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THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON

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By *Erica Abeel* (<http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93>) Dec 1, 2004

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Reviews

Niels Mueller's feature debut, *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, offers up a brave, spot-on portrait of one man pulverized by the system during the Watergate era. A character-driven film reminiscent of the '70s, it's anchored by Sean Penn, doing what he does so well: struggling to tamp down a Vesuvius of rage. Based on true events, the film also presciently suggests that America, currently reviled from without, also harbors a threat from within, in the form of a decent but thwarted citizen who tips into paranoia and madness. Even with all this good stuff, the film acts on the viewer like fingernails drawn across slate.

It's 1974, and outside the Baltimore airport, Sam Bicke (Penn), hiding a gun under an orthopedic leg brace, plans to hijack a plane and crash it into the White House. The film then flashes back to the events that drove Bicke (close cousin to Travis Bickle) to attempt his doomed act. Unable to hold down a job due to his naïve ideas about how the world ought to operate, and separated from his wife Marie (Naomi Watts in black hair), Bicke hopes to get back his life with a new gig as a furniture-supply salesman. He dreams of starting his own business with his only friend, a mechanic played by Don Cheadle—winning back his wife and reuniting his family. His plan hinges on receiving a small-business loan from a bank. But Bicke encounters roadblocks at every turn. Some of the film's more agonizing scenes—sure to resonate with anyone who has tangoed with a corporate behemoth—observe him cajoling, stalking, then venting on a poker-faced bank lackey, who lectures this man-on-the-verge on the virtues of patience. Meanwhile, his wife politely rebuffs him, and takes up with another man.

Coming increasingly unhinged, Bicke starts to fixate on the dishonored and dishonorable president

as symptomatic of the country's malaise, conflating it with his own. The one heroic figure in his living nightmare is Leonard Bernstein, for whom Bicke records his story, as to a sympathetic ear. These voice-off moments add texture to the narrative. Luckily for the viewer, moments of dark humor punctuate Bicke's delusions and downward slide: In his political awakening, he visits the Black Panthers to donate money, and suggests, in the name of inclusion, they change their name to Zebras; and his earnest efforts to internalize the Dale Carnegie philosophy of success promoted by his bosses are twistedly funny. Diving into Bicke, Penn tops his own best work. As well, Mueller lasers in on a type poised to multiply like kudzu over the four coming years: a meek, well-meaning Everyman—a self-described "grain of sand"—who's crushed by a society where his needs go unmet, his voice goes unheard. It's hell to watch.

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