



CHECKERS

BY DOUGLAS McGRATH



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INC.

CHECKERS
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CHECKERS was produced by the Vineyard Theatre
(Douglas Aibel, Artistic Director; Jennifer Garvey-Blackwell, Executive Producer)
New York City, Fall 2012

CHECKERS received its world premiere at the Vineyard Theatre (Douglas Aibel, Artistic Director; Jennifer Garvey-Blackwell, Executive Producer) in New York City on October 31, 2012. It was directed by Terry Kinney; the set design was by Neil Patel; the costume design was by Sarah Holden; the lighting design was by David Weiner; the music and sound design were by Millburn/Bodeen; and the projection design was by Darrel Maloney. The cast was as follows:

NIXON Anthony LaPaglia
PAT Kathryn Erbe
CAMERAMAN/MAN IN CROWD Joel Marsh Garland
SHERMAN ADAMS Kevin O'Rourke
GENERAL EISENHOWER/MODERATOR/
MAN WITH PENNIES/CROWD John Ottavino
MAMIE EISENHOWER/WAITRESS/
OPERATOR/CROWD Kelly Coffield-Park
PETER EDSON/CLERK/STAGE MANAGER/
RADIO ANNOUNCER/CROWD Mark Shanahan
MURRAY CHOTINER Lewis J. Stadlen
HERBERT BROWNELL Robert Stanton

CHARACTERS

NIXON

PAT

CAMERAMAN

SHERMAN ADAMS

GENERAL EISENHOWER

MODERATOR

MAN WITH PENNIES

MAMIE EISENHOWER

WAITRESS

OPERATOR

PETER EDSON

CLERK

STAGE MANAGER

RADIO ANNOUNCER

MAN IN CROWD

CROWD

MURRAY CHOTINER

HERBERT BROWNELL

CHECKERS

Scene 1

Richard Nixon's study, New York City, 1966.

Richard Nixon sits at his desk, reading one of the day's many newspapers. The other papers cover the desk. All around the room are statues, paintings, carvings, etc., of elephants. Pat Nixon enters, very pretty and trim. She carries a cup of coffee.

PAT. Here's your coffee, dear.

NIXON. Thank you, Buddy. Dinner was delicious.

PAT. I know I sound like one of those ads on the television, but I've been sleeping so much better since we switched to Sanka. *(He reads his paper as she straightens a few things up.)* Did I tell you I rode the elevator this afternoon with the Rockefellers? Who would have ever thought when we moved to New York that we'd be in a building with *Rockefellers*?

NIXON. Several floors below them, naturally. I'm sure they took note of that.

PAT. They were very cordial, sent their regards to you. I told her how much I loved the exhibit of English landscape paintings at the Metropolitan. She said she'd try and get over there but — she couldn't have been nicer, but for some reason I felt she disapproved.

NIXON. Nelson's a modernist, one of those dribble art nuts. To that crowd if you paint a tree, it better not look like a tree or you've done something very wrong. Anyway, you know what a botch Johnson has made of this war?

PAT. Yes, you've said so, many times —

NIXON. Well, listen to this editorial from the *Times*: "Americans must give the President time to execute his strategy ... War is a

messy business, and the public's patience is as important as its patriotism." You think they'd urge patience if I was in office?

PAT. No, and that's one of the many super things about your not being in office. Which is the other reason I'm sleeping better. Anyway, before Murray gets here, I wanted to ask you. Julie wants to take riding lessons in Central Park, but I just worry that it isn't safe — there are so many delinquents there. Will you back me on this?

NIXON. Of course. I wish there were some way she could — I just hate that nice people, good girls like Julie, are driven from what used to be decent public places.

PAT. Well, there is a way. We could take a place in the country, maybe Connecticut —

NIXON. Move?

PAT. No, just for weekends and holidays. I like New York, I really do, much more than I expected, to be perfectly frank, but not on the weekends. New York on the weekend always feels like a party after all the good people have gone, and we're stuck with the people who are too drunk to get themselves home.

NIXON. A place in the country? Well, maybe. All the big shots do it, I know that. Maybe it, it's worth, maybe it's worth considering. Certainly it would be good for the girls, and you could have a garden again. Let's give it some thought.

