

# Stage: 'Evening With Nixon' Is for Radical Liberals

## The Cast

**AN EVENING WITH RICHARD NIXON**  
AND... a political satire, by Gore Vidal. Directed by Edwin Sherin; setting by William Ritman; costumes by Joseph G. Aulisi; lighting by H. R. Poindexter; makeup by Bob O'Bradovich; masks by Jane Stein; visuals by Marjorie Morris; music arranged and conducted by Charles Gross; sounds by Jack Shearing; projection consultant, William Batchelder; production supervisor, Michael Thomas; stage manager, John Actman. Presented by Hillard Elkins; associate producer, George Platt. At the Shubert Theater, 225 West 44th Street.

Pro ..... Gene Rupert  
Con ..... Humbert Allen Astredo  
George Washington ..... Stephen D. Newman  
Dwight D. Eisenhower ..... Philip Sterling  
John F. Kennedy ..... Robert King  
Richard M. Nixon ..... George S. Irving  
WITH: Maureen Anderman, Robert Blackburn, Chet Charlin, Robert Christian, George Hall, Dorothy Dorian James, William Knight, Susan Sarandon and Alex Wilt.

By CLIVE BARNES

Gore Vidal, if I may subtly misquote him for an instant, has described his play "An Evening With Richard Nixon And . . ." as "a highly biased political charade." It opened Sunday night at the Shubert Theater, and it even makes you feel sorry for Checkers, let alone Spiro T. Agnew, or have I got those names in the wrong order?

Mr. Vidal is a very witty man. He is almost the only man I know who talks like dialogue, or at least an interior monologue, and his blast at the President sparkles with firecrackers but generates more light than heat.

Mr. Vidal is often to devastatingly destructive to the President and his political friends or accomplices that you almost wish that they had someone from their own side to write an equally witty counterscript. But then I imagine no one could ever have been found.

Mr. Vidal has done a fairly clever thing. In the guise of political biography he is say-

ing, in effect, "Richard Nixon, this is your life." There are two commentators. One is called Con, who is imitating Gore Vidal, and has been given all the best lines. The other is called Pro, who is imitating William F. Buckley Jr., and has not been given all the best lines. He gnashes his teeth nicely, however.

The playwright has discovered a neat formula for his television-style pastiche; unfortunately it is a formula that would have been more effective on television for merely, say, an hour.

Its adroitness consists in having his two commentators ask questions of Mr. Nixon, of having a judge in George Washington and two assistants in Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, and having Mr. Nixon actually on the floor. Other characters from the political scene are also brought in as witnesses or bystanders.

Everything that Mr. Nixon says is, according to Mr. Vidal, in "his own words," and in the printed edition of the play, published by Random House, the sources for all of Mr. Nixon's speeches are actually named. Although the sources for other speakers are not identified, their speeches are typographically differentiated in the printed play as either authentic or Mr. Vidal's invention.

In all fairness, some of this material is a matter of public record, including Presidential speeches, for example. Other parts of it are taken from interviews, presumably some of them hostile, and the President may have been misquoted. But the main part of the record is substantially true, and it does not, let me

say, cast the President in an especially favorable light.

Mind you, Mr. Vidal is not merely being nasty about President Nixon and Vice President Agnew, President Eisenhower as a golf-swinging nincompoop and President Kennedy as a political opportunist and savage proponent of imperialism are both given the full force of Mr. Vidal's cynical scorn. President Kennedy comes off particularly badly, but then Mr. Vidal has not recently been known as a friend of that family.

I laughed a great deal at this political bloodletting, and yet at the end I felt a little cheated. Mr. Nixon, quoted out of context, quipped at in the semblance of a debate (but one in which the victim had no chance of reply) and made into a caricature of that caricature he normally seems to play in his public life, is like a cow at a bullfight.

There is no real drama, no real excitement. There is only a crowd of radical liberals, including, of course, myself, watching another crowd of radical liberals giving what Mr. Nixon once called the shaft to a President who is not a radical liberal. It is fun while it lasts but no more exciting than seeing candy taken from little kids.

Perhaps it is the subject matter that has me spread-eagled across the fence, so let me make one thing perfectly clear. I got satisfaction from having my political convictions and prejudices so satisfyingly massaged, and I enjoyed seeing the President hoisted on his own verbal petard, and held up to scorn as the figure he is.

I don't think, on the other hand, that admirers of President Nixon, and they are legion, would have such a good time. If I were either Mr. or Mrs. Legion I would definitely stay away.

Yet even these kind souls would need hard hearts not to admire the swift and deadly TV style mannerisms of Edwin Sherin's exultantly parodistic staging and equally clever setting by William Ritman. And most of the performances are joyous.

Most of all, there is George S. Irving as President Nixon himself, flashing out his hands like a berserk traffic cop, with hair like a skullcap, a nose that is running away from him and that Presidential friend-of-the-people voice that contains a miraculous vocal amalgam California, the Middle West and just a suspicion of the Eastern Establishment. Mr. Irving should run for President. Who knows? Perhaps he will one day have to. Unlikelier things have happened.

I very much liked Gene Rupert as the man like Mr. Buckley and Humbert Allen Astredo as the man like Mr. Vidal, Stephen D. Newman was George Washington to the life, and Philip Sterling (looking more like Don Rickles than anyone else) and Robert King made gallant stabs at Eisenhower and Kennedy, respectively.

As for Mr. Vidal, no, his stabs were not gallant. They were mean and nasty. But some people might like to see a mean and nasty play about our President. At least no one wants to ban it, which is one of the more hopeful things about America.