

Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts: A remarkable glimpse into cultural history

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Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts (BearManor Media, 2013, 328 pages) is a fascinating look at the relationship between American film director Orson Welles and his longtime mentor and friend, Roger Hill (1895-1990), teacher at and headmaster of the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois. Welles attended the school from 1926 to 1931 and was deeply influenced by its progressive educational methods and by Hill himself, a cultured and charismatic figure.

Todd Tarbox, Hill's grandson, has performed a considerable service by skillfully editing taped conversations and correspondence in the 1980s between Welles and Hill into the form of a three-act theater piece.

Welles, one of the greatest cinema and theater figures in the 20th century, was born in 1915 in Kenosha, Wisconsin to Beatrice and Richard Welles. His childhood was somewhat chaotic. His father made a fortune as an inventor, but gave up working and eventually became a terrible alcoholic. Welles' mother aspired to a career as a concert pianist, but died shortly after her son's ninth birthday. His father died only six years later. The parents had separated and moved to Chicago in 1919.

At the age of 11, Welles was enrolled at the Todd School, "because of my delinquencies," he once wryly asserted, where Roger Hill (known as "Skipper") was a teacher and later, headmaster. By all accounts, Welles enjoyed his days at the school tremendously and also contributed greatly to its life, in particular through his theatrical productions, including his amalgam (accomplished at age 15 or 16) of Shakespeare's history plays, entitled *Five Kings*.

Welles, in that same aforementioned comment, included in Tarbox's book, explains that "Having gone to all that trouble to get his [Hill's] attention in the theatre, I became stuck in it. I had to learn every bit of Shakespeare because he knew it and I had to learn the entire Bible because he knew it."

Welles and Hill, and Hill's wife, Hortense, formed a friendship that would last almost 60 years.

After leaving Todd, Welles rejected a scholarship from Harvard and threw himself into the theater—first in Ireland, oddly enough. In April 1936, Welles (now all of 20), directed his famed production of *Macbeth* for the Federal Theatre Project's Negro Theater Unit in New York, with music by Virgil Thompson. A year later, Welles staged Marc Blitzstein's left-wing *The Cradle Will Rock*, creating new controversies. He and John Houseman subsequently formed the Mercury Theatre, which attracted an extraordinary group of actors. Welles also worked extensively in radio.

Welles' career in film is legendary. He directed some of the most important works of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, including *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *The Trial* (1962) and *Chimes at Midnight [Falstaff]* (1965).

By the time of the first conversation included in Tarbox's book (in 1982), Welles, America's greatest living director, had not been able to complete a feature-length fiction film for more than a decade and a half. He had not been idle, far from it, he had planned out or begun work on numerous films (and directed the hour-long *The Immortal Story* [1968] and the documentary *F for Fake* [1973]), but the "New Hollywood" of the 1970s and 1980s was not proving much more sympathetic to his projects than the "old" studio system had been, perhaps even less so. A portion of the conversations between Welles and Roger Hill is devoted to the various works the filmmaker was still hoping to direct. Virtually all of these projects fell through, thanks to the shortsightedness, timidity and philistinism of the film and television industry.

One of the "scenes" in the book, a conversation held in December 1984, concerns the collapse of Welles' effort to make a film out of *The Cradle Will Rock*. The following dialogue takes place:

ROGER: How do you endure these blows?

ORSON: It is just terrible news. The sky fell in about six o'clock last night.... I have a wonderful cast. I have everything. Except the money. I own the production and the script.

ROGER: You're not tied up with the producer? He doesn't own you?

ORSON: No. I never signed a thing.

ROGER: Then, it's just a matter of finding the money from another source?

ORSON: Yes. But, that's not always easy....

ROGER: I'm sorry Hortense [Hill] isn't alive to see your script because we were so tied up with you that summer [1937].

ORSON: I know. What I have written is not strictly factual, but it is essentially the truth.

ROGER: It really is. It's essentially the truth about you and Virginia [Nicolson, Welles' first wife, with whom he eloped in 1934].

ORSON: I'm very frank about myself.

ROGER: Exactly. Yes, you can see and feel your spirit of youthfulness. I think it's wonderful. Nobody could have done as good a job.

ORSON: It was difficult to do. Very difficult to distance myself from

myself, to be objective.

ROGER: You have captured a unique and a little cock-eyed time when you were just out of your teens and in charge of everything.

ORSON: And the not-quite-grown-up quality of it, I think, is very good. I'm very proud of it. I think it's the best thing I've ever written.

