



The Assassination of Richard Nixon

Sean Penn gets down so deep inside his characters that you worry whether he'll be able to get out. He was always one of the most promising actors of his generation, whether joyfully stoned out of his mind in **Fast Times At Ridgemont High** or confused and angry in the undervalued **Bad Boys**. What time seems to have done, however, is to refine his talents and when he came back after a respite period, in De Palma's **Carlito's Way**, he was better than ever. The vanity, which soured both his roles and his public reputation in films like **Shanghai Surprise**, was gone and he was working on his instincts, digging into the character to find unpredictable nuances which were just what was needed. His work as a director has shown a similar talent, forcing Jack Nicholson to rein himself in and consequently produce some of the best acting he's ever done. In recent years, Penn has continued to be one of the most interesting film actors around and **The Assassination of Richard Nixon** confirms his brilliance.

Whether it does a great deal else is another matter. Collective nostalgia for what are now seen as the last great days of Hollywood filmmaking – broadly speaking, the period between **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** in 1966 and the premiere of **Heaven'sGate** in 1981 – has become so overpowering that any film which seems to hark back to those days is acclaimed as "an instant classic". Of course, scratch the surface of any alleged great days and you find a proportion of gold to dross which isn't significantly different from any other time in film history. But the memory of the likes of Altman, Penn, Coppola and Scorsese working at full-tilt has cast a sunlit hue on the period and the fact that the men responsible have now managed to sully their reputations to one extent or another has done much to etch the legend ever deeper into our collective consciousness. It's this which **The Assassination of Richard Nixon** very cannily plays upon and everything is in place to make fans of **Taxi Driver** and **The Conversation** soil themselves with excitement.

In a few respects, the promise is fulfilled. Niels Mueller's debut film is admirably controlled, conveying an authentic sense of hopelessness and isolation. It tells the story of Sam Bicke (Penn), an incompetent salesman who feels that his life is somehow being dogged by failure and is angered by a sense of injustice that he isn't living the American Dream which he believes is his due. When he discovers that his estranged wife Marie (Watts) is involved with another man and his application for a business start-up loan is rejected, Sam allows his paranoia to run free and begins to plan an act against the President of the United States which will show the world that, despite all evidence to the contrary, he is someone to be remembered.

This is a sad story, all the more affecting for being grounded in truth (albeit heavily embroidered) and in Sean Penn it has its ideal embodiment. Penn is compulsively watchable, even in impossible scenes which never work, such as the one where he causes a rumpus in the bar where his wife works, and he makes us completely understand Sam Bicke's plight – that he is eternally doomed to be a nobody. There's a particularly fine moment when he's talking to his best friend Bonny (Cheadle) and is suddenly struck by inarticulacy. He's surrounded by excellent actors like Don Cheadle, Jack Thompson and Naomi Watts, all on top form. Thompson is particularly good, his surface geniality suddenly breaking out into intimidating aggression. There's also a quite brilliant cameo from Michael Wincott as Sam's brother. Wincott, usually cast as one-note psychopaths, gets a chance to show his range here and he's absolutely riveting.

Yet somehow the film doesn't come together. It's a very self-conscious piece of work which goes for a very austere, high-tone effect, signified by a killingly slow pace and the use of classical music which seems to dislocate the story from any particular time or place even while the news footage places it very specifically in 1974. Niels Mueller is certainly a promising director and you can see how he thinks the pieces are all falling into place. But we're left with a story which doesn't go anywhere. Sam is fucked-up at the beginning of the film and he simply gets more fucked-up as the film goes on. Penn's performance is fascinating to watch but the film stays on one grim note for far too long and the occasional humorous asides in the first half hour are soon forgotten. I also have to echo the comment made by numerous writers that the air of predictability prevents us from becoming fully involved in the film. It heads towards a specific moment which history tells us was a failure. This isn't necessarily a problem as Fred Zinnemann demonstrated in **The Day of the Jackal**, but he was making a suspense thriller in which much of the tension came from the police hunt for the killer.

Mueller is making a character piece which doesn't have any suspense or thrills at all and by the time Sam's scheme is under way, it's tempting to tune out of the film since the end is inevitable from the very start.

The biggest disappointment for this viewer is that there's a great irony at the end which could be either funny in an absurdist way or desperately moving. Mueller's film doesn't do anything with it at all and it's left to Penn to make what he can out of a character who, in the script, is never much more than a heavily simplified Travis Bickle. The film is heroically downbeat at a time when downbeat doesn't generally sell and Mueller may think that this links his film to the 1970s classics which he so obviously loves. But the best films of that period were complex and shaded with unexpected diversions and jagged edges. Apart from Sean Penn's performance, which threatens to explode the surrounding film, **The Assassination of Richard Nixon** is a very smooth and focused piece of work and this may, in the end, be its downfall.