Me and Orson Welles, but too much of the former

Tracy Montry
25 January 2010

Directed by Richard Linklater, written by Holly Gent Palmo and Vincent Palmo Jr., based on the novel by Robert Kaplow

Me and Orson Welles, the latest film from Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*, *Before Sunset*, *After Sunset*, *School of Rock*), is a coming-of-age story set in 1937 in New York City.

Seventeen-year-old Richard Samuels (Zac Efron) wins a part in Orson Welles's famed Mercury Theatre production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. During the subsequent weeks he falls in love, falls out of love, wins Welles's praise, wins Welles's wrath, gets fired, and probably falls in love again.

Efron's Richard has guts. He is confident in his artistic abilities and his ideas of right and wrong. He wins the small part in *Julius Caesar* when he boldly sings and does a drum solo for a group of Mercury's management standing outside the theater in midtown Manhattan. He makes a play for Claire Danes's Sonja Jones, a sophisticated, educated and ambitious Mercury office manager who takes him under her wing during his stint there. Sonja is also sleeping with Welles (Christian McKay), who has promised to introduce her to Hollywood movie producer David O. Selznick.

The conflict with Welles arises when Richard tells him that Sonja is his girl. Richard is fired by a very mean-spirited Welles, temporarily wooed back by him (for purely opportunist reasons), and then fired for good. A subplot involves Richard's friendship with an aspiring writer, Gretta Adler (Zoe Kazan), whom he influences. Gretta gets her story published in the *New Yorker*. He has had his seminal experience as a player in a Mercury Theatre production. At the end, the two young, expectant artists go off, he, hoping to be a great actor, and she, a great writer.

The major problem with the film is the emphasis on the "me" (Richard) in *Me and Orson Welles*. Many scenes deal with the wide-eyed youth being disabused of his naïveté. Joseph Cotten, who performed in a number of Welles's greatest productions, is shown as an actor merely interested in bedding as many women as possible, and offering Richard the fateful advice on Sonja which leads to his dismissal.

One can admire Richard's determination and pluck. However, the escapades of a young, inexperienced actor with a bit part—the perspective from which the filmmakers tell their story—are simply not compelling enough to hold their own against Welles and his provocative, ground-breaking production of *Julius Caesar*.

The play was the first chosen by the newly formed Mercury Theatre and its staging took place in a politically-charged atmosphere—the build-up to World War Two, the rise of fascism in Europe, and a powerful upsurge by the American working class. Welles's production was a political one, with the play taking place in fascist Italy. This effort followed his direction of an all African-American version of *Macbeth* for the Public Works Federal Theatre Project (when Welles was 20!). This is all hardly alluded to in *Me and Orson Welles*.

Much has been made of British-born Christian McKay's portrayal (or imitation) of Welles. McKay has Welles's mannerisms down to a tee. However, it's *what* McKay's Welles says and does that is the problem, not *how* he says and does it, and that is the result of bad writing and thinking, not acting. The Welles in this film is in line with too many current portrayals of him: egotistical, sarcastic, capricious and loud.

Something of a walking cliché, this film's Welles comes into rehearsals swearing at the top of his voice,

© World Socialist Web Site

demanding his dinner, yelling at the production crew and harassing producer John Houseman to the breaking point. He is also cheating on his pregnant wife. One wonders why any serious actor, producer and technician would have bothered with him, and what's more, how Welles produced anything of any consequence.

Robert Kaplow, author of the young adult novel *Me and Orson* from which Linklater's film is adapted, apparently researched Welles for ten years. Having based his book, in turn, on Houseman's 1972 memoir, *Run-Through*, Kaplow says Welles is a "very mysterious, enigmatic figure … one I thought would work well in a novel like this. Whether [my portrayal] is accurate or not, it's hard to tell—I worked on this for so long, it's hard to tell any longer what's the fabric and the fabrication." *[News.bookweb.org/Orson Welles Stars in Book Sense 76 Top Ten Pick]*

Actually, after so many years of research, keeping in mind that this would be Welles's introduction to a new generation, much of the 'mystery' should have been replaced by an accurate, nuanced and empathetic portrayal of a very complex man and artist.

Linklater is a sincere admirer of Welles, calling him the patron saint of independent filmmakers. Then why participate in a project that shows the director of *Citizen Kane* and other important works in such a negative and foolish light?

Here, I think Linklater wants it both ways: to associate himself with Welles's well-known "anti-establishment" credentials, his most positive attributes, on the one hand, while shaking a politically correct finger at Welles's personal 'excesses,' on the other. Kaplow and director Linklater, unfortunately, have taken the low road. Their version of Welles is similar to the one dreamed up by writer-director Tim Robbins in his *Cradle Will Rock.*

Both Kaplow's book and Linklater's film have been met with enthusiasm. Why would another rather conventional coming-of-age film receive such praise? After reading critics' and viewers' comments alike, one can sense a yearning for something exciting and thoughtful. And that is encouraging. It's not simply that the movie deals with youth. There is something very provocative about Orson Welles, his commitment to creating something original and thought-provoking against the conservatism of the cultural and political establishment. In fact, the best parts of the film are the scenes from *Julius Caesar*. Linklater, to his credit, is able to capture some of the excitement of the 1937 production.

And that is not simply good directing, but Welles's artistic and intellectual integrity breaking through everything secondary.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site