Welles and Hill were individuals of considerable intellect and culture. They belonged to a generation steeped in the classics of Western literature. Lines from Shakespeare, Poe, Ben Jonson and others form an organic element of their conversations. It is a moving moment when Hill recites Christ's entire "Sermon on the Mount" from memory.

At one point, the older man remarks, "I can quote the *Bible*, Shakespeare, and a great deal of poetry I learned as a child. But, I can't recall with such clarity what happened last week, or last month." To which Welles replies, "You know damn well the early stuff is better than the late stuff. Wouldn't it be awful if it were the other way around? What the hell is there to remember about last month? The great stuff is still with us. Cling to those treasured thoughts. [Laughter.]"

Welles recounts amusing stories, like the one about the fake "Chinese magician," Chung Ling Soo, real name William Robinson, who had "a long and successful career until 1918, when he was accidentally shot on stage performing the bullet catch, where a marksman fired bullets and the magician would catch them in his teeth. He died the next day, which was, ironically, Houdini's birthday."

He also speaks feelingly about the actor John Barrymore, who was not "the drunk people thought he was." Barrymore, according to Welles, was worried that he was losing his mind, like his father, who had been placed in an asylum. "He [John Barrymore] used alcohol to hide from that probability. He'd get drunk, or pretend to be drunk, when he really was lost, when he suddenly didn't know how he got where he was or what was happening."

Too many things come up for discussion than can be treated here: education, the Roosevelt administration, the nuclear bomb, Welles' championing of a black war veteran who had been beaten and blinded by a policeman in South Carolina, Ronald Reagan and the 1983 invasion of Grenada (Hill, ironically, "It was a noble victory." Welles: "Yes, a famous victory") and more ...

Not surprisingly, since these were two men in the latter stages of life, the conversation turns to death at one point:

ORSON: What do you think death is?

ROGER: Sleep, a very wished for and blessed sleep and nothing more. We're not going to have any reincarnation. We had our chance. Good Lord, one season on earth, isn't that enough? Isn't it silly to think that we're going to come back?

ORSON: You would feel sorry to be surprised?

ROGER: (Laughs) I think so, yes.

ORSON: Just imagine any form of immortality. You would be sorry to find that that existed?

ROGER: I can't imagine anything but sorrow in looking back on the hopes you had that didn't materialize. I'd like to end with hope. You, in no small measure, are responsible for my decades-long ruminations on death, beginning when we used to read of the deaths in the *Bible*, which are some of the most poignant in literature. For instance, the death of David, who had been such a sexual giant. They put the beautiful Shunammite maiden, Abishag, in his bed. Remember the

passage, "Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat." Shakespeare on death is also worth attending. Falstaff, which you've played so beautifully since your youth, can bring tears to my eyes. In *Henry V* when Nell Quickly reaches up and says—

ORSON: "So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone;"

ROGER: "Then I felt his knees, and they were as cold as any stone,"

ORSON: "And so upward and upward, and all was as cold as any stone."

ROGER: "As cold as any stone." It's so poignant. It's scared me all my life.

ORSON: Well, I won't keep you any longer, but it was lovely talking to you.

ROGER: As always, it was great.

ORSON: Bye.

As I indicate in the conversation with Todd Tarbox, I think the weakest side of the Welles-Hill ruminations concerns the postwar period, the coming of the anti-communist purges and related matters. Welles strikes his most cynical and unconvincing tone in these passages. He downplays his left-wing views, speaks sarcastically about "the threat of Communism in New York City" in the 1930s, complains about his being called a "communist" when he would have been more than willing to testify before Congress about "the difference between the progressives or liberals and the Communists," and so on.

Unhappily, even left artists of Welles's stature underestimated their own work and the threat it genuinely represented. His blacklisting—and that's what it was—didn't take place for no reason. The purging of left-wing elements in film and theater was organized by the powers that be because *they* understood, better than the artists themselves, that truthful, humane, complex art always has a radicalizing and subversive impact.

Welles' "curse" was that he could not abandon his commitment to that sort of filmmaking, and that sort of filmmaking proved essentially incompatible with the American social order and its ideological needs in the postwar period. It was not bad luck, much less his own willfulness, that condemned Welles to so many years of frustration, but his social and cultural integrity.

In any case, Todd Tarbox's book is a genuine contribution to our understanding of a critical historical period and two remarkable personalities. *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts* is available from Amazon.com, from BearManor Media, and can be ordered from your local bookstore.



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