

‘Elvis & Nixon’ is a True Story That’s Fit for a King

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “When two great saints meet, it’s a humbling experience,” said Paul McCartney of John and Yoko. Well that also applies to “Elvis & Nixon.” Their meeting, albeit brief, has layers of meaning for our times – and their time – and the movie with the “E&N” title exposes that meaning with humor and grace.

Elvis Presley, nicknamed the “King of Rock ‘n Roll,” had prodigious fame and an appetite to match. Richard Milhous Nixon, President of the United States by default because all of his opponents were either killed or marginalized by the Vietnam War, was a tic-filled paranoid with little regard for his constituency beyond power. They met because Elvis wanted an honorary title, and Nixon – through his aides – wanted legitimacy in the “youth vote.” In the realm of the film, they gave each other something, but not exactly what they expected. All the ambiguities and underlying symbols are brilliantly played out in the essential “Elvis and Nixon.”

Elvis Aron Presley (Michael Shannon) is upset. He sees a United States in 1970 that is devastated by war, protest, the hippie movement and the ever-present communist threat. He broke into the national consciousness fifteen years earlier, with a singing voice and demeanor that captivated millions. As an army veteran, he sides with law enforcement, collecting a number of honorary badges. But he doesn’t have one...a federal government badge.



History is Made with Kevin Spacey and Michael Shannon in ‘Elvis & Nixon’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

He gathers part of his “Memphis Mafia” – his posse from Graceland – including Jerry (Alex Pettyfer) and Sonny (Johnny Knoxville), and they accompany him when he solicits President Richard Nixon (Kevin Spacey) to procure his honorary badge. Nixon’s aide Egil Krogh (Colin Hanks) convinces POTUS to take the meeting – he needs more credibility for the youth vote – and the two great saints meet in the Oval Office, and take a memorable photo together.

That photo is the most requested from the National Archives, for thousands of reasons, but through the point-of-view of the film, it exists because both men needed something from the other, and it had nothing to do with who they actually were at the time. But as the meeting is depicted, the inner being of each – as in who they actually were – couldn’t help but emerge. Two great actors interpret that iconic perspective for their characters, and uplift a silly and momentary event into a cultural thesis exploration.

When Michael Shannon first appears, my reaction was, “there is Michael Shannon dressed as Elvis.” By halfway into the film, that notion disappears. Shannon is E because he understands the humanity of representing something Presley never asked for – isolating fame. His Elvis is vulnerable, humble, ambitious and morally wasted, all at the same time. The convergence of his fame with Nixon’s fame shares many of those traits, and together with Kevin Spacey the performers seek to exploit that convergence in the precisely structured story – written by Joey Sagal, Hanala Sagal and (actor) Cary Elwes, and directed by Liza Johnson (her third feature).

Kevin Spacey is simply incredible as Nixon, a perfect acting pas de deus with Michael Shannon’s Elvis. Spacey started his career as an impersonator, and his Nixon voice is nuanced around those years of vocal flexibility. Unlike Shannon, there was never a thought of “that’s Kevin Spacey dressing up as Nixon.” It was the 37th President in all of his insecure glory, the most uncomfortable man in any room. Spacey nails it.



Jerry (Alex Pettyfer) and the King in 'Elvis & Nixon'

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

The supporting cast is having a ball as well. Colin Hanks is moving from the shadow of his famous father and creating characters with the same élan as Papa Tom. Alex Pettyfer as Jerry represents the common element of everyday reality, and balances the broadness of "E & N," raising the consciousness of the celebrity posse. Johnny Knoxville is an instinctive player, and relishes portraying Sonny, the de facto leader of the Memphis Mafia.

But the core comes down to Shannon and Spacey, and bless those guys for bringing it home. In the realm of celebrity, that meeting doesn't get any bigger, and the fates of both men are dictated by the handshake, the photo and their eventual road to ruin.

"Elvis and Nixon" had a nationwide release on April 22nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Michael Shannon, Kevin Spacey, Alex Pettyfer, Colin Hanks and Tate Donovan. Written by Joey Sagal, Hanala Sagal and Cary Elwes. Directed by Liza Johnson. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [21]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [20]

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