

100 years since the birth of Orson Welles—Part 2

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This is the second part of two. The first part of the article was posted June 4.

Welles and Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*

One of the strongest intellectual and artistic influences in filmmaker Orson Welles's life and art was undoubtedly William Shakespeare. His immersion in the dramatist's work began at an early age. One commentator notes, "As a child, Orson Welles claimed Shakespeare for his own." At 18, Welles was editing *Everybody's Shakespeare*—acting editions of three of the plays designed for teaching and staging in schools—with his mentor, Roger Hill.

Subsequently, on stage, radio, television and record, he appeared in or directed versions of *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, his own *Five Kings* (based on *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and *Henry V*), *King Lear* and *Othello*. He made films out of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, and took portions of *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, *Richard II*, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to create his *Chimes at Midnight*, centered on the figure of Falstaff.

Welles, although he valued the original words and drama, approached Shakespeare as raw material, from the point of view of his present-day purposes. In our view, his interpretations of Shakespeare are the finest ever filmed. Not because they are unduly true to the originals, although they are in something more than a superficial sense, but because they strive to be true to life and reality.

There are various sides to Welles's affinity for Shakespeare and the classics in general (Marlowe, Büchner, Hugo, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Thackeray, Stevenson and others). They provided him with the built-in language and eloquence he needed as the basis for his investigations of modern society. They offered a criticism of the vulgarity and stupidity of so much in contemporary culture and public life.

Shakespeare in particular becomes a kind of indispensable guide, an entryway into the world of lofty drama and passion. To the artist who can assimilate and master his work, Shakespeare offers language, drama, showmanship, entertainment, magic, history, sparkling wit, physical comedy, and both personal and political triumph and annihilation—an artistic universe, in short.

Critic Robin Wood commented in a 1976 essay, "What is important is Welles's evident partial identification with Shakespeare, manifested in the efforts to create a visual-poetic world equivalent to the 'world' of a Shakespeare tragedy; in the constant reaching out for a tragic weight and grandeur; in the attempts to find a cinematic style that will fulfill a creative function analogous to that of Shakespeare's verse." (*Personal Views: Explorations in Film*)

Did Welles succeed in creating this "equivalent," and not merely in a

formal sense, but, changing what had to be changed, a world equal to Shakespeare's in terms of objectivity and comprehensiveness? If his ambition was that grand, and it most likely was, he deserves to be evaluated by a similarly high standard.

Welles's *Macbeth* (1948), one of the most urgent renditions of Shakespeare on film, sets out to prove that contemporary politics are one with the play's vision of murder and tyranny in crisis. The film was shot in the summer of 1947, in the shadow of the war and the Holocaust and as the American ruling elite was undertaking a sharp shift to the right.

Virtually every moment of the film is saturated with conspiracy and intrigue. It is a work that terrifies, and showcases—through the grimmest and most aesthetic drama—the barbarism committed by barbarians in power. The insidious goals of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* are single-minded and delusory. Vicious animals clad in animal skins.

"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty," says Lady Macbeth in one of her blood-curdling speeches. Utterances, that, in Welles's hands, bring to mind the monstrous inhumanity of yesterday's—and today's—rulers. Despite being completed in three weeks on a shoestring budget, essentially shot as a B movie for a studio that specialized in Westerns, the movie has a remarkable poetic intensity, springing from its striving for "tragic weight and grandeur." This is further enhanced by its macabre sets and, most especially, the performance of Welles, a great Shakespeare tragedian.

In his *Othello* (1952), Welles also plays the title character, a Moorish general in the Venetian army who has secretly married Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier), the daughter of a leading senator. Iago (Micheál Mac Liammóir), an ensign in the same military, hates *Othello* and plots (successfully) to make him jealous of his new wife. Jack J. Jorgens in his *Shakespeare on Film* categorizes Iago as one of the newly emerging bourgeois figures, "familiar students of Machiavelli, the humorless, brutal, heartless users of men."

The story of the immense obstacles Welles overcame to create *Othello* over the course of several years is elegantly told in Mac Liammóir's *Put Money in thy Purse*. By now exiled in Europe, Welles begged and borrowed funds, shut down production when funds ran out, shot footage in various countries and continents. The result nonetheless is artistically and intellectually unified. More than in any of his previous films, one feels, Welles has constructed each individual shot or sequence to convey a specific idea or theme.