PAT. Does that mean you'll really think about it or you're just saying that so we can stop talking about it?

NIXON. No, I — I'd like you to have your garden again.

PAT. Thank you, dear. Oh, also, both girls wanted me to ask you. Tomorrow night there's a Christmas special they're just crazy to see. They were wondering if they could watch in here on the color set.

NIXON. After dinner, I suppose? (*Off her nod.*) You know that's the one time all day I can really be alone and think about the world. It's both stimulating and relaxing for me — my equivalent of a squash game after work.

PAT. I know but — it's a Christmas special, and the colors would be so pretty. (*He hates to say no to the girls.*)

NIXON. All right. I suppose the world will still go on if I don't think about it for an hour. (*The house phone rings. Pat answers it.*)

PAT. Yes? That's fine, send him up. (*Hangs up; with distaste.*) Murray.

NIXON. And Buddy, I hate to nudge you again, but I need your Christmas list. If you don't give it to me soon I'm going to have to come up with my own ideas. (*Pat slips her hand into Nixon's.*)

PAT. I can't do it.

NIXON. Why not?

PAT. Because you've already given me all I could ever want when you left politics.

NIXON. *Buddy.*

PAT. I mean it. You don't have to get me one other thing. Although, maybe we could go see *Hello, Dolly* —

NIXON. *Again?* I'm pretty sure I fully understood it the first time.

PAT. It's just such a happy show, so happy and hopeful. (*The doorbell.*) Here is he. Dear me, *Murray*. What does he want?

NIXON. Oh, the usual. Trying to persuade someone to run for office and he wants my help. (*She sits on the arm of his chair and kisses his head.*)

PAT. You know what's so funny — and *wonderful*? In the old days, I would've asked who the candidate is. But now I couldn't care less because *it doesn't matter*. (*Murray enters, all charm and warmth.*)

MURRAY. My God, that Julie! She's all grown up! And Pat, look at you. You only get prettier. (*To Nixon.*) How did a schlub like you get a goddess like this?

PAT. I'll leave you boys alone. Murray, would you like anything?

MURRAY. No, darling. Just your husband's ear. (*She exits. Murray's manner changes — he is tougher, cooler.*) Big news about Reagan. He's going to appoint a fairy to his cabinet.

NIXON. Christ. How will Ronnie get away with it?

MURRAY. That airhead doesn't even know. The only people besides me who know this guy is queer are my source who told me, the fag himself, of course, and all those guys whose cocks he sucked. And what about that prick Romney? Did you read about the Vietnam trip?

NIXON. George Romney's a lightweight people mistake for a heavyweight, but not for long, not once the bright lights are turned on him. They all think it's easy to go for the top job, but it's tough out there.

MURRAY. Oh, it's tough —

NIXON. Nobody knows how tough it is if they haven't walked through the fire.

MURRAY. You know —

NIXON. Well, I've walked through the fire.

MURRAY. Yeah, you walked through the fire and you know. You're not going to let one of these clowns go up against LBJ, are you? 'Cause he knows, and he'll eat them alive and the GOP'll be out of

power for twelve years — it'll be fucking FDR time again. Also, if I might just make note of a grim option, you wait till '72, you may have to run against that prick RFK. *(That sends a chill through Nixon. He gets up, goes over to a bookshelf, pulls down a big leather book.)*

NIXON. You never know in politics. Climate might be better. *(Nixon opens the book. It holds a flask of cognac. He pours some into his Sanka. Offers it to Murray, who declines.)*

MURRAY. You never know. But you do know what you have now: a war in the toilet, campuses blowing up, the South about to secede —

NIXON. It's ripe, I acknowledge it's ripe.

MURRAY. Are you going to let somebody else take it? Don't tell me you spent the last two years going around the country for every dipshit Republican candidate out of the goodness of your fucking heart.

NIXON. Look, it's — Pat's against it.

MURRAY. Against being First Lady? Against you stopping the nation from going down a lawless hell-hole of hippies and shit?

NIXON. Against having our family in the spotlight. Against the way people treat me. She doesn't like it.

