

# An interview with Todd Tarbox, author of *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*

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I recently spoke by telephone with Todd Tarbox, author of *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*. (See accompanying review.) We began with the latest news headlines:

Todd Tarbox: My condolences on the bankruptcy of Detroit! My wife, Shirley, and my son Hascy, lived in Indian Village during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Detroit's descent in recent decades is devastating.

David Walsh: It's a social disaster.

TT: Do you see any light in the stygian tunnel?

DW: Yes, but that "light" for me is mass social opposition, a social explosion.

TT: It's truly a catastrophe. From afar, although not that far, it's heartbreaking.

DW: They're saying there is no money for pensions, there's only money for bank bailouts.

TT: It's a raw and brutal time in Detroit, and the Motor City isn't an urban American outlier. A culturally uplifting book, which I would like to believe *Friendship* is, may seem to many irrelevant in our economically hard-pressed times.

DW: I don't necessarily agree. We need to pay a great deal of attention to cultural questions. I think the book, and cultural questions more generally, have everything to do with our times. If you think about the period that produced your grandfather [Roger Hill] and produced Orson Welles, it was a different sort of time.

TT: Wasn't it just?

DW: I found your book very interesting and moving, and one of the things that interests me the most are the intellectual-cultural origins of both men, Welles and Hill, what produced the world they lived in.

I'm fascinated by Welles, one of the most important filmmakers in history, in my view, but I'm also fascinated, frankly, by your grandfather.

TT: Thank you. I thought the world needed to know about Roger ("Skipper") Hill, my remarkable grandfather.

DW: He comes across as remarkably honest, sincere and principled.

TT: Yes, these are the qualities that Orson loved about him. It's my reading of Welles' life that he had very few close friends. I believe the single relationship that stuck throughout Orson's life was not only with my grandfather, but also with my grandmother, Hortense. Orson viewed them as adoptive parents, and they considered Orson as their foster son. They all nourished one another, emotionally, intellectually.

DW: How well did you know your grandparents?

TT: We were very close. One of the most delightful and enriching years of my life was my freshman year in college, which I spend

under their roof in Miami, Florida. To be a daily part of their lives and to witness their mutual affection and their commitment to reaching out and bettering the lives of others—many others—was inspiring.

DW: What formed them?

TT: My grandmother's father, Arthur Lincoln Gettys, was a socially minded lawyer in Chicago. He was always fighting the good fight, winning many and losing not a few. He was very liberal minded, and from the knee, she acquired this humane philosophy.

His parents were a great influence on him. Through their eyes and through life experiences, living in the world he quickly came to realize that there was a much in life that needed attending in and out of a classroom. His father, Noble Hill, was an entrepreneur in education, as was my grandfather, in addition to being a highly innovative educator decades ahead of his time.

DW: One of the things that interest me is the subject of Chicago in the post-Civil War period and later, at the turn of the 20th century, because I think there was an extraordinary cultural and political life there.

TT: Yes. My grandmother grew up in Chicago, and she was exposed to her father's socialist efforts, efforts on behalf of the downtrodden. His heart was in the right place. What a book he could have written on this fascinating period he lived through. Pity he didn't.

Even before they met at the University of Illinois, my grandparents were politically strong-minded, engaged liberals. I have to believe that part of Orson's socialistic leanings were as a result of my grandparent's political leanings.

DW: What were Roger Hill's notions about education?

TT: My grandfather believed that human beings were "created creators" and that an educator's responsibility was to provide young people with myriad opportunities to explore their world and develop their cognitive and creative skills, stressing that the two are not mutually exclusive. There were few adult dictates at the Todd School for Boys, but a great deal of adult counsel and collaboration, a condition that was rare in the world of education then as it is today.

My grandfather was a man of many enthusiasms—from sailing to flying—and he blended them in the educational program at Todd. He had a passion for sailing, which became an integral part of the school's curriculum. Students sailed the Great Lakes on the school's 60-foot schooner, *Sea Hawk*. He believed travel expanded the lives of children, which prompted him to buy several buses, equip them with a kitchen, a bathroom and seats that could be converted to beds, permitting students to travel on these classrooms-on-wheels throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Skipper felt that students, many of whom came from urban backgrounds, could benefit from time spent on a farm. With this in mind, he bought a 300-acre farm several miles from the campus that was run in large part by students. During the last decade of Todd's existence, my grandfather bought three Piper Cub airplanes and a Link Trainer, established the Todd Airport where a number of Todd boys learned to fly. Todd's theatre program was one of the finest in the country.

My grandfather was a great student of literature—Shakespeare, the *Bible* being two of his and Orson's literary wellsprings.

