

THE IMPERSONATOR

Peter Morgan fills in the gaps of history.

BY JOHN LAHR

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it," Oscar Wilde said. The British screenwriter and playwright Peter Morgan—responsible for the 2006 movie "The Queen" and for the play "Frost/Nixon," now on Broadway (at the Bernard B. Jacobs)—agrees. His stories, he says, "take defining moments in recent history and allow drama to explore areas that have perhaps been neglected." These areas have included the royal family's response to the death of Diana ("The Queen"), the rise of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin (the 2006 film "The Last King of Scotland," which Morgan co-wrote with Jeremy Brock), the power-sharing agreement made between Prime Minister-to-be Tony Blair and his future Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (in a 2003 Channel 4 TV movie called "The Deal"), the prison reformer Lord Longford's attempt to win a pardon for the child-murderer Myra Hindley (in another Channel 4 TV movie, titled "Longford," and recently aired on HBO), and the combative interview between former President Richard Nixon and the British talk-show pundit David Frost ("Frost/Nixon").

Over the past five years, Morgan, who is forty-four, has become a brand name. He owns the franchise on a certain kind of scrupulously researched and astutely observed investigation into the emotional ructions behind contemporary events—neither documentary nor fiction but an imaginative amalgam of the two. Since his Academy Award nomination for "The Queen," which has grossed more than a hundred million dollars, Morgan has been inundated with scripts. "None of them interest me, because they're all fact-based," he told me. What interests him is narratives in which real public figures are thrown into unlikely relationships. His dramas turn on what he has called "this odd collection of pas de deux—dances between

very different kinds of people." "I want to go to all the un-minuted places—bedrooms, Land-Rovers, private audiences," he told ABC News this year. To me he said, "I couldn't begin to write unless I could see heartbreak or human connection. I have a great deal of compassion for those in public life and what we have done to them."

As a storyteller, Morgan is drawn to volatile, ambitious antagonists. ("Ambition interests me because it's such a surefire indicator of damage," he said.) In "The Deal," a drama, directed by Stephen Frears—who also directed "The Queen"—about Tony Blair's pivotal meeting with Gordon Brown, in 1994 at a North London restaurant, where they decided on the future of the Labour Party leadership (a meeting whose ramifications are still playing out in British politics), Morgan hit on a rich, intellectually challenging seam of psychological and political combat. "I actually wrote about a sort of fratricide," he said. "That's what interested me: friendship and betrayal." In one scene, in which the up-and-coming politicians are walking out of the House of Commons, competition and exposition play off each other deftly, as the passive-aggressive Blair teases the saturnine front-runner Brown, asking him if his reticence is a "specifically Scottish trait":

GORDON: You ask this, as a Scot yourself, of course.

TONY: You may mock, but I am a Scot.

GORDON: As well as being black, and working-class.

TONY: I was born in Scotland.

GORDON: Being born in a stable doesn't make you a horse.

The chemistry of opposition makes terrific drama. Morgan insists on this point. "They tried to get me to write about the Queen without Tony Blair," he recalled of his producers on "The Queen." "What happened after Diana's death was quite interesting, and it was about Blair and the Queen. They said,

'For God's sake, don't go anywhere near Blair.' So I started trying to write it without Blair in it. I just couldn't. It wasn't interesting to me. I called Stephen up and said, 'The only way this is interesting is with Blair and the Queen in conflict—it's sort of mothers and sons, two different generations in two different worlds, two different Englands, two

ford in a trenchant exchange at the finale, "on the moors . . . when we did the first one, you'd know that evil can be a spiritual experience, too.") In a sense, "Frost/Nixon" (which Morgan has adapted for a movie, to be directed by Ron Howard) is a perfect case study of Morgan's style. "In the end, it's just two people and words," Morgan said. In

drafter I've ever read. If he gets it in the first draft, he's got the movie. If he doesn't get it in the first draft, he sort of never will." (Morgan wrote the first draft of "The Queen" in three weeks.) "I do have an innate understanding of where a story should or shouldn't go, in a way that I don't think can be taught," Morgan said. He has, he said, "an almost autistic ability to see a shape in a story": "So, in other words, 'The Queen' right from the get-go was: audience scene-Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday-Friday-audience scene. Blair-Brown was: starts at the end, goes back, tells the story for two-thirds, then goes back. I lock onto a structure almost like an infant looking at colors and shapes. Once I've got that, I'll never deviate from it. There are many, many things in my work that need redoing—never the structure."

