

*In New York*

# Vidal Gores the President

By Allan Wallach  
Newsday Service

New York

And now we have Nixon to kick around on Broadway, too. Gore Vidal's "An Evening With Richard Nixon and . . ." arrived at the Shubert Theater this week, and it may be that Broadway has never spent a more curious evening.

"An Evening With Richard Nixon and . . ." is more a political than a theatrical event, a savage lampoon that reviews the public career of a man depicted as bumbling, devious and hypocritical. One's reactions depend almost entirely on his own feelings about the President, and when I say that I laughed, it is more a commentary on my political convictions than my theatrical judgments.

It's probably impossible to judge what Vidal calls a "highly biased political charade" solely as a stage work. As a theater piece, it moves swiftly under the fluid direction of Edwin Sherin.

But the device of having an actor portray Nixon and speak his own words, while other actors representing George Washington, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy comment, does begin to pall once you realize that this is to be the major device throughout.

## DECLINE

Vidal, of course, never intended this to be regarded solely as a stage work. He

told an interviewer it was his "small and cheerful contribution, I hope, to the decline of the American empire."

I'm not qualified to judge how much of a contribution he's likely to make, but "An Evening With Richard Nixon and . . ." is the kind of show which — like a preacher inveighing against the Devil — converts only those already converted. There's no one else out there in those pews.

The framework is a debate between a Pro (an actor representing Vidal's views) and a Con (an actor resembling a nasal, supercilious William F. Buckley Jr). On a bunting-draped platform, Washington sits as moderator while Ike and JFK comment as witnesses.

Although many political figures are assailed, it is Richard M. Nixon who is at the center of the satirical crosshairs, and rarely has a public figure been lampooned so mercilessly. As Nixon, George S. Irving does a marvelous job — part imitation in the vein of David Frye's mimicry, but acting as well in the sense of capturing the essence along with the mannerisms.

## WORDS

Vidal's device is to use Nixon's own words and those of the other public figures, many of them represented by masked actors. The words in this context paint Nixon as a sanctimo-

nious ("We were poor but didn't know it"), fumbling (Eisenhower was "complex and devious in the best sense of those words"), self-serving ("I was there when the bombs were falling"), hypocritical ("I never said Helen Douglas was a Communist") and a number of other unflattering things.

Beneath the clownish figure with his square, studied gestures, Nixon is portrayed as a hollow man, unable to relate to anyone or anything but his naked ambition. Kennedy, Eisenhower and many

others fare little better and all are blamed for our troubles (hence the "and" in the title).

"Since none of you gentlemen believes in justice," Washington says finally, "we cannot have a just society."

Vidal's point is that the comedy created by three — in his eyes — unqualified men constitutes America's tragedy. His view should be judged by political commentators rather than theater critics.

My own laughter during

the evening was uneasy, both because Vidal was setting up his targets so easily and because — since we are all portrayed as victims — I wondered just what it was I was laughing at.