

Ravens – another 1972 Fischer-Spassky smorgasbord as a metaphor for Cold War dominance

Last week I went with my wife to the Hampstead Theatre to watch *Ravens*, the latest take on the 1972 World Chess Championship between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky, this time through the pen of playwright Tom Morton-Smith. Let me say from the outset that I am not a regular theatre-goer – I much prefer the screen over stage. For a proper and excellent review of *Ravens*, please see Michael Billington's take [here](#).

Like the 2014 film *Pawn Sacrifice*, on the same subject, *Ravens* is somewhat of a disappointment. The clocks were set at 2 hours and 45 minutes and the second half was a long grind against Fischer and the Soviet delegation with only an occasional nod towards Spassky (and then only after the match had been won by Fischer). Certainly Ronan Raftery (Spassky) and Robert Emms (Fischer) gave excellent individual performances but Morton-Smith's script and Annabelle Comyn's direction came over as an obsessive Twitter pile-on against Fischer. The American's humiliation of Spassky with angry, exaggerated movements in the famous Charles Eames chair and both actors' flailing hands while making the chess moves is not how people who play and love chess will remember these two giants, and despite Fischer's antics, Henry Kissinger's clumsy diplomacy and a spot of Soviet James Bondery, the actual match ran its course and there was no world war. As Marianka Swain puts it in this [review](#), what's the story?

No expenses were spared in taking us back to the heady days of 1972 – the Scandinavian furniture, impressive digital montages of the two grand masters on a backdrop and the pre-computer monitors that transmitted the scores. But with a more nuanced approach to the protagonists and user-friendly explanation of the geo-politics, the musical *Chess* presented a better audience experience.

The 1972 world title was but one part of Fischer's extraordinary life. And as Liz Garbus showed in her excellent 2011 documentary film *Bobby Fischer Against The World* Fischer's troubled life was similar to other mavericks like George Best, Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse and Joe Orton, all of whom died tragically young. To that end, Henry Kissinger and The Kremlin were bit players in Reykjavik. We have flogged this dead horse enough. If you really want to know what happened in Iceland, go to the library and seek out CHO'D Alexander's analysis – of the games.

Ravens is on until 18 January. Tickets are available here:
<https://www.hampsteadtheatre.com/whats-on/2019/ravens-spassky-vs-fischer/>