Part of the trick, as Morgan understands it, is to move quickly "from levity to seriousness." In this, he is well served by a sharp sense of humor. "He's the greatest standup that never was," Harries said. "When I first met Peter, I just wanted to put him onstage. He was Jerry Seinfeld. He was savage, and occasionally overstepped the mark; he lost a few friends along the way." Morgan is a good mimic; he often gets inside his characters' minds by aping the rhythms of their speech. For "Longford," he watched tapes of Longford's television appearances until he got "a genetic print of the way he spoke." For his current commission, again with Frears, a TV movie about the Derby County soccer coach Brian Clough and his takeover of Leeds United, the hated rival club, Morgan learned to write "long speeches in a sort of working-class Middlesbrough vernacular." His ear for idiomatic speech and the comedy of its weasel words is enhanced by the fact that his characters rarely tell jokes as such; their humor is between the lines. "The Queen" opens with Elizabeth II, played by Helen Mirren, having her portrait painted by an artist who admits to having cast his vote for the Conservatives:

ELIZABETH: I envy you being able to vote. (A beat) Not the actual ticking of the box, although it would, oh, it would be nice to experience that ONCE. (A beat) But the sheer joy of being partial.

It's part of Morgan's mischievous power



Morgan says he has "compassion for those in public life and what we've done to them."

different languages.' And he got that immediately." Frears said, "His friends in London are quite grand, so he's writing precisely about things that he's observed." (Morgan married Lila Schwarzenberg, an Austrian, in 1997; they and their four children live in London.)

Much of Morgan's storytelling is anchored in warring dualities. "The Last King of Scotland," in which a young, adventurous Scot becomes the personal physician to Idi Amin and unwittingly gets caught up in the tyranny of his revolution, explores a kind of father-son conflict; in "Longford," the vanity of a would-be saint is tested by the manipulative projections of one of the nation's most infamous sinners. ("If you'd been there that night," Hindley tells Long-

Nixon and Frost, he found two explosive, contradictory protagonists, both on the decline, both looking for a way to redeem their names, one famously repressed and the other famously indulgent. "It's like nitrogen and glycerin," Morgan said. "Apart, they are completely harmless chemicals; together, it's a wonderful cocktail."

Structure is what turns Morgan's unlikely pairings into the combustible material we see onstage and onscreen. "History gives him an outline," Andy Harries, the head of drama and film production for Britain's ITV, and the producer of "The Queen," said. "He's brilliant at accessing material and finding a plumb line through it." Harries added, "He's the best first-

that the viewer can never tell if he's being supportive or subversive.

Morgan's collages of fact and fiction, with their dramatic nuances and subtle reversals, lend surprising tension to otherwise familiar events; all of his stories play like thrillers. Part of the illusion of plausibility comes from a shrewd selection of detail: Nixon's appreciation of Frost's Italian-leather loafers sheds light on his capacity for envy; the bagpipes that wake the Queen each morning announce both the day and the ritual that defines her life and which she defines ("It's her morning alarm call, and it's the way she wakes up wherever she is—anywhere in the world," the stage directions read). Frears said, "One thing people would say about the Blair-Brown film was 'Well, after a few minutes I stopped thinking they were actors.' People would describe that quite early suspension of disbelief. His writing leads you to accuracy." He added, "It was the freshest piece of writing I'd come across—not like anything else. It's so pertinent." The success of Morgan's narrative style can be measured by the number of imitators he has spawned; within the past few months, British film companies and television channels have announced projects dealing with Margaret Thatcher, the young Queen Victoria, and Buckingham Palace. "As much as I would like to carry on writing like this, I fear I can't," Morgan said.

Although Morgan likes to scrutinize the contradictory traits of his characters, he studiously refuses to examine his own nature. "I don't want to know what swamp of toxicity and lunacy lies beneath the surface," he has said. As a result, his metabolism is, according to Harries, "quite charged." Behind the urbanity and wit, Frears said, Morgan is "a very emotional man," with "tremendous extremes of cheerfulness and depression." He added, "It can cause havoc."

