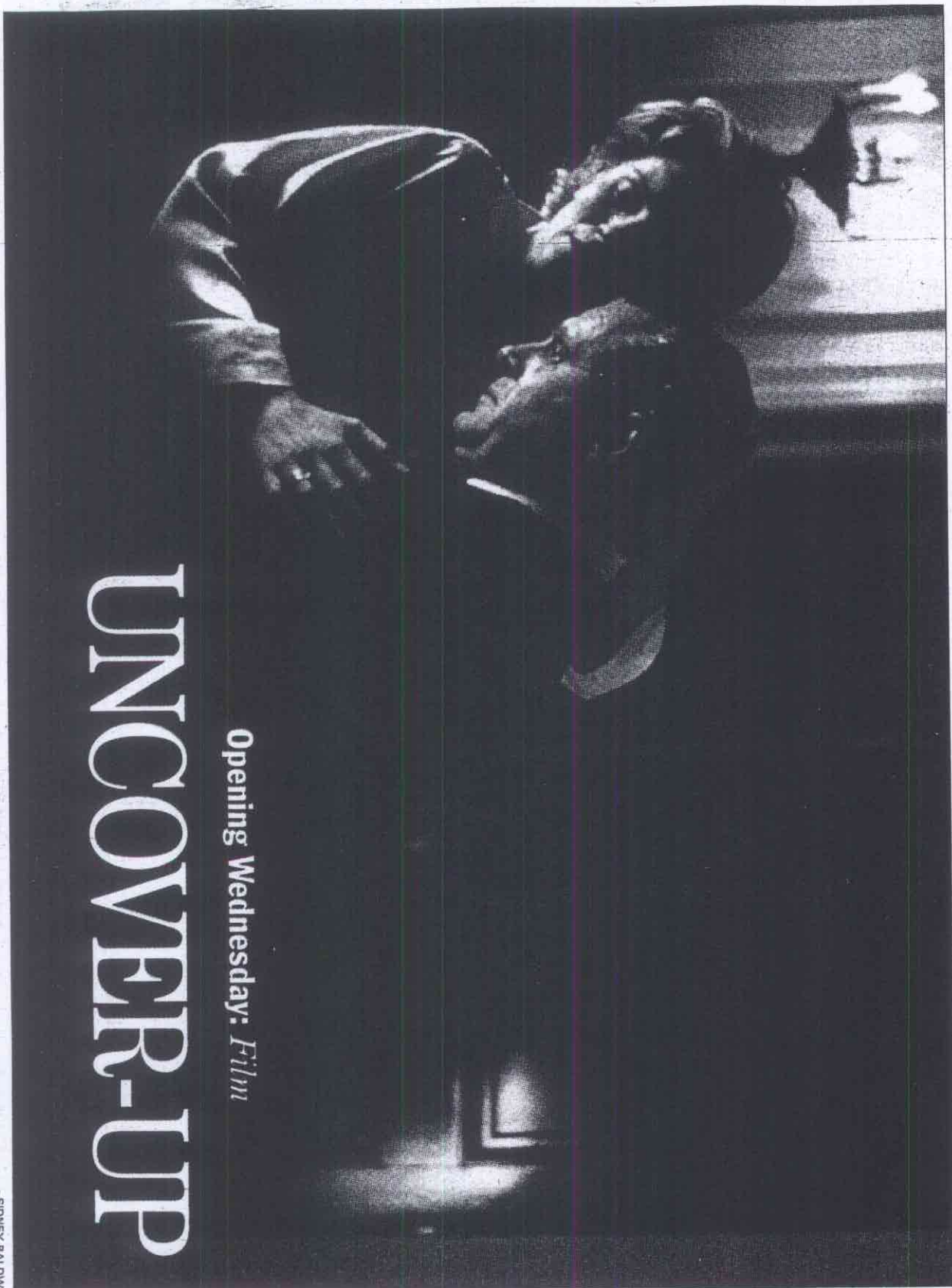


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Opening Wednesday: *Film*

UNCOVER-UP

SIDNEY BALDWIN

Engulfed by Watergate, Richard M. Nixon (Anthony Hopkins) is comforted by wife Pat (Joan Allen) in Oliver Stone's "Nixon."

Director Oliver Stone wants to make one thing perfectly clear: His movie of Richard Nixon is a character study. It's not unimpeachable, but he welcomes the inevitable controversy.

