

# *the* **LIMELIGHT** *and*



Peter Morgan

BY **AMY DAWES**

Admirers of screenwriter Peter Morgan (*The Queen*) might approach *Frost/Nixon* expecting a chatty, cerebral set of conversations — a kind of PBS-style Charlie Rose interview show put to cinema — but this powerhouse drama packs far more action than that. Based on the 1977 interviews with the disgraced president conducted by British talk-show host David Frost, it's structured like a boxing

# *the* WILDERNESS

## Frost/Nixon writer Peter Morgan talks about the psychology of ambition and his journey as a writer

story, with most of the emphasis on the high stakes and the machinations leading up to the main event. Frost, as the outmatched underdog, seems to be very much getting the worst of it until some late-breaking developments unfold. Drenched in the period (the soundtrack includes David Bowie and The Who), it's also propelled by knockout performances from Frank Langella as Nixon

and Michael Sheen as Frost, both of whom originated the roles on the stage.

But it's ultimately the dazzling screenplay that is the star. A specialist in dramas that explore defining moments in recent history, Morgan recently finished a draft of a new screenplay, *The Special Relationship*, about Tony Blair's interactions with Bill Clinton. He spoke to *Creative Screenwriting* by phone from London. >>

**Spoiler alert:**

Key developments in the screenplay are revealed in this article.

**Q** After the play moved from London's West End to Broadway, you had filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, Sam Mendes and George Clooney wanting to direct the movie. How did you choose Ron Howard?

**A** Ron had asked me to work with him on something else, so we'd had a number of conversations and even a meeting and a lunch, and we were already very familiar with each other. It was clear to me he was a man of his word and that we were going to get on. I wanted it to be a film, not the play on celluloid, and I consider him a really accomplished moviemaker. And I'm very sensitive to the fact that all the action takes place in America, and this is a sensitive subject to Americans, so I wanted

someone who understood America and its sensibility very well. To me, he's a quintessentially American man. So seeing how well it came out is such a vindication for me. And the experience of working with him was a complete joy — I was involved closely all the way through.

**Q** It is true that when you wrote the play, you deliberately made it difficult to adapt?

**A** I booby-trapped the wiring. Because I'm a screenwriter, and this is the first play I'd written since university, I consciously wrote it an unfilmable way. I thought, "I'm choosing to write this for the stage, so it should be written for the stage and not the screen." I used a dual-narration system in which the narration is ping-ponged between two onstage characters, James Reston and Jack Brennan (Ed: Frost's adviser and Nixon's aide de camp, respectively). So when it came around that there would be a movie, I thought, "We don't have a single protagonist. This is unadaptable." It was Ron who came up with the

idea for the interview technique, for which I'm eternally grateful. It's an inspired fix. He said, "Let's incorporate everyone as a narrator a little bit, as if they're being interviewed for a TV documentary."

**Q** The famous interviews on which it's based take up very little of the screen time — it's mostly about the context and the machinations leading up to them. You structured it like a prize fight. How did you hit on that approach?

**A** I had the idea to do it this way, before I wrote either *The Queen* or *The Last King of Scotland*, from the minute I saw Frost talking about it in one of those dreadful biographical TV pieces. Watching him talk about the interviews, I thought, "That would be like a verbal *Rocky*." You've got the outsider who takes a shot at the champ. It's a David and Goliath story. But when I first met with Frost, he painted a picture of it going terribly smoothly, so I thought, "I haven't got anything (to work with) after all." It wasn't until I met the real James Re-



Frost/Nixon

ston that I realized how chaotic and calamitous it had all been. And far from putting me off, that immediately inspired me.

**Q** *And the inciting incident was...*

**A** They paid Nixon \$600,000 to do these interviews. It was a breathtaking amount — something like \$5 million in today's money. This is a leader who had abused his power and completely devalued the American democratic process. Some people wanted to indict him for war crimes. That these payments were made — the American networks were so angry, and Frost was vilified. [I imagined] the pressure he would have felt. And that he skated into it with no real comprehension, as an outsider, of how important this was to Americans. So I really thought this was a great, great idea, but I didn't have the confidence to write it. And then at a certain point, I had this hiccup with (director) Stephen Frears, where he postponed shooting *The Queen* for a year, and I thought, "I'll actually try that idea that I never had the courage to write."

I very much wanted it to feel like they were plotting a combat, and every fight, even the briefest bar room fight, has a structure, with reversals and twists and turns.

**Q** *Two major surprises turn things around late in the script. One is the late-night phone call that a rather drunken Nixon makes to Frost, and the other is the revelation of the Colson conversation on the tapes. When you found those, or came up with them, as the case may be, is that when you knew for sure that you had what you needed to make the drama work?*

**A** Well, the Colson conversation — though not as dramatic as in the film and the play — did happen. James Reston did find a transcript that, when it was read, began the process of throwing Nixon off (and his unraveling).

**Q** *And the phone call? In the film, you included a line where Nixon asks Frost, right before the final interview, "Did I really call you last night? What did we*

*talk about?" At that point I figured you were signaling that this was an invention of yours....*

**A** At one point Ron wanted to drop that line. I said I thought it was more honest (to keep it). It's a way of me taking responsibility for what I'd added. And when I wrote the phone call, I felt exactly the way you just said — that yes, now this works — but also, now I've written *the reason why I wanted to write this*. And those are two different things.

