

State of play

Alan Cox, who stars as David Frost in the US tour of Frost/Nixon, talks to **Jo Caird** about how American audiences have reacted to the play and the fine line between power and entertainment in the run-up to the election

There's been nothing frosty about the US reaction to the Donmar Warehouse production of Peter Morgan's *Frost/Nixon*. The play takes as its subject the infamous 1977 Watergate interviews in which David Frost grills Richard Nixon on his presidency and elicits the nearest thing to an apology that Nixon ever gave.

Frank Langella won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Nixon on Broadway last year and the play received a further two Tony nominations, for Best Play (Peter Morgan) and Best Director (Michael Grandage).

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Eighteen months on and the show is touring the United States, hopping its way across the American heartland. Stacy Keach, a heavyweight of American theatre and television, is in the Nixon role – in the chair opposite him, playing Frost, is Alan Cox, seen most recently on the British stage in *Natural Selection* at Theatre 503.

Cox is the only British actor in the cast of 13 (the other British character, John Birt, Frost's manager, is played by an American actor, Antony Hagonian) and one might be tempted to read this fact as evidence of a deliberate agenda by the *Frost/Nixon* creative team.

Cox, however, stresses that his Britishness, although it “lends a certain authenticity”, was not the motivation behind the casting.

“You could find a perfectly good American actor who could do an English accent. I just happen to be British-born and have a green card and I'm 38 [Frost's age at the time of the Nixon interviews]. Grandage had seen me in stuff and obviously

I thought I was up to playing the role.”

The production has been receiving stellar reviews at every stop on its tour, with Cox getting his fair share of praise. In real life the actor is gregarious, the centre of attention in any group. Running his hands through his hair and laughing uproariously, as he often does, Cox is almost a caricature of himself. While in character, however, he is beautifully focused and utterly convincing – one American reviewer has called him “spot on”.

He finds the reactions of American audiences to the show endlessly interesting, emphasising the subtle differences from place to place. Halfway through this point, Cox interrupts himself to highlight the imprudence of generalising.

“You hear about the American people like it's one entity, when there are as many different American people as there are individuals.”

He has been much surprised by the responses of some – a man in Owensboro, Kentucky approached Cox after the show and told him that his favourite scene was the one in which Nixon phones Frost on the night before the final interview and talks to him in a vaguely threatening manner about the future. The man loved it, he said, because it showed Nixon “at his most statesman-like”.

“That was something I hadn't anticipated at all – at his most statesman-like – drunk and rambling!” says Cox, his tone split between amusement and concern for the state of US politics.

Cox brushes off the suggestion that conservative American heartland audiences might be hostile to a play in which a British interviewer gets the better of a US president.

He sees *Frost/Nixon* as a complex commentary on the demise of a political career.

“The play documents two men on different paths in relationship to their own individual ambitions. Frost is a catalyst to a man's disintegration, to the disintegration of his authoritarian role. I wouldn't want to patronise the audience by saying that the Broadway audience are more sophisticated than any of the audiences we're going to meet on the road. Individuals making up an audience respond in different ways.”

Cox describes his own politics as “pretty libertarian”, but tries to keep as open a mind as possible.

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the suspicion that we're liberal pinkos and, being a Brit, there's a double suspicion that we somehow think we're better than America, which, of course, we're not.”

Cox clearly has a fondness for the United States, having lived and worked there on a number of occasions, most recently in the Broadway revival of Brian Friel's *Translations* in 2007.

He is particularly pleased to be playing Frost, he says, because “there aren't many opportunities for a 38-year-old [British] actor to play a major role in a touring production around America. They don't come up very often”.

Cox sees the timing of the production as noteworthy. “The borderline between politics and entertainment is more blurred than it's ever been during this presidential race and doing a play that explores the pivotal moment in the drawing, or the erasing, of that line is exciting.”

Frost/Nixon will be touring to Washington DC just after the election – with a chuckle, Cox confesses that he is looking forward to “interrogating the president in front of the great and the good”.

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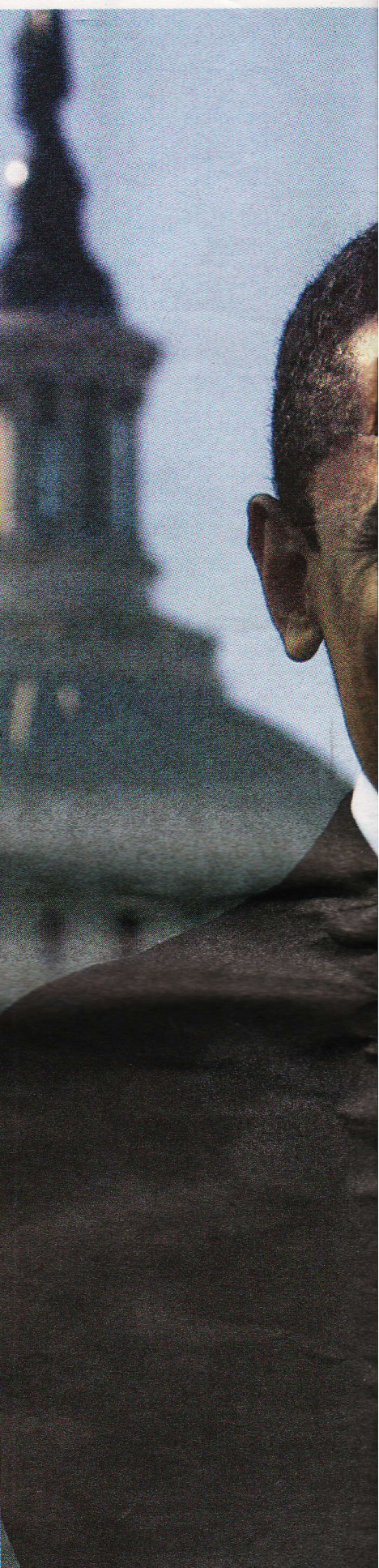
This is a topic that the actor feels strongly about – he believes that theatre and other forms of entertainment “can serve to check and balance the excess and abuse of power, to question and encourage an environment of questioning, so that nothing is taken for granted, so that people stay mentally rigorous”.

Whether or not the “faulty mirrors” that the entertainment industry holds up to nature actually succeed in affecting the balance of power, Cox cannot say. He, and we, will have a better idea after November 4.

Frost/Nixon will be touring the US until April 26, 2009.

www.frostnixonontour.com

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