The decisive centrality of Iago—the embodiment of envy, slander and back-stabbing, who spits out "I hate the Moor" and never ceases to plot against his supposed friend and mentor—in Welles's version presumably also speaks to the witch-hunting hysteria then dominating Hollywood. (In 1982, Welles termed director and informer Elia Kazan "a traitor who sold to McCarthy all his companions...and then made a film called *On the Waterfront* which was a celebration of the informer.")

In *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), Welles carves out his story about Falstaff

from a number of plays, in particular the two parts of *Henry IV*. The fat, landless knight (played by Welles), always broke, often drunk, hangs around in taverns with the rowdy, youthful Prince Hal (Keith Baxter), the son of King Henry IV. The reigning king, a usurper himself and isolated in a prison-like environment, competes for Hal's loyalty and affection with Falstaff, although the final outcome is hardly in doubt.

In Welles's opinion, Falstaff was "the most completely good man, in all drama. His faults are so small and he makes tremendous jokes out of little faults. But his goodness is like bread, like wine...." Against Falstaff, stand King Henry and the court, and "society's need for order, duty, and constraint" (Jorgens). To make himself into a monarch, Hal has no choice but to betray his friends and his own better nature. Falstaff's sad fate, in Welles's film, to die rejected and alone, represents both the end of a perhaps mythological "Merrie England" and the inevitable suppression of uncontrolled human appetite in the rising social order. As Falstaff warns the prince early on, "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!"

Despite minor difficulties, most of them the result once again of budget constraints, *Chimes at Midnight* may well be Welles's finest overall accomplishment. All in all, one might say that with Shakespeare, Welles was on his firmest ground. However, both of those statements, if true, at the same time register something of a reservation, a criticism.

Shakespeare offered Welles a "ready-made," integral artistic and intellectual framework. But the filmmaker, like any other artist, was confronted with the task of creating that sort of a framework for himself, of developing a fully worked-out conception of twentieth-century life and society. And it would be false and misleading to suggest that he ever did that, or that the conditions for such an artistic achievement, which implies a profounder grasp of the historical and social process than Welles or any of his contemporaries possessed, existed in the postwar period.

In some fashion or other, genuine Marxism, in the tradition of Trotsky and Soviet critic and Left Oppositionist Aleksandr Voronsky—not Stalinist "socialist realism," on the one hand, or Existentialist or Frankfurt School-type pessimism and subjectivism, on the other—would have had to exert a far greater influence on intellectual life, and on masses of human beings, than it did.

It is an irony, and a serious problem, that Welles felt more confident in recreating the universe of Macbeth or Falstaff than he did in representing the realities of the postwar world, in America or Europe. He demonstrated perceptive insights, provided scintillating glimpses into the latter realities in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Mr. Arkadin* (1955) and *Touch of Evil* (1958), but their inconsistency, as well as the unpleasant cynicism of his adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1962), speaks to some of the difficulties.

Why was Welles unable to "break through," so to speak, from his Shakespeare productions to a similarly all-embracing engagement with contemporary life?

We should first look at a number of the films Welles directed in the postwar period, and then return to that question.

The Stranger, The Lady from Shanghai, Mr. Arkadin and Touch of Evil

Filmed in late 1945, *The Stranger* is one of Welles's lesser works. The director plays Franz Kindler, a Nazi war criminal (based on Martin Bormann) hiding out in a quaint Connecticut town under the name Charles Rankin. He is being pursued by a Nazi-hunter, Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson). The turning point in the movie occurs when Kindler-Rankin blurts out that "Marx wasn't a German. Marx was a Jew," thus effectively blowing his cover.

The movie contains documentary footage of the horrors of the

concentration camps—a first for a fiction film. Welles's most conventional work is nonetheless a serious warning about the danger of a revival of fascism in the postwar world. This threat is contrasted to a complacent, trivial-minded American community, seemingly insulated from the European catastrophe.