Morgan, who calls himself "a complicated mongrel," was born in England, the son of Arthur Morgenthau, a German Jewish refugee, and Inga Bojcek, a Polish Catholic refugee (one had fled the Nazis, the other the Russians). Morgan, who was nicknamed Fritz at school, grew up speaking German at home. When he was nine, his father died, at the age of fifty-nine. "It is devastating, losing a par-

BEAGLE OR SOMETHING

The composer's name was Beagle or something,
one of those Brits who make the world wistful
with chorales and canticles and this piece,
a tone poem or what-have-you,
chimes and strings aswirl, dangerous for one
whose eyelids and sockets have been rashing from tears.
The music occupied the car where
I had parked and then sat, staring at
a tree, a smallish maple,
fire-gold and half-undone by the wind,
shaking in itself,
shocking blue morning sky behind, and also
the trucks and telephone wires and dogs
and children late to school along Orange Street, but
it was the tree that caused an uproar,
it was the tree that shook and shed,
aureate as a shaken soul, I remembered
I was supposed to have one—for convenience

I placed it in my chest, the heart being away,
and now it seems the soul has lodged there, shaking,
golden-orange, half-spent but clanging
truer than Beagle music or my forehead pressed
hard on the steering wheel in petition for release.

—April Bernard

ent," he told the London *Evening Standard* last year. "I don't really know what the effect is, but I suppose people might call me an ambitious man, and I'd say that an ambitious man is a damaged man." Certainly, even before his father's death, Morgan had been set on the educational ladder of British upper-middle-class success: he attended St. Paul's Preparatory School and, thanks to the munificence of a godparent, Downside, a Catholic boarding school in Somerset, which he hated and where he developed what he has called "the muscles of disobedience." He said, "I was taken out of a very Jewish meritocratic school—St. Paul's—and sent to this boarding school where I came up against landed Englishness for the first time in my life. It wasn't my people. I just didn't get it." After he'd been there for about three and a half years, Morgan recalls, he woke up one day and thought, This is not a sentence. I don't have to do this. He phoned his mother and told her he'd be home in three hours. Then, leaving all his belongings behind, he walked out of school and

never returned. The decision, according to Morgan, was "completely the making of me." In order to pay for a six-form college—a crammer, in effect—which he needed to attend before university, he worked nights doing data entry at a bank. When it came time to choose a university, although he had the exam results for Oxford or Cambridge, he decided on Leeds University, where he turned out to be, by and large, the only Southerner and the only public-school boy in his year. He was thrown in with politicized people who, he has said, "tore me to pieces." For a naïve, sheltered middle-class kid, the experience was transformative.

By the time he graduated, with a degree in fine arts, in 1984, Morgan had discovered theatre and won some success as a student actor. After a bout of stage-fright in a production of "Love's Labour's Lost," however, he gave up any hope of a professional career on the stage. Instead, with Mark Wadlow, a university friend and collaborator (who is now a senior writer on the ITV series "Coronation Street"), he channelled his theatrical en-

ergy into directing shows and writing scripts. In the mid-eighties, Wadlow and Morgan took a play, "Gross," based on Wadlow's summer job at a call center, to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. They attracted the attention of a producer of corporate training films, who provided a back-door entrée into filmmaking. By the time he was twenty-three, he and Wadlow were doing rewrites on John Schlesinger's "Madame Sousatzka," about which Pauline Kael said, "It should be projected on the wall while you have a polite lunch at the Russian Tea Room—the wall behind you." Morgan told the London *Observer*, "We were incredibly cheap and totally exploited for six months for about five grand. . . . Then five or six years of penury followed, where we were still writing . . . any kind of scripts. It's like when you turn on the tap and rust comes out. It takes a while until it's clear. You have to write the bad ideas out."

In 1990, Morgan and Wadlow wrote "Dear Rosie," an Academy Award-nominated eleven-minute film about a struggling female novelist, whose agent, more impressed by her weight-loss program than by her prose, turns her into a diva of diet books. As a metaphor for commercial compromise, it seemed to reflect the frustrations that Morgan was experiencing. "Until five years ago, he wasn't an A-list writer," Harries said. "He was pitching a lot of ideas that weren't intrinsically him. He could pitch a good romantic comedy. He's much smarter than that, and actually he's not fundamentally a comedy writer." The turning point was "The Deal." "It was radically different," Harries said. "He'd found himself. He knew what he wanted to write, and, as much as anything, he knew what he didn't want to write." The person who, according to Morgan, made the difference to his career was Frears. "Stephen's where I got my confidence," he said. "He chose to do my work. There's not a charitable bone in his body, so clearly it must have been out of self-interest."