By Dick Polman

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

NEW YORK — The first thing you notice, after the opening credits, is the sly homage to *Citizen Kane*. You've got the portentous music. You've got the gloomy night. You've got the camera creeping toward an iron fence that guards a mansion. And inside, you've got a lonely character haunted by his past, a man of sporadic greatness who has crashed and burned.

But Charles Foster Kane escaped his fate by dropping dead in the first scene. This guy, on the other hand, isn't so lucky. This guy is guzzling booze on ice in a shadowy room, he's barking out 10-letter cuss words, he's stoking the fireplace while running the air conditioner full blast, and he's so mechanically inept that he can't uncap a bottle of aspirin — or thread the audiotapes that record his criminal guilt.

Meet Richard Nixon, courtesy of Oliver Stone.

Maybe it was inevitable that Stone would make a biographical movie called *Nixon*, because, as characters in the public mind, the men make quite a pair. Both are seen as provocative polarizers. Both are known for their fits of paranoia, their suspicion of the media, their love of intrigue, their shared belief that momentous American events are guided by elite cabals meeting in secret.

In dygone days, there always seemed to be a New Nixon. And now, in a sense, we have a New Stone. Compared to the MTV-on-acid freneticism of last year's *Natural Born Killers*, much of this Nixon bio — which opens in theaters Wednesday — moves at the pace of *Masterpiece Theatre*. And he has drawn most of his scenes from the massive public record. This time around, in contrast to his 1991 paranoid screed *JFK*, our foremost cinematic polemicist has chosen bold portraiture.

He hired renowned character actors (Anthony



"Nobody really knew him," says Oliver Stone of the 37th president.

Hopkins as Nixon, James Woods as H.R. Haldeman, David Hyde Pierce as John Dean, Paul Sorvino as Henry Kissinger), and brought in some old Water-gate hands to oversee the actors — including Alexander Butterfield, the Nixon aide who told the

See **NIXON** on G6

Oliver Stone's portrait of Nixon

NIXON from G1
world that his boss had bugged himself.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear," Stone says on a recent weekend, using an old Nixon line. "A painting is the artist's rendering of the reality that he perceives, which he transforms into something more personal. ... Of course there's license and speculation, but they are based on reasonable assumptions."

Nixon isn't accurate in every detail — far from it — but it captures the complex essence of its main character, who died in April 1994. It's anyone's guess whether film-

goers, many of whom weren't alive when Nixon resigned in 1974, will flock to a three-hour "dramatic interpretation." But Stone, 49, was hungry to do "a character study of a powerful leader against a large historical backdrop."

And if the finished work is controversial, all the better. The pugnacious Stone is always ready for a fight. He expects — hopes? — that *Nixon* will rattle the historians, and trigger another firestorm. As Nixon used to say: "I wake up in the morning, thinking of ways to confound my enemies."

"There was this fascinating mix

of idealism and corruption in Nixon," says Stone. "Nobody really knew him, not even [wife] Pat. There was a hole in his soul. The process of making the film deepened my awareness of what he went through. It made me more aware of his suffering. I have greater empathy for him now."

The Whittier, Calif., childhood scenes — shot in black and white, and scattered throughout the film — tell the tale of a Quaker boy caught between a verbally abusive father and an emotionally remote mother. He watched helplessly as two brothers died young, and struggled to survive the Depression in a world far removed from Kennedyesque privilege.

"I started out congenitally despising the man," says Stephen Rivele, one of the screenwriters. "I carried a sign for Jack Kennedy when I was 13. But the more you try to see the world from Nixon's point of view, the more you get a sense of the logic of his behavior, the more you empathize."

That said, the chance of a backlash from diehard defenders of the late president is roughly 110 percent. Several weeks ago, New York Times columnist William Safire, a former Nixon aide, was already referring to Stone's "forthcoming Nixon hatchet job." They are not likely to buy the argument made by Hopkins that "I'm just trying to play the human being that he was."

As evidenced by this film, Nixon was a brilliant, embittered klutz, a real square who would rather curse his tormentors than loosen his tie. When his own wife makes a sexual overture, he huffs: "I don't need that. I'm not Jack Kennedy." When he's visiting a Texas ranch populated by evil right-wing oil barons (naturally), and a bimbo sidles over and asks him what he likes, Nixon replies: "Guy Lombardo."