Welles undertook to direct Cole Porter's *Around the World*, an adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, on stage in early 1946. The extravagant production involved 38 sets and, according to Welles biographer Bret Wood, "an authentic Japanese circus troupe, a live elephant, a train crossing the Rocky Mountains and a troop of Marines." When German playwright Bertolt Brecht, looking for a director for his *Galileo*, came to see the musical piece in April 1946, he was greatly impressed. He told Welles and his collaborator, Richard Wilson, "This is the greatest thing I have seen in American theater. This is wonderful. This is what theater should be." (James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*)

After producer Mike Todd pulled out, Welles put his own money into the show, which closed in New York after 75 performances. He ended up losing some \$320,000, a debt that would take him years to pay off. Welles also borrowed money from Columbia Pictures president Harry Cohn, in exchange for directing a film for Columbia. That film was *The Lady from Shanghai*, based on a mediocre crime novel, *If I Die Before I Wake* (1938), by Sherwood King, which aspires to James M. Cain-type "poetry of the tabloid murder" and largely fails. The film uses little of King's book, except its basic plot conceit.

One of Welles's most dazzling and disturbing films, *The Lady from Shanghai* centers on a Spanish Civil War veteran, killer of a Franco spy, and sailor, "Black Irish" Michael O'Hara (Welles)—the "most notorious waterfront agitator" and cop-hater—who is lured into a scheme that eventually involves his becoming the fall guy for a murder.

The bait in this case is the exquisite Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth, Welles's wife, with whom he was going through a break-up at the time), the spouse of bottom-feeding criminal attorney Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane). "When I start out to make a fool of myself...there's very little can stop me," O'Hara tells us in a voiceover. He goes to work for the Bannisters, to help sail their yacht from New York to the West Coast via the Panama Canal.

Arthur Bannister's equally repellent partner, George Grisby (played with memorable, ghoulish relish by Glenn Anders), a former member of a pro-Franco committee, makes O'Hara a strange (and unlikely) proposition: that he help Grisby fake his own death and disappearance in return for \$5,000. Of course, everything goes wrong for O'Hara....

A great deal of artistry has gone into skewering the homicidal, money-mad rich. (O'Hara: "I've always found it sanitary to be broke.") Throughout the film, Welles turns to the image of sharks. The scene of giant sharks swimming in the background in an aquarium is remarkable. But the human sharks, society's profiteers, "mad with their own blood," whose natural instinct is to tear each other apart, are far more dangerous.

In *The Stranger*, a Nazi lived underground in America. But native-born fascist sympathizers have no need to hide in *The Lady from Shanghai*, they largely rule the roost. Grisby, Bannister and Bannister's hired detective and subsequently a blackmailer, Broome (Ted de Corsia), exude something extremely nasty. And Elsa proves to be the deadliest of all the conspirators. The movie's famed finale is a cat-and-mouse sequence shot in a fun house hall of mirrors. *The Lady from Shanghai* is one of those films made in the late 1940s, before the wholesale purge of left-wing figures took effect, that looked at postwar American life and found something quite ugly and troubling.

Welles left the US for Europe in late November 1947, as the Hollywood blacklist was being imposed. And whether, as Joseph McBride passionately argues in *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?*, his "political and cultural activities...caused him to be blacklisted" officially, so to speak, or whether his departure was more an act of revulsion against

an ever filthier climate, Welles was unquestionably driven out of the American film industry in the late 1940s and never truly able to find a home in it again.

Reflecting both the general state of the world and his own ever more precarious situation as an exiled and nomadic director, Welles's films in the late 1940s and into the 1950s grew increasingly unstable, fragmentary, "out of joint."

Despite its numerous problems, *Mr. Arkadin* is a masterpiece in its own, delirious, vertiginous fashion. Welles plays the fabulously wealthy and secretive tycoon Gregory Arkadin, whose physical appearance oddly suggests a combination of Neptune, god of the sea, and Stalin (who had died in 1953, a year before the filming took place).

Obsessively protective of his daughter, Raina (Paola Mori)—who calls him an ogre "capable of anything"—Arkadin hires an American cigarette smuggler and fortune-hunter, Guy Van Stratten (Robert Arden), to "rediscover his past," despite running "the greatest private spy service on earth." Arkadin claims to suffer from amnesia about his life prior to 1927, but his real intent is to destroy anyone who was part of or knew about his earlier criminal activities—including, ultimately, investigator Van Stratten, who falls in love with his daughter.

