

Movie Satire That Kicks Nixon Around

By Stanley Eichelbaum

Emile de Antonio's distinctly biased documentary, "Millhouse: A White Comedy" (shown last night in the Film Festival and opening today at the Presidio), goes after Richard M. Nixon with excoriating irreverence and derisive laughter.

It's the first example we've had of a disrespectful film satire of an incumbent President. The play, "MacBird," which took on LBJ, never reached the screen.

De Antonio's film debunks Nixon on the basis of his fierce survival instinct in a political arena from which he has more than once been ejected.

Young people — to whom the film is largely directed — may well learn something new and surprising.

The rest will merely be reminded of familiar facts about a checkered career that began here in California some 25 years ago.

Old - style liberals in particular will find nothing too illuminating, since Nixon has always been considered an easy target.

There are flashbacks of his Congressional campaigns against Jerry Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas, both subjected to pinko smears. Voorhis is interviewed about Nixon's "below - the - belt" tactics in 1945, but the remarks are polite and guarded.

This early stage of Nixon's career — which Democrats still remember with outrage — might have been more cogently exposed.

Nixon is nevertheless discredited as a man who climbed to power on insincerity, character - assassination, red baiting (the Chambers - Hiss affair) and political opportunism (his father - son relationship with Eisenhower).

We're shown the famous 1952 Checkers speech, soapily reinforced with arguments like, "Pat doesn't have a mink coat, but she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat."

The so - called "last press conference" is also included, when Nixon was defeated by Governor Edmund Brown in 1962 and lit into reporters with, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore."

But de Antonio ("Rush to Judgment" and "Point of Order") has been fairly narrow in his choice of material, nearly all of which is a matter of widely known public record.

Nixon's resurgence as Presidential candidate in 1968 is also treated parochially, except perhaps for some rare, behind - the - scenes footage showing him taping a TV address. This is pungently annotated by Joe McGinnie, author of "The Selling of the President."

The film is absorbing, if only moderately effective. It's been assembled by de Antonio with less than his usual skill. The editing is choppy and the continuity often seems helter - skelter.

And there are cheap laughs, like the intrusion of an excerpt from the 1940s football movie, "Knute Rockne" (with Pat O'Brien and Ronald Reagan), which de Antonio correlates with Nixon's oft - quoted remark about the world of politics being like the competitive world of sports.

The analogy may be right, but it's a devious and far - too - transparent ploy for comedy.