

Hopkins fills the role of

By **BETSY PICKLE**

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Anthony Hopkins is missing something: half his silver hair.

"They shaved my head," says Hopkins, quickly anticipating questions about his bald pate as he sits down to meet the press. "I'm playing Picasso; I finish filming this week in Paris. It's vanity that makes me explain myself."

Vanity, however, doesn't keep him from changing his look to meet the demands of his roles. Only credibility does, which is why he didn't go overboard to beef up his resemblance to Richard Milhous Nixon while playing the title role in director Oliver Stone's new film, "Nixon."

"We discovered very early on through makeup tests that it wasn't gonna work," says Hopkins, whose movie opened Wednesday. "I said to Oliver Stone, 'I don't look anything like Nixon.' He said, 'No, but if you can get the essence of the guy, we can make you look something like him.'"

At first, Hopkins and the makeup artists tried to duplicate the look of Nixon's jowls and ski-lift nose.

"It was terrible," Hopkins tells reporters at the Parker Meridien hotel. "If you add anything to your nose, you look like Cyrano de Bergerac. There was a sense of desperation because none of it would work. We'd already started filming some of the black-and-white stuff of early Nixon, and [in] one of the shots you can see me with a long nose."

Hopkins ended up with a short

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**Anthony Hopkins
on Richard Nixon**

list of alterations: hairpiece, brown contact lenses, eyebrows and capped teeth.

"I looked in the mirror," recalls Hopkins, whose navy suit with coordinated blue shirt and tie intensifies the blue of his eyes. "I thought, 'Well, I don't look exactly like him, but it's just to give a sketch, like a Picasso sketch.' That's all you've gotta do . . . and then let the audience's imagination work from there."

Hopkins immersed himself in films and audiotapes of Nixon in order to head a cast that includes Joan Allen as Pat Nixon, James Woods as H.R. Haldeman, J.T. Walsh as John Ehrlichman, David Hyde Pierce as John Dean, Paul Sorvino as Henry Kissinger, Pow-

ers Boothe as Alexander Haig and Bob Hoskins as J. Edgar Hoover.

"I spent about two hours a night [watching], and then I'd play tapes as I'd go to sleep — things like the 'Checkers' speech or the final speech," says Hopkins, whose normal soft-spoken tones sound British, with a slightly sing-songy Welsh lilt. "I'd listen for the break in his voice, the defensiveness in his voice."

Though born and reared in Wales, Hopkins, who'll turn 58 on New Year's Eve, was keenly aware of Nixon's place in history long before he took on the role.

"I had my own opinions about the man before because I was very close to Watergate back in 1974," says Hopkins. "I was about to come to America in 1974 to work in New York on Broadway, and Watergate had just blown its top and Nixon resigned."

"I remember watching it on television in England and listening to various commentaries by Alistair Cooke and then interviews with Americans in the streets of Washington and New York — people saying, 'The guy should go to jail,' and other people saying, 'Well, you know he did wrong, but . . .,' and then Gerry Ford's pardon. So when I came to New York, it was like, for me, a personal connection."

Hopkins' impression of Nixon was "that he was a real lone wolf, a real loner, in deep psychic pain. A really lonely man. A remarkable man. A deeply flawed human being — as everyone around this table is — with a lot of faults, a lot of weaknesses, a lot of strengths. Ev-

Nixon from the inside out



Anthony Hopkins as Richard Nixon dances with Joan Allen as wife Pat, in a scene from "Nixon."

everything that the human being is — loving, compassionate, hateful — all those things that we all are.

"I've never met any of his family; I'd like to. I hear that his daughters worshiped him. Pat Nixon, I think, loved him in her own way. I think she was exhausted by him because he was relentlessly ambitious.

"I really admire him. I know what he did; he did some unspeakable things. The bombing of Cambodia was horrible. But he would call it political expediency."

Nixon, whose funeral last year was attended by the four surviving former chief executives as well as President Clinton, was straight out of the Machiavellian model, Hopkins believes.

"Stalin's bedtime reading book was Machiavelli's 'The Prince,'" notes Hopkins. "Stalin told Churchill, 'If you're ruling a country like the Soviet Union, you can't waste time on Christian ethics; you have to be brutal.' And I think Nixon must have taken a lot from Stalin; in order to achieve things, you have to be tough. And he was a tough man; he was a tough guy."

He was also a man of vision, Hopkins says.

"There he was an anti-Communist in the '30s and '40s, feeding on the American paranoia, and then he was the first president to

open up China and Russia," says Hopkins. "Two men he really admired were Brezhnev and Mao Tse-tung. It's an amazing journey."

Hopkins was as surprised as anyone that Stone wanted him to play Nixon.

"I thought, 'Why didn't he cast somebody else? I know there are lots of wonderful actors here in America.' I'm glad he didn't. I'm glad he used me."

Not that the role was easy. In addition to trying to evoke Nixon's speech patterns and mannerisms, Hopkins had only about three days off during 12 weeks of shooting.

"It was tiring," he admits. "But I tell you what — at the end of it, I was so sorry when I had to give it up. I had a great time. I was kind of sad at the end. Like childbirth, I'd