Welles's film, with its menacing soundtrack and baroque backdrops, is a succession of encounters with eccentric characters, including the operator of a flea circus (Mischa Auer), a decrepit antiques dealer and fence (Michael Redgrave), a dying ex-convict (Akim Tamiroff) and the former head of a "white slavery" ring (Katina Paxinou).

A sense of foreboding is ever-present, as is the malaise of the characters. Everyone must run for cover from the vindictive titan. In one remarkable scene, Guy's girlfriend and cohort, Mily (marvelously played by Patricia Medina), is on a yacht in rough seas with Arkadin. Drunk, she is whipped around the shifting cabin, followed closely by the financier, all the time revealing information that tightens the noose around her own neck.

Welles referred to the fate of *Mr. Arkadin*, which he had wanted to make "in the spirit of Dickens," as the "biggest disaster" of his life because the film was taken out of his hands, and released in various versions, none of which he approved. Jonathan Rosenbaum has documented this in "The Seven Arkadins" (*Discovering Orson Welles*).

Welles returned to the US in late 1955. In early 1957, he directed the filming of *Touch of Evil*, based on *Badge of Evil* (1956) by Whit Masterson, for Universal Pictures. The film takes place on both sides of the US-Mexico border and involves the investigation into the murder of an American couple just inside the US by a car bomb planted in Mexico.

Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston), a Mexican drug enforcement official, and his wife, Susie (Janet Leigh), are nearby when the bomb goes off. Vargas becomes involved in the investigation, although he has no jurisdiction in the US. Heading the inquiry is a legendary police captain, Hank Quinlan (Welles). Vargas and his wife, who are on their honeymoon, face threats and violence because he is in the midst of pursuing a drug case against the Grandi crime family.

Infuriated and threatened by Vargas, Quinlan joins forces with "Uncle Joe" Grandi (Tamiroff) to discredit the Mexican official by framing his wife on drug charges and accusing them both of being addicts. The scheme unravels primarily because Quinlan's trusted assistant, Sgt. Pete Menzies (Joseph Calleia), becomes disgusted with the methods of his longtime friend and mentor.

As we noted in 1998: "*Touch of Evil* is justly famous for a number of things. First of all, its opening crane shot, lasting several minutes, which follows both the convertible carrying the time bomb and the married pair as they all proceed toward the US border on the Mexican side. Following their progress, the camera reveals a tawdry, impoverished town.... The shot is more than a technical tour de force. The use of one extended take, which visually unifies so many elements, suggests a single, indivisible universe and it is a universe in which a layer of corruption coats virtually

everyone and everything."

The film is also about racism and American chauvinism, the haves and have-nots, police corruption and the abuse of power. In a well-known sequence, Quinlan mocks Vargas for having "some very special ideas about police procedure. He seems to think it don't matter whether killers hang or not so long as we obey the fine print." Vargas replies that, "In any free country, a policeman is supposed to enforce the law, and the law protects the guilty as well as the innocent." Quinlan grunts, "Our job is tough enough." Vargas: "It's supposed to be. A policeman's job is only easy in a police state."

These three films, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Mr. Arkadin* and *Touch of Evil*, are vivid, often electrifying black-and-white works, which make devastating use of light and shadow and whose camera movement and angles attempt to get at the truth beneath the conformist surface. They are often lacerating in their critiques. The contempt for those in power, for the financial racketeer, for the police thug, for the toady, is genuine and sensuously felt. They reflect disillusionment with the promises of American capitalism and an almost hallucinatory response to the moral and political terrors of the Cold War period.

But can one legitimately claim that these works sum up the epoch in an important and exhaustive manner? Brilliant as they often are, the three films are unquestionably one-sided. They tend toward the treatment of the grotesque, toward observing the damage wreaked on certain types of vulnerable personalities by the reactionary, stagnant times. Grisby, Bannister, O'Hara, Van Stratten, Raina, Menzies, Suzie Vargas, Grandi and the rest are fascinating, but do their dilemmas speak to the general experience of wide layers of the population? Does that "general experience" even register with the filmmaker?

And, to be frank, much of Welles's attention remains fixed, a little Nietzsche-like, on his "great men," such as Arkadin and Quinlan, and their particular quandaries. And this is a problem.