DW: The two of them, Welles and Hill, come back time and time again in *Friendship* to Shakespeare. There's something, it seems to me, about the drama of the era in which they grew up. Shakespeare always seems appropriate to any time of towering social drama.

TT: One of the more touching points in the book, as it was in life, comes when my grandfather or Welles or my grandfather beings reciting Shakespeare, or the *Bible*—and they interact, one gives a line and the other completes it, or adds the next line.

One of the things that I came to appreciate putting this book together was the catholicity of their interests and their dexterity at moving from topic to topic. I was also impressed with, and have included in the book, a number Orson's early erudite and articulate letters to my grandparents, as well as several pages from their co-authored textbook series of Shakespeare plays, *Everybody's Shakespeare*, published when Welles was 19.

In the late 1970s, I worked briefly on a project to reprint *Everybody's Shakespeare* accompanied by remastered tapes from the original Mercury Theatre's *Everybody's Shakespeare* recordings. Unfortunately, we were unable to procure the sound copyright, and without sound Welles and my grandfather convinced me that the books would be difficult to market.

DW: What did that consist of?

TT: The books consisted of four Shakespeare plays, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* with hundreds of illustrations by Orson "edited for reading and arranged for staging."

Orson and my grandfather were aware that Shakespeare's plays could be, and often were, intimidating to both student and teacher. They felt that an effective means of demystifying the Bard was to read and perform them.

DW: What was the Todd School like? You went there, I believe.

TT: Yes, I did. And, remember, this was only 20 years or so after Welles. Until the day the school closed, it was a marvelous open-ended laboratory for the young, in which to explore life and to expand one's horizons. It was so much in opposition to what exists in many schools, public or private today.

When I went to Todd, little had changed from Welles' days—in fact, some of the same teachers were still there. When it closed, in 1954, essentially for financial reasons, it was painful.

Skipper argued that Todd's closing was particularly traumatic for Orson, who had spoken a number of times in the 1940s of one day returning to Todd to teach. In 1945, he told Hedda Hopper, "I want to be a teacher. All this experience I've been piling up is equipping me for that future. I shall know how to dramatize the art of imparting knowledge ... One day I shall leave all this behind me, go back there [Todd] and give full rein to my ideas. That's when life will really begin for me." To realize less than a decade later that life would never "really begin" for him at Todd must have been a blow.

DW: The period, the early 1950s, was a difficult one for Welles, and not only him. Joseph McBride, in his book [ *What Ever Happened to*

*Orson Welles?* 2006], establishes convincingly that Welles was blacklisted.

At times, because of the bitter experiences Welles had been through, and because, in my opinion, his understanding of those experiences was quite limited, I find him somewhat self-deluded and cynical at times. This has to do with the postwar period, its traumas, and the Hollywood left as a whole. When he says, "If I had ever been asked to name Communists and I had wanted to, I could have pointed fingers for two days. They never called me. I kept asking to be called. I begged to be called because I wanted to describe the difference between the progressives or liberals and the Communists," when he says that, it's pretty ugly.

First of all, he wouldn't have done any such thing at the time. He does say, *if* "I had wanted to."

I'm not a supporter of the Communist Party and Stalinism, obviously. But the CP was not simply Stalin and the gulag. The left wing in Hollywood was not purged because of Stalin's crimes. The American ruling elite couldn't have cared less about those. They wanted to eliminate the danger of the population being exposed to critical, radical ideas.

One of the interesting things Roger Hill says, referring to the postwar period, is, "I was all starry-eyed. You were, too. We thought that we could make a world government that would work." They were all totally unprepared for what was to come in the Cold War, the McCarthyite period, including the attacks on them.

There is a lot of history in this book. You're touching on big issues, big, unresolved issues.

TT: One of the things that make this book timely is that numerous topics discussed are timeless. A friend of mine wrote me a thoughtful letter after reading *Friendship*, in which he wrote: "Your book is much more than about the friendship of Roger & Orson. To me it an outstanding perspective on almost 60 years of American and World history: 1926-1985, from when Orson entered Todd to when he died. Both Roger and Orson were true geniuses with photographic memories. I was fascinated by their ability to not only quote Shakespeare and other plays, but also the Bible. They were clearly 'ahead of their times.'"

DW: These individuals are so interesting because they were culturally, politically committed people, people who thought about things, who read and studied history and literature. I don't have to agree with everything they say, but they are serious human beings, engaged with life. And there isn't a great deal of that around, at least in public circles, these days.

TT: Thank you. I hope the book will find an audience.

DW: It deserves to.



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