

Terrence O'Flaherty

TV Today

SFChronicle MAY 6 1977

Send in the Pygmies

THE NIXON-FROST interview on Watergate was the ultimate media event — a cunningly promoted, heavily edited spectacle of two unctuous, self-centered men who are as cold as the floor of an ice rink, playing a sado-masochistic game for money.

As I watched this wretched little lawyer selling himself for \$650,000 to the British preacher, I was suddenly reminded of Somerset

Maugham's "Rain." It was apparent that I was watching the most ironic encounter since the Rev. Mr. Davidson saved Sadie Thompson's soul by seducing her.



David Frost

Yesterday on the front page of this paper the headline "PYGMIES WAGE A PSYCHOLOGICAL WAR" appeared directly under the Laverne-and-Shirley photograph of David Frost and Richard Nixon. It was an unfortunate juxtaposition but in the final analysis it may have been a moment of truth in print.

The TV production was impressively spare with Frost on the left of the screen because it's his "good side." He was the surprise of the evening — a well-informed, tenacious and occasionally maudlin interviewer. I doubt that anyone else could have done as well — perhaps because he has so many of the qualities of Nixon himself, a kind of blubbery self-righteousness which curls the toes and turns the stomach. They made quite an impressive show business team on the debut of their political mini-series.

★ ★ ★

FROST SEEMED TO believe that this program was a trial of Richard Nixon — the one avoided in the Senate by resigning and the court trial he side-stepped by accepting Gerald Ford's pardon. On this four-part series he continues the travesty by accepting money for a "trial" by a television entertainer.

As the 90-minute inquisition pushed its way through a dense phalanx of commercials for everything from Gallo to Alpo, I began to have the uneasy feeling that Nixon may be the definitive quick-change artist — switching from the sadistic politico with the foul mouth to the groveling masochist of San Clemente, relishing every minute and lacking the sense of humor to realize his absurdity.

For Californians there should be no surprise at this latest episode in the Nixon video series, "I Am Not a Crook." It all began here so many years ago when he first realized that innuendo and half-truths uttered on radio could put even a second-rater into public office.

★ ★ ★

SUBSEQUENT EPISODES in this memorable series included his ruthlessly contrived and scripted media tear-jerker called "The Checkers Speech" and the equally ignoble episode following his defeat at the polls when he uttered a sanctimonious cry of anguish that not even a soap opera scriptwriter would have the gall to employ: "You won't have Richard Nixon to kick around any more."

Unfortunately, he was wrong there. We *did* have Richard Nixon to kick around — for 15 more years to be exact — and most of us wish he'd just go away now and keep quiet.

We are being shown the programs out of sequence. The Watergate episode was to have been the final one but somewhere along the line Frost's showmanship surfaced, making him realize it was the one to attract the press. And he was right, God knows. Every publication except Women's Wear Daily front-paged the story of the heartless little man who crawled back on all fours to make excuses instead of apologies and to tell us he followed his heart instead of his head when it has been apparent from the start that he was out to save himself — not his friends, his administration, or his country.