

A Public Richard Nixon Attends the Theater and Enjoys It

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The President went to the theater last night and saw a bouncy, bubbly musical that even his Secret Service agents could love.

"I really enjoyed the play," one of them said after being crushed by crowds trying to watch the departure of his chief, "but I was happier when he stayed up at Camp David."

Although the perspiring agent was merely expressing the frustrations of a tired man who has done a difficult job well, he was also acknowledging, in his own way, the several public-private ebbs and flows that have always seemed to characterize the life of Richard Nixon.

For a decade or so, they have fascinated the media, enthralled much of its audience, puzzled more than a few of his political associates and, consequently, generated a shadowy notion that the variety of his visibility levels is unmatched in this country's history by any national figure other than Lamont Cranston.

The Pendulum Swings

The swing of the pendulum has been broad and frequent. He has been, at times, sequestered as a Trappist monk, or as gregarious as a mayoral candidate in Boston, and the rhythms of his relationships are about as constant as the tempos of the "Peer Gynt Suite."

"I think it's just marvelous to see what he's going to do next," Mrs. Nelson E. Blechman gasped at the National Theater last night as she watched him, his wife, and his daughter Tricia graciously sign hundreds of autographs during the intermission of "Irene," a nostalgic, Broadway-bound, 50-year-old revival starring Debbie Reynolds.

Seated in a \$12-orchestra seat, the President, who has never before attended a performance at the aging house on E Street, seemed completely relaxed and enormously happy as he chatted with those who made their way to his spot on the aisle.

Yet, only a few weeks ago, he was spending almost all of his time out of the public eye, either in the White House or at Camp David, the Maryland mountain retreat

the Secret Service agent much preferred.

So deep was his commitment to that solitude that on one occasion, according to reliable reports, he abruptly took a helicopter back to Washington when Mrs. Nixon and a friend showed up at Camp David unannounced.

It was during that low-visibility period, the days between his re-election and his second inauguration, that he selected his second-term Cabinet, made the decision to resume bombing North Vietnam, watched Henry A. Kissinger's negotiations proceed toward a denouement, worked on the national budget and prepared his State of the Union remarks.

It was also during this period that large segments of the press began to question the merits of isolation, demanding occasionally that he come forward to face his constituency.

When he finally decided to do so, he did it with the unpredictable flair that has become a mark of his public life.

Suddenly, he was everywhere—dancing at the Inaugural Balls with women he had never met, riding in open cars in motorcades, dining out at a Washington restaurant, giving little groups of reporters impromptu news conferences, wading hand-over-hand into street-corner and airport crowds—and finally, last night, acceding to his daughter's wishes that he take her and Mrs. Nixon to the theater.

Overemphasis Alleged

Members of the White House staff believe the press tends to make too much of what one of them called "the rises and falls in the public nature of the President," although the same people candidly concede that, even within the Administration, there has been some "tugging and hauling" over the very question.

One aide said the President sometimes responded to pressures from the press on the private-public question, and another, concurring with that view, quoted one of Mr. Nixon's maxims:

"The only way to stay on the road is to freeze your hands on the steering wheel. You give a little to the left, a little to the right—and you keep on going."

The stories in the press about the President's fluctuating visibility "were anticipated here in the White House," one aide recalled. "The reaction now is either bitter or amused."

Beyond the response of the press to the President and vice versa is the question of what he is really like in terms of leisure and sociability. One White House associate believes it can be answered in average, American-family terms.

'When the Kids Are Home'

"If anybody cares to check it, I think they'll find that the President goes out more when the family is together," Connie Stuart, Mrs. Nixon's press secretary said today. "It's just like in any family: When the kids are home, there's more activity."

In support of this theory, she pointed out that it was Mrs. Edward F. Cox, the elder daughter, who persuaded her father that "Irene" was worth seeing last night and that it was Mrs. David Eisenhower who asked him to take the family out to dinner at Trader Vic's last week.

"When it's just the two of them at home," she added, "they're a lot like most other couples—they just stay at home."

Moreover, another White House insider said, the president is a man who believes in the momentum of work. "He doesn't like to lose it," he said, "so he stays with it and refuses to allow anything to interrupt it."

These days, however, as one aide put it, "it's business as usual at the White House," and Mr. Nixon seemed more than willing to take an evening off for the nearly three hours of songs and dancing that the musical offered.

A Presidential Review

When it was over, the President stopped beneath the marquee outside to give the press his review of "Irene," and in the delay the rest of the audience poured outside and thronged around the little circle.

"'Irene' was a great show," the President said. "I think this will be a big hit in New York, perhaps not with New Yorkers, but with the out-of-towners."

"It's a good family show," he said. "People are tired of that way-out stuff. I don't want to get into the business of criticizing some of the new art but it's very difficult

to find a play you really want to take your family to—an this is that kind. It's a lot of fun."

Then the public President became the private President once again, ducking into the gleaming limousine and gliding smoothly back toward the White House—recalling perhaps the words of Debbie Reynolds in the title role of the play.

"Always let the public know how to reach you," she had said in the first act. "Otherwise, they'll forget you."



Associated Press

The Nixons with their laughter Tricia signing autographs during the intermission of "Irene" on Thursday night at the National Theater in Washington. After the show, Mr. Nixon paused outside to give his review.