Frears also got Morgan to focus his ideas and to polish his exchanges to a bright specificity. ("I just ask questions," Frears said. "You tease it out that way.") Sometimes in production, however, things between the two men can get fiery. "He's a big baby," Frears said. "He just has to be dealt with all the time." Frears cited as an example the helicopter shot in "The

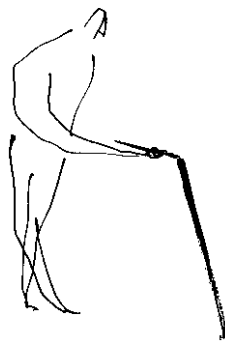
Queen" of deer-stalking on the Scottish moors. "I've never actually been deer-stalking," Frears said. "I made him come up to Scotland and take me out onto the moors, with all the people, and I said, 'Now explain to me what happens. Where's the deer? Where are the people? How close are they?' I got him to go through it in detail." Frears continued, "The grumbling that went on! 'Why am I being dragged up to Scotland?' He drives you senseless with rage half the time." Nonetheless, when, recently, Morgan was asked by Sony to direct his own movie, he replied, "As long as Steve Frears is around, why on earth would I want to direct?"

Morgan not only owes his best films to Frears; he also inadvertently owes him his first play. According to Frears, Morgan didn't want to rush the writing of "The Queen." "Take as long as you like," Frears told him. Given carte blanche, Morgan wrote perhaps too quickly. He was done a week later. The day before he handed in the script, Frears agreed to direct the musical "Mrs. Henderson Presents," with Dame Judi Dench, which meant that "The Queen" would be postponed for more than a year. "Stephen pissed me off so much by doing 'Mrs. Henderson Presents' before 'The Queen' that I started writing 'Frost/Nixon' as a sort of act of skydiving. The only way I was ever going to be able to be civil to Stephen again was if I used that moment to do something that I would never have done otherwise," Morgan said. He'd had the idea for "Frost/Nixon" for a long time. "I just didn't have the confidence to write," he said. Now, emboldened by his anger, "I opened the door to the airplane and jumped out. I thought, Well, I just hope I've got a parachute."

Morgan's preferred method is to write first and research later, passing the first draft to people in the know with the question "Is this believable?" "Frost/Nixon" required a reversal of procedure. In 1977, David Frost, in an act of entrepreneurial chutzpah intended to bolster his flagging career as a celebrity-talk-show host, coaxed the disgraced former President into six hours of interviews, to be aired in four segments. Frost wanted to get Nixon to admit his culpability in Watergate and

to apologize—something he had never done. Nixon, from his isolation in San Clemente, California, saw it as a chance to reënter the public arena, as well as to make a big paycheck. (He negotiated a deal in which he would receive six hundred thousand dollars and twenty per cent of the profits from the broadcasts.) The Nixon-Frost exchanges were the television version of Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope against George Foreman: Nixon outpointed his opponent, only to be somehow blindsided at the last minute. Morgan's interest in the story was not political. Morgan saw in Frost's and Nixon's conflicting personalities the prospect of gladiatorial combat—a fight in which there could be only one winner. "If you watch the interviews in context, Nixon is momentarily wounded, but he quickly gathers himself—he gives nothing back," Morgan said. "Now we're getting into the laws of dramatic art. There are internal imperatives and logics to narrative. I could just as easily have written the piece—and found substance to support it—to substantiate the idea that Frost didn't get Nixon, that Nixon half threw it, in order for these interviews to sell." Instead, although the play astutely synthesizes the actual events, it is, by Morgan's own admission, "a bouquet to Frost." Morgan said, "When I met Frost, I didn't connect with him. He didn't understand what I was trying to do. I thought, The less I see of this man the better, because I wanted to write him dispassionately and, to some degree, respectfully."