To have been the Shakespeare of American life would have required a different vantage point and historical perspective. In his *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky makes a point in the concluding chapter, "Revolutionary and Socialist Art," that has a crucial relevance in this regard.

He first emphasizes the world-shattering changes produced by the emergence of bourgeois society, which "broke up human relationships into atoms, and gave them unprecedented flexibility and mobility." He associates Shakespeare with these developments. In the Elizabethan playwright's tragedies, "the fate of the ancients and the passions of the mediaeval Christians are crowded out by individual human passions, such as love, jealousy, revengeful greediness, and spiritual dissension."

These great passions, Trotsky argues, were carried to such a high degree of tension in Shakespeare that they lost their individual character, became "super-personal," and were transformed into a fate of a certain type. "The jealousy of Othello, the ambition of Macbeth, the greed of Shylock, the love of Romeo and Juliet, the arrogance of Coriolanus, the spiritual wavering of Hamlet, are all of this kind."

Bourgeois society had a great aim for itself in its ascendant, revolutionary phase: "Personal emancipation was its name. Out of it grew the dramas of Shakespeare and Goethe's *Faust*. Man placed himself in the center of the universe, and therefore in the center of art also. This theme sufficed for centuries. In reality, all modern literature has been nothing but an enlargement of this theme."

However, with the decline and decay of capitalism, this individualistic theme loses its strength and purpose, is relegated more and more into the sphere of a new mythology, "without soul or spirit." In Ibsen, one of the most interesting of the late nineteenth-century playwrights, one might say, this process is already fairly far advanced. At a far higher stage of degeneration, much of the art of the past several decades has been nothing but a working over, because enlargement is not really the issue here, of

this tired theme. The art associated with the politics of identity—i.e., the aggressive promotion of the upper middle class self at the expense of everyone and everything—is the final resting place of this once “great aim.”

Tragedy based on the passions of the individual, Trotsky observes, is “too flat” for our day. “Why? Because we live in a period of social passions. The tragedy of our period lies in the conflict between the individual and the collectivity, or in the conflict between two hostile collectivities in the same individual. Our age is an age of great aims. This is what stamps it.”

This is where Welles, as well as of course many other less talented figures, falls down. Whether or not Shakespeare can successfully be stretched and pulled in this manner, it’s fine to do a *Julius Caesar* that references the rise of fascism or a *Macbeth* set in post-revolutionary Haiti, as Welles did in the 1930s. These were urgent experiments of a kind, and entirely welcome. Welles blew apart the mediocre box in which Shakespeare is normally held prisoner.

However, it’s a different matter when one attempts to stretch and pull modern American or European life and force it into the musty mold of individual passions and dramas. And all sorts of somewhat artificial means of resuscitation (unusual camera movements and angles, certain outlandish performances) do not solve the problem. Welles’s films of the time are too uneven, they teeter on occasion, they fail to provide the broadest picture. Welles never achieved the equilibrium in *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Mr. Arkadin* and *Touch of Evil* that he did in his Shakespeare adaptations, although he was perhaps more successful than anyone else at depicting aspects of the subjective experience of the postwar period.

The conflict “between the individual and the collectivity” and “the conflict between two hostile collectivities in the same individual” did not disappear in the 1950s, although it appeared to many as though they had. It was necessary to trace out these processes beneath the surface of temporary economic prosperity and psychic conformism (or annihilation). Welles took the line of least resistance in that regard.

And the impact of the general cultural decline and the growth of intensely subjective and pessimistic, anti-socialist moods within the intelligentsia in the postwar years should not be discounted. Personally and artistically vivacious, determined to entertain and enlighten audiences, Welles never gave in to those moods entirely. But the sting of his final words in this 1964 comment to an interviewer ought to be taken as an indication of the overall difficulties: “I absolutely disagree with those works of art, those novels, those films that, these days, speak about despair. I do not think an artist may take total despair as a subject; we are too close to it in daily life.”

Indeed, his version of Kafka’s *The Trial*, a series of brilliantly orchestrated, but “hateful” and “repellent” (in critic Andrew Sarris’s words) set pieces, which plunges deeper and deeper into hopelessness and ends with a mini-mushroom cloud, is testimony to the very “closeness” of this despair. Welles rose to the occasion once more with Shakespeare and *Chimes