Orson Welles: An “unfinished artist” in an unfinished century

Event marks 80 years since theater festival in Woodstock, Illinois

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“All of us who work in the entertainment industry are kidding ourselves: we always pretend to be the masters of our fate, and all the journalists, whether serious or not, contribute to this hoax. The truth is that we do not decide what we are going to do: we run continuously around the globe in order to try to find the funds in order to do something. Personally, I think that I have reached an age where it is useless to continue to pretend that I control the slightest thing, since it’s not true.” – Orson Welles in a 1958 interview.

An interesting event occurred May 16-17 in Woodstock, Illinois, a small town some sixty miles northwest of Chicago. The event commemorated the 80th anniversary of a theater festival orchestrated and organized in the town by 19-year-old Orson Welles, the future filmmaker. (See also: Interviews with critics and film historians about Orson Welles.)

Welles is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of the cinema. His feature films include *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Stranger* (1946), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *The Trial* (1962), *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), *The Immortal Story* (1968), *F for Fake* (1974) and *Filming Othello* (1978).

As well, he worked extensively in theater, radio and other media. Largely because of his inability to accept the constraints and limitations of the commercial film system, dozens of his works, or projects for works, remained uncompleted at the time of his death in 1985.

Woodstock, Illinois was significant in Welles’ early life because it was the location of the Todd School for Boys (1848-1954), a progressive school presided over at the time by Roger Hill, a remarkable educator and human being. Welles attended Todd from 1926 to 1931, and returned three years later to help stage the theater festival.

The recent event was addressed by a number of Welles scholars and film historians, including Joseph McBride and Jonathan Rosenbaum (each the author of several books on the filmmaker); Michael Dawson, currently working on a three-part documentary on Welles; Jeff Wilson, founder of Wellesnet.com and authority on the writer-director’s work in radio; and Josh Karp, author of the forthcoming *The Unmaking of Orson Welles’s ‘The Other Side of the Wind*,’ about one of Welles’ major unfinished works. Audience members traveled to Woodstock for the Welles commemoration from various parts of the US.

The town of 25,000 or so has a place in history for at least one other reason as well. Eugene V. Debs, railway workers’ and future Socialist Party leader, was jailed there in 1894-95 for six months following the bitter Pullman strike. According to Debs himself, he was finally won over to the socialist perspective while in Woodstock, based in part on his reading of Marx’s *Capital* and various writings by German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky. (A fascinating account by a St. Louis reporter of his July 1895 visit to Debs in the jail is available online.)

The organizers of last weekend’s commemoration were wise or fortunate enough to have invited Todd Tarbox, the grandson of Roger Hill, to open the event Friday night. Tarbox, author of *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*, offered a substantive and moving presentation, which included a brief history of the school, an account of Welles’ years there and the details of the 1934 theater festival.

Tarbox noted that the school, from a relatively early date, had insisted “that a teacher’s primary role is to educate the entire child, not just the intellect.” He cited the school’s 1928 catalogue, which remarked, “Our teachers are all specialists. Their specialty is boys, and the varied interests which make up the modern boy life … The true work of the educator is developing character, and the true educator knows that character is developed on the playground and in the social circle even better than in the school room.”

According to all accounts, including his own, Welles was fascinated by Hill as soon as he encountered him. Tarbox cited Welles’ recollections at an American Film Institute tribute in 1978: “I tried to find a way to capture the attention of this man [Hill] who fascinates me tonight as much as he did the first day I laid eyes on him. I decided that the best way was dramatics: Let’s put on some plays. Having gone to all that trouble to get his 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.”

The 1934 theater event was conceived of by Hill and Welles while the latter, all of 18 or 19, was touring with and playing leading roles in Katherine Cornell’s renowned repertory company. Ever ambitious, Welles invited the prominent co-directors of the Gate Theatre in Dublin, Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir (later memorable as Iago in Welles’ *Othello*), with whom he had previously worked, to travel to small-town Illinois and participate in the festival.

Tarbox read Welles’ lengthy and beguiling April 1934 letter to the Irish pair, which included this passage about the drama festival’s “particulars”: “With the idea of founding in America a Festival Theater in the European spirit and tradition, Woodstock … is to become the scene of a good deal of theatrical hysteria during the months of July and August. … That the press is so ready to boost the Todd Theater Festival three months before its first day of rehearsal is due not so much to their hunger for something to write about as their delight at the prospect of something new and the dignity which the names associated in this business inspire. It is going to be a pretty superlative company; you can take my word for it. Katherine Krug, Whitford Kane, Hiram Sherman, George MacCready, Brenda Forbes, and let us pray, Hilton Edwards and the inimitable Micheál, are quite enough to antidote the effect of Orson Welles in any theater.”