Before beginning to write, Morgan spent about three weeks in Washington researching the project. He even hired a tutor on American politics. He interviewed all the secondary players in the drama—the sidemen who prepared Frost to go into the ring. Although Morgan regrets not having built up the characters of Frost's high-powered advisers John Birt and Bob Zelnick—lacunae in the play which the film will rectify—he got lucky with the third member of Frost's team, the writer James Reston, Jr. "One has to bow to the god of dramatis," Morgan said. "I needed one angry American liberal and one indignant



militaristic Republican.” In Reston, whom Morgan wrote into the play as the embodiment of the American protest against Nixon, he found an adamant and eloquent liberal with an unpublished manuscript about the event in his personal files. (Reston’s “The Conviction of Richard Nixon” is being published to coincide with the play’s run in New York.) Although Morgan refers to Reston’s manuscript as “quite unreadable,” he was able to spin much of its incidental detail into dramatic gold. He acknowledged its usefulness in his personal inscription of the published play to Reston—“collaborator, fellow conspirator, colleague, and friend . . . without whom this would never, could never have come into being.”

Morgan is an opinionated man who relishes tweaking received opinion. His dramas rambunctiously challenge the public to get beyond what he has called “the default position of hating,” which is a refusal to think. (“Politically, he teeters between the extreme right and the extreme left,” Frears says. “He’s very hard to nail down.”) “Frost/Nixon” is an entertaining theatrical example of his maverick light touch. “The conviction and crucifixion of Richard Nixon doesn’t interest me,” Morgan said. What interests him, as he told the *Evening Standard* last year, is “to represent people who are hated, although in the case of Nixon and Amin that hatred is entirely justified.” The greatest traps are the ones we lay for ourselves; Morgan seems to have a talent for winking out self-destructive contradictions in the historical figures he portrays. The Queen is master of her public role and inept at her private one; Gordon Brown is a remarkable public servant who can’t relate well to the public; and, perhaps most tragic of all, Nixon is intelligent enough to acknowledge his limitations but not smart enough to do anything about them. The historical event of the interviews, as Morgan sees it, brings together “two lonely, disconnected men clamoring for the limelight to complete themselves somehow”; the encounter raises powerful psychological undercurrents. “Clumsy, socially inadequate as Richard Nixon is, prone to uncontrollable, incontinent perspiration,

how can he not stare with a sort of fury and envy and erotic fascination at a young, confident, blue-eyed, unspiring, womanizing guy?” Morgan said. The Nixon he brings onstage is a monument of self-loathing and self-consciousness, a man whose practiced bonhomie only underscores his discomfort in his own skin. (“Most smiles are infectious. Make you want to smile back. Nixon’s has the opposite effect,” the stage direction reads on the play’s first page.) “I could write about awkwardness—all that kind of stuff—because I feel it,” Morgan said.

The sinew of Morgan’s dialogue and the vivid emotional arcs he builds for his characters are a gift to first-rate actors—Helen Mirren, Forest Whitaker, Jim Broadbent, Samantha Morton, to name a few. Now Frank Langella can be added to that list. As Nixon, Langella, reprising his London triumph, is magnificent. In life, Langella is known to be a passionate, imposing, voluble character; onstage, his stooped, jowly, repressed but forceful Nixon is a piquant piece of theatrical transformation. From the moment Langella’s Nixon enters—the occasion is a TV broadcast in the Oval Office, on August 8, 1974, that turns out to be Nixon’s resignation speech to the nation—he is shrouded in solitude, a stranger to himself. Langella has given Nixon’s speech patterns as much inspired scrutiny as his posture. Langella’s raspy low voice—a sound with no smile in it—catches Nixon’s grave, evasive music. The tone, with its combination of authority and banality, echoes some kind of internal emptiness. (“Pleasant evening last night?” Nixon asks Frost, as they’re about to tape the segment on Vietnam. “Did you do any fornicating?”) Nonetheless, Nixon’s hollow idiom can be hypnotic, distracting even Nixon himself from the implications of what he’s saying. For instance, during his legalistic wittering about Watergate, Frost interrupts, “Are you really saying that there are certain situations where the President can decide whether it’s in the best interest of the nation and do something illegal?” Nixon answers, “I’m saying that when the President does it that means it’s not illegal.” The line, for obvious sorry reasons in the republic, gets a huge laugh.