There is no evidence that such scenes ever happened, but they do suggest the essential truth that Nixon was ... yes ... a brilliant, embittered klutz. Referring to the bimbo, Stone says, "It wasn't in his character to knock off the easy piece." Butterfield tells stories about the guy's quicksilver intelligence, but adds, "he certainly did have his hatreds."

as a brilliant, embittered klutz



Anthony Hopkins wears scant Nixonian makeup in the title role, but has reportedly mastered Nixon's body language.

Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins wears scant Nixonian makeup — in Stone's words, "We wanted to suggest Nixon, rather than a nightclub impressionist's act" — but he has mastered the body language that often made Nixon look like a spastic puppet on strings, and he conveys the same loneliness that haunted Hopkins' repressed servant in *Remains of the Day*.

Rivele recalls: "[Hopkins] added little things as he got farther and farther into the character. He started to become Nixon. Even during lunch breaks, he was Nixon. At one point, I brought over my 11-year-old son to meet him, and Tony was in character the whole time. Like he was saying to my son, in that voice, 'They're all lying! They're all against me!'"

Stone is also on his guard. Upon learning that his visitor is a political reporter, he flashes a mirthless grin and asks, "Are you going to assassinate me?"

Later, when asked if his complex Nixon portrait is designed to mollify critics who attacked *JFK* as a reckless rewriting of history, the director doesn't give an inch:

"That movie was much misunderstood. I'm very proud of *JFK*. I think history *needs* to be rewritten, because the facts on the Kennedy as-

sassination are not agreed upon."

In his new film, Stone doesn't rewrite the record, but he and his actors do punch it up for entertainment value. He stays away from his trademark pyrotechnics most of the time — at least until Nixon is stricken with viral pneumonia, and his life appears to pass before him in Stoned psychedelic fashion.

Or check out the scene depicting one of Nixon's 1968 campaign events. Nixon spent much of that year in a TV studio, answering softball questions from "average citizens" picked by his aides. But, in Philadelphia, he was hassled by a hostile white questioner, and Halde- man, in the booth, groused, "This guy is making a speech!"

That's what really happened. Stone's script turned the questioner into a black man who accuses Nixon of playing racial politics. And James Woods ad-libbed his line: "He's saying all these Negro things!"

Watergate junkies might also wonder why convicted conspirator John Ehrlichman comes off here as a cross between Mother Teresa and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Was he *really* the voice of righteousness within this sordid cabal?

Rivele replies: "Somewhere around the fifth draft, Oliver said, 'We need a moral conscience in the

script. We've got to locate it somewhere.' ... We made a conscious decision to give him that role."

And did Pat *really* ask her husband for a divorce in 1962 (as also reported by Bernstein and Woodward)? Did she *really* chew him out at the White House dinner table?

Stone replies: "We hypothesized, we speculated."

Other "dramatic interpretations" were made. There is evidence that young Nixon suffered from survivor's guilt after the death of brothers Harold and Arthur, but it's not true — as rendered by Stone — that Harold's passing freed up enough family money to send the future world leader to Duke Law School. In reality, he won a full scholarship.

Nor is there any hard evidence that Nixon was the culprit who erased 18 minutes on a key Watergate tape. But Stone fingers Nixon for the deed — even though Butterfield says he doubts that Nixon, in his klutz mode, even knew how to work a tape recorder.

And, in a pivotal plot point, the celluloid Nixon fears he may have helped unleash the forces that resulted in the slaying of JFK. In the film, he knew about the CIA plan to overthrow Fidel Castro, and he feared that the same hit men might have killed Kennedy instead in 1963. But, in reality, there is no hard evidence that Nixon was intimately involved, or that he knew of the early CIA-Mafia plots against Castro. The CIA says Nixon did not know.

That's not good enough for Stone, because he doesn't trust the denials: "Of course they'd say that. There is plausible deniability for the leaders, in a case such as this. Nothing is admitted. This is the way these things work."

Listen, he quickly adds, "I'm not setting out to be a proselytizer, anything like that. But if it's a good movie, on a subject of interest, then hopefully people will read more. I think that's the whole point of education."

He knows he'll take more flak for his unreconstructed cynicism, but he doesn't care. He is happy just to provoke. And when he says, of Nixon, that "his character was his destiny," he could easily not be speaking of Nixon at all.