**Q** *On the phone to Frost, Nixon sketches out that dichotomy between the limelight and the wilderness — how the craving for one and fear of the other is what drives people like the two of them. Is it a theme that you relate to? Is the limelight a great motivator for you?*

**A** Well, if what you're after is exposure, then this is the wrong job. As you know, very little of the attention comes to the writer. So in that sense, no. But I had ambition, and I was interested in writing



Frost/Nixon

## ● The Limelight and the Wilderness

about ambition. I've come to believe that ambitious people are always damaged people — that it has to do with unresolved conflicts and other baggage. Frost is so blindly ambitious — I've literally never met anyone so ambitious. And yet he presents such a happy and uncomplex exterior. To me, that doesn't look quite true. So I had Nixon mess with his head a bit.

*Q Since writing that phone call was an essential part of cracking this material, can you talk about how and where in the writing process it came about?*

**A** No one ever gave me a note when I was writing this play. The process I had was that we did table readings, two of them in London. And at the first one, the guy who read Nixon read him in such an

ingenious way that it made me realize how much scope there could be in this for playfulness and comedy. I immediately went back and started writing him that way, with the playfulness and the baiting. For example, Nixon did use that line about fornication (Ed.: Nixon throws Frost right before the cameras roll by asking him, "Did you do any fornicating last night?") but in a completely different context, and at a completely different time. It wasn't as knowing.

I wrote the late-night phone call in two drafts. The first one was shorter. When I heard the actor do it at the reading, I thought to myself, "For God's sake, have the courage to go further here." So I wrote it again, very quickly, which I think is the only way to write a scene like that. I just tore into it like it was me on the phone. And I thought, this is far too purple, too

lurid. But when (Frank) Langella read it, everybody just suddenly stopped talking. I thought, "It *hasn't* gone too far." It was sort of scarily bold, but rather pleasing.

*Q What was the impetus in your mind for Nixon making that phone call?*

**A** Nixon is a self-destructive individual. His career showed that again and again. There was something in him that was uncomfortable being on top and in the limelight. So I have that scene where he's playing the piano at home, and Kevin Bacon (as Jack Brennan) is saying, "We're sitting on an 11-0 lead; it's a shut out." And Pat Nixon says, "I'm so glad everything worked out just as we planned." Nixon realizes he's effectively won. And at that moment he looks very sad. He's going to get away with it. Some part of him feels un-



Frank Langella in *Frost/Nixon*

comfortable with that. So in a moment of self-destructive, alcohol-fueled behavior, he rings up Frost, and as it were, goads him into hitting him. Subconsciously, he gives Frost the sword to stab him with and sows the seeds of his own downfall in that way. This is what I made up.

**Q** *You've said that your favorite part of dramatizing these historical situations is writing the parts that take place out of the public eye. Can you talk about how you get the voices right so you can feel confident writing these private moments?*

**A** Well, I immerse myself in the archival footage and the stock footage, where you can listen to them talk, with all the cadences and hesitations. And there's mimicry, certainly, once you get the voice into

your head. Some people come easier than others. The fact that Nixon was the age he was means he essentially grew up in the 1940s and '50s.... That's when his register would have been shaped. And for an Englishman to write an American whose register is stuck in the '40s and '50s is a lot easier than for me to write someone contemporary. There's more going on in contemporary American slang that makes it difficult for me as a sort of BBC writer to connect with. But because Nixon was an older and quite conservative man, he was easier to write. And Frank Langella was great on the swear words. He'd say, "Sons of bitches, that's what he'd say." Frank was exactly the age that Nixon was.

**Q** *Another aspect of your dramatic technique is that you really play up the contrasts between the leading figures in the drama. You portray Frost, perhaps more than he was in real life, as this showbiz bon vivant, who's focused mainly on popularity and the ratings, and Nixon as this tormented, brooding statesman who claims to not really enjoy being around people.*

**A** Yes, it's the part that I like the least, that sort of "here's one and here's the other,



Director Ron Howard with Peter Morgan

here's one and here's the other." It's a bit too schematic for me, but if you don't do it, then it doesn't work as well. A number of times Ron and I were saying, should we just get to the interviews quicker? But every time we took out something, it was such a loss. Each scene is setting something up you pay off later. For example, the more you know about the difficulty Frost had in raising the money, the more satisfying it is to see him winning later on.

**Q** *Getting back to ambition, were you always set on being a writer?*

**A** No, quite the opposite. Writing wasn't my ambition at all. I don't know what I thought of — I didn't have any vocational dreams. But I was always a good storyteller, and I do think that's something you're born with.

**Q** *I've read that your parents were immigrants who escaped Hitler and Stalin. Is it true that you grew up speaking German?*

**A** Well, I spoke English at school, but at home we spoke German until I was about 10.

**Q** *So you began writing while you were a student at the University of Leeds?*

**A** Yes. I'd wanted to act, but I got on stage and it made me nervous. It was

agony, and I realized I wasn't suited to public exposure at all. So I wrote plays, and one of them won a prize. A man came backstage and offered me the chance to write some industrial training movies. I was 19 years old, and it was such a buzz. I never stopped — I've never done anything but write. I went through a period of absolute poverty, where I was scrambling, taking any gig going. I was working 40 hours a week and getting back pretty much zip. In the last five or seven years it would appear that things have gone very well, but I really, really did my time.

**Q** *So then that was the wilderness. And it looks like you may be headed for the limelight once again come this awards season.*

**A** Well, I don't know. It still shocks me that anyone knows what my name is.

**Q** *Really?*

**A** Absolutely. I spend my entire waking life in a room of my own and in a house with my family. The idea that there's something beyond that is bewildering. And anecdotally, I know that there are some fantastic writers with some fantastic screenplays that are going to be released before the year is out. So I have no idea, and I wouldn't presume. Let's just see what happens. **CS**