David Frost is played by Michael Sheen, who, in the past few years, seems to have found nearly permanent employment in Morgan’s oeuvre. He was a memorable Tony Blair in both “The Deal” and “The Queen”; as soon as he has finished his limited engagement in “Frost/Nixon,” he will move on to portray the soccer supremo Brian Clough in the next Morgan-Frears collaboration. Here his warmth, humor, and alertness play well against the aloof and lugubrious Nixon. Where Nixon can never, even at his best moments, give off a whiff of ease, Sheen’s Frost exudes it; Sheen manages to suggest both Frost’s manic effervescence and his dandy’s desire to shine. An expert mimic—he has also played the loud and lewd high-camp king of the British “Carry On” comedies, Kenneth Williams—Sheen has a great deal of fun with Frost’s speech mannerisms, especially his alliterative flourishes. The play recounts Frost’s retort to the rivalrous Mike Wallace about his upcoming interview with Nixon: “I’m hoping it will be a cascade of candor.” But straight talk, when it comes, is an imagined drunken late-night call from Nixon before the taping of the legendary Watergate segment. “That’s our tragedy isn’t it, Mr. Frost?” Nixon says. “No matter how high we get, they still look down on us.” He has sussed the same canker of ambition and revenge in his British adversary, of whom it was once said that “he rose without a trace.” He goes on:

No matter how many awards—or how many column inches are written about you—or how high the elected office is for me—it still isn’t enough, am I right? We still feel like the little man? The loser they told us we were? A hundred times. The smart-asses at college. The high-ups. The well-born. The people whose respect we really wanted. Really craved. And isn’t that why we work so hard now? Why we fight for every inch?

If Nixon intuits the bond of competition between them, Frost senses in Nixon the moral exhaustion of a life dedicated to winning at all cost. When Nixon’s aide, against all the rules of engagement, interrupts the interview just at the point where Nixon is about to admit culpability—a moment of terrific suspense, which is historically accurate—Frost is curiously unruffled. As Morgan would have it, Nixon’s confession of guilt is a sort of political suicide,

a redemptive gesture, and Nixon has chosen Frost to assist him. "He wants me to do this. To finish him off," Frost says before the interview resumes, and he does just that. "He wants the wilderness." The fact that this powerful moment is imagined doesn't distract from its emotional truth. In lifting Nixon out of the odium in which history has preserved him, Morgan makes us feel Nixon's tortured humanity—an intimation of genuine tragedy.

The production has not travelled smoothly from the intimate Donmar Warehouse, where the audience was never more than thirty feet from the intellectual jousting, to the cavernous Broadway proscenium of the Jacobs; something essential in its chemistry has changed. The dialogue is still trenchant, the main performances are still vivacious and crowd-pleasing, but, in Michael Grandage's transfer, "Frost/Nixon" has become bombastic. The characters broadcast themselves across the footlights, which robs the evening

of its illusion of intimacy. The monumentality of the space—the mahogany-stained-pine surround, the thirty-six TV screens on the upstage wall, on which the "televised" debates and the locales can be seen—swallows up the actors, who are forced to do a lot of spinning and pacing and crossing, to provide a bogus dynamism that is underlined by the smash cuts of jarring sound. The effect maximizes the limitations of the play's theatrical shorthand rather than its drama.

Although the play allows Nixon a contrition and Frost a victory that don't appear in the six hours of interviews, Morgan, by dramatizing the making of the interviews, traps a fascinating larger point about the media and democracy. He demonstrates that everything that rises in America converges on television, where it is necessarily theatricalized and trivialized. In the play's coda, after Nixon's ravaged face has been maneuvered by Frost into a sort of onscreen confession—the money

shot for Frost's show, which, according to the play, "attracted the largest audience for a news program in the history of American television"—Reston (Stephen Kunken) is bemused by the spectacle of his elated cohort John Birt, who has stripped and run into the sea to celebrate. "That was before I understood the reductive power of the closeup," Reston says. He goes on, "The first and greatest sin of television is that it simplifies. Diminishes. Great, complex ideas, tranches of time, whole careers, become reduced to a single snapshot." Television is by its nature a fictionalization of history; it personifies history as fable agreed upon. Morgan, the storyteller who plays his own game of three-card monte with the actual, appreciates the irony. "Frost has now repackaged the whole thing," Morgan told me. "He's reduced the interviews to the Watergate interview—cut out all the others." He added, "It's now just the reëdited Watergate interview, which makes it look like he gets him." ♦