MURRAY. Your specialty is persuading people who don't want to support you to support you. Do the same with Pat. *(Nixon looks out the door into the living room where Pat sits happily with the girls.)*

NIXON. She's so happy now. She's done so much for me and I want her to have what she —

MURRAY. Bullshit. There's only one thing you want and that's the big job. The job you won and J-F-fucking-K and his old man and that dirty Chicago machine stole from you. The job LBJ is screwing up six ways from Sunday. *(Nixon pours a little more hooch into the coffee.)* So then *what is it*, Dick? It can't just be Pat. We've chewed this thing over long enough. Months and months of *Rocky and Romney and Reagan and Johnson*. You gotta shit or get off the pot.

NIXON. Funnily enough, I said that to Ike once in one of the blackest moments of my life.

MURRAY. Dick, please, we don't have time to go over your black moments. There are only two years till the election. Now, there's a time to get in and there's a time when it's too late to get in, and I'm telling you, as someone who knows this world, as someone who has greased and jammed and jerked the gears of this world, your time is about to pass. *(Nixon is silent, mulling, knows Murray's right.)*

NIXON. Here it is, then: Nixon can't afford another loss. The public will let you lose once, as I did against Jack Kennedy, and not hold it against you. They'll even let you lose twice — my race for governor of California. We can't forget that.

MURRAY. No, and I've tried.

NIXON. But three times — a man who loses three times is out of excuses. It's not a fluke, it's not bad luck, it's the way the people feel about you, and you're done. So what I'm saying, what I'm saying to you right now is this: Nixon only has one more chance. And if we botch it, if we make a botch of it somehow, and the rest of my life were — like this, I'd go mad.

MURRAY. So what? Are you afraid of Johnson?

NIXON. You know the definition of a pussy?

MURRAY. I can think of several, but what's yours?

NIXON. "Someone who's afraid of a Democrat." (*Murray laughs.*) With what they've done on civil rights, the Democrats have lost the vote of every white person who isn't a tea-sipping tenured professor at Yale. Now the rich, the rich have always been Republican, but we couldn't get the working man, the blue-collar fellow, to see that the GOP was on his side. Now that the Democrats are sending buses full of the coloreds into white schools, believe me, we can have those blue-collar votes. *Those* are people who have never felt above anyone *except the blacks*. *That was their one comfort*: We're down, we're down but at least we're above the fucking blacks. But now those buses are telling them that they are *the same* as the blacks. And that is a message those white voters do not want to hear. So mark my words: The candidate who identifies this grievance for the voters, who knows the right words to explain it — not the old slurs that are a stain on our past, but I mean, what I mean is, the words with the right resonance — that candidate could steal the South, and the larger white vote, from the Democrats for a generation. I'll *flay* the Democrats. I'm worried about *our* people.

MURRAY. Why? The Republican field is very thin this time.

NIXON. Agreed. Not one of them stands a chance against Johnson. My fear is with the Party elite, the boys behind the scenes. As you know, that crowd has never liked me. For a long time, the GOP was the Gentleman's Party and we never played rough. There was something in that old WASP establishment that said it was more important to fight fair than to win. Which is why we didn't win for 20 years.

CHECKERS

by Douglas McGrath

7M, 3W

It's 1952. A young Richard Nixon is campaigning as his party's candidate for Vice-President, his wife Pat proudly at his side, when an accusation of financial impropriety almost ends his promising career. In a momentous speech, he takes charge of his fate, and changes the character of American politics forever. CHECKERS is a revelatory look at Nixon's drive, history and most surprisingly, his marriage to Pat — all of which are explored with insight, blistering wit and unexpected tenderness.

"In this year of electoral ambivalence, an unlikely candidate to root for has arisen in New York. The relevance of CHECKERS is undeniable."

—**The New York Times**

"CHECKERS is fascinating! CHECKERS is an event rather than a mere commentary on the Republican party's poisoned past."

—**The Village Voice**

"An engaging new play! CHECKERS skillfully makes history come alive."

—**New York Magazine**

"Playwright Douglas McGrath has skillfully imagined Pat's early, lady-like feistiness as Nixon's loyal political partner ... spirited ... compelling."

—**Associated Press**

"If we must have a play about Richard and Pat Nixon, then Douglas McGrath makes a damned good job of it in CHECKERS." —**Variety**

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