The festival staged three plays, *Trilby* (the Svengali story, based on the George du Maurier novel), *Hamlet* and Dmitry Merezhkovsky’s *Tsar*

Paul. Welles played both Hamlet's father (the ghost) and his uncle, the king, in Shakespeare's work. The *Chicago Tribune* 's critic exclaimed, "He reads the magnificent speeches of the ghost with fine effect, and adds new touches of character to the king. I have never before seen the murderous and incestuous Claudius acted except as an obvious and perfunctory villain. Welles, the nineteen year old master of character, puts into the role suggestions of an exceedingly corrupt Roman emperor."

Welles, along with some of his colleagues, also took the opportunity of the summer of 1934 to direct his first film, the eight-minute *The Hearts of Age*, which Tarbox described as a "surrealist satirical nod to [French writer and filmmaker] Jean Cocteau."

Other presentations over the course of the weekend dealt with Welles' first work in the theater in Ireland (at 16), the significance of his writing, the role of Todd School and Hill in his artistic and intellectual development, the origins of his radical politics, his work in radio and his frustrating, unsuccessful efforts to complete *The Other Side of the Wind* in the 1970s.

In 1968, critic Andrew Sarris noted, "That Welles … is still the youngest indisputably great American director is an ominous symptom of decadence in the industry as a whole. It can even be argued that Welles's films are now less American than European in outlook and that in ten years or less there may be no American of great artistic significance."

Welles remains the most recent "indisputably great American director."

We asked a number of the presenters and participants to explain why Welles was still such a compelling figure. The accompanying interviews contain some of their answers.

Jonathan Rosenbaum's comment about the "unfinished" character of Welles' work is intriguing, and one feels the need to expand on that thought.

In the end, so many of Welles' projects remained incomplete—including film or television adaptations of *Don Quixote, The Merchant of Venice, Moby Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*, to mention only a handful—because the conditions prevailing in the film industry, and the general social and political circumstances of the mid-20th century, rendered them impossible to complete.

At its best, Welles' career represented one of the most profoundly democratic efforts to bring complex and challenging drama and comedy to a mass audience. Only a figure like Charlie Chaplin (who used Welles' draft of a script as the basis of his *Monsieur Verdoux* in 1947) perhaps attempted something as ambitious. On the one hand, the studio executive and political authorities were inevitably made unhappy, perhaps without even understanding the implications of Welles' work, by such an effort. On the other, portions of the Stalinist-dominated left reacted with nervousness and disquiet to his "elitist" and "aristocratic" undertakings.

In the 1958 interview cited at the top of this piece, Welles observed bitterly that he had only been allowed to direct eight films in seventeen years, "and I have edited only three of them" [*Citizen Kane, Othello* and *Don Quixote*, the last of which was never finished]. He added, "The film is violently taken out of my hands each time."

Welles said in that same interview: "I am not thus in ecstasy in front of art: I am in ecstasy before the human necessity, which implies all that we do with our hands, our senses, etc. … [I]t is the [artistic] act that interests me, not the result, and I am taken with the result only when there is the smell of human sweat, or a thought."

And: "I am not interested in works of art, in posterity, in fame, only in the pleasure of experimentation itself: it is the only sphere where I feel really honest and sincere. I have no devotion for what I've done: it is really without value in my opinion. I am profoundly cynical towards my work and towards the majority of works I see in the world: but I am not cynical towards the act of working on a material. It is difficult to make this understood."

(Joseph McBride told us an interesting anecdote about Welles. When speaking to a group of film students at the University of Southern California in the 1970s, Welles advised them not to concentrate on studying film—but to study history, to study the world!)

This degree of personal and intellectual seriousness, this obsession with artistic truth, could not find satisfaction in the postwar conditions, in which conformism and stagnation, allied with the official state religion of anti-communism, eventually dominated Hollywood. Talented directors and writers continued to work in the American film industry, but no one at the heights of a Welles or a Chaplin (both essentially driven out of the US).

The notion that Welles brought his difficulties on himself is preposterous, and entirely misses the point. He was working at a cultural and intellectual level, whether he knew it or not, that presupposed a politically independent and advanced workers movement that was in the process of being devastated or suppressed by Stalinism and the Labour and trade union bureaucracies. The decline and erosion of this mass cultural basis was the greatest single cause of his "failures." Welles' work was unfinished because the 20th century itself was unfinished.

The continuing fascination with Welles is bound up with unresolved economic, political and cultural contradictions inherited from the past century. His fragmentary, partial or aborted artistic projects demand "completion." But this completion is not largely a matter of finishing individual films or scripts that have gathered dust for decades, although that may still be appropriate in a few instances. His unfinished body of work as a whole speaks to the need to address once again the cultural development of wide layers of the population. That, of course, is not simply an artistic undertaking, but, above all, a political-revolutionary one.

Genuine interest in Welles is thus not an academic enterprise. Every serious consideration of his work is a polemic against the current cultural and political conditions.

The event in Woodstock raised more questions than it could possibly answer. But a forthright study of this history and of Welles' struggles is vital to an understanding of the tasks at hand.