Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 27 January 2009 16:04



Ron Howard's adaptation of playwright Peter Morgan's *Frost/Nixon* has been nominated for five Academy Awards, and in *V* ariety

magazine, Morgan reacted to its success by saying, "The film is political but entertaining, and the credit goes to Ron. He takes the experience the audience has at the cinema very seriously." That's why I love Howard, and also why, as a director, he drives me absolutely crazy.

A moderately fictionalized account (much like the fictionalization in Morgan's script for *The Queen* 

f the events that led to TV personality David Frost's legendary interview with former President Richard Nixon,

## Frost/Nixon

is a supremely enjoyable and gripping behind-the-scenes account, buoyed considerably by the joyously invested presence of Frank Langella. What the actor performs here is a rather astonishing high-wire act - Langella delivers the former commander-in-chief's familiar traits and tics without either commenting on or satirizing them - and his powerful, devastatingly poignant, and oftentimes deeply funny channeling of Nixon provides that rarest of moviegoing treats: a grandly and unapologetically

theatrical

film portrayal. He's so good that Michael Sheen - who also played Frost to Langella's Nixon during the play's London and Broadway runs - has no choice but to play second fiddle here, but he does it with admirable, un-showy grace, and Morgan provides a terrifically witty script. Frost/Nixon is great fun.

It's also *irritating* fun, because Howard, as usual, steadfastly refuses to deviate from his depressingly obvious, audience-pandering style. The film's wholly unsurprising compositions and rhythms are sitcom-honed in the extreme - you can practically hear the studio audience's laughter following punchlines - and the supporting cast is so generically, inhumanly practiced that the actors seem only slightly more realistic than Marie Barone or Kramer or Lenny and Squiggy; Sam Rockwell, Oliver Platt, Rebecca Hall (in a meaningless role), Matthew Macfadyen, Toby Jones, and Kevin Bacon (in one of his rare bad performances) haven't been directed so much as merely posed. Howard has been a professional entertainer for more than

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## Wolves: "Frost/Nixon" and "Underworld: Rise of the Lycans"

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50 years now, and you could argue that he almost always gives his audiences a good time. Of *course* 

he does; he directs with both eyes

on

the audience, relentlessly simplifying, and even dumbing down, his material so that no one could possibly miss the points - comic, dramatic, ironic - he's attempting to make.

Frost/Nixon

works, and works quite well, despite its director. But it drives me nearly bonkers to think that for many people, and now the Academy, it's an example of the best Hollywood can offer, when it's really just an example of the best that

Ron Howard can offer.



UNDERWORLD: RISE OF THE LYCANS

Michael Sheen enacts a first-rate David Frost, and he was an even better Tony Blair in *The Queen* 

but if I were casting the role of a buff, half-naked, fiercely intense leader of a pack of werewolves, Sheen's would be the absolute

last

name on the list. (It's not just that we rarely see him shirtless; we almost never see him tie-

less.) The producers of the vampires-versus-werewolves series *Underworld* 

, though, cast Sheen as the growling Lycan Lucian (or is it the other way around?) back in the franchise's first entry - well before we became acquainted with the actor's friendly stammering and apologetic sweetness - and

Underworld: Rise of the Lycans demonstrates that this was a

fantastic

decision; Sheen positively makes the movie.

## Wolves: "Frost/Nixon" and "Underworld: Rise of the Lycans"

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A prequel to 2003's *Underworld* and 2006's *Underworld: Evolution*, director Patrick Tatopoulos' monster yarn provides the backstory behind the vampires' murderous hatred towards their werewolf slaves, and it has many of the same flaws as its predecessors: sub-Ray Harryhausen effects, frenetically incoherent editing rhythms, and a tendency to take itself almost parodistically seriously. That being said, it's also my favorite of the *Underworld* 

installments. Bill Nighy appears to be having a ripping good time as a decadent vampire with creepy colored contacts, there are a bunch of truly exciting action sequences - the Lycans' climactic attack is

spectacular

- and best of all, Sheen lends the movie so much emotional commitment and fervor that his performance transcends the silliness and provides real rooting interest;

Rise of the Lycans

is a horror flick with

gravitas

. I never thought I'd catch a movie in which the sight of Michael Sheen in tight leather pants didn't produce uncontrollable giggling, but this latest

Underworld

endeavor is, surprisingly,

filled

with surprises.

For a review of Slumdog Millionaire, see " Game Show and Tell ."

For a review of Reservation Road, see "Scenes from a Marriage."

For reviews of Notorious, Inkheart, and Paul Blart: Mall Cop, see "Rap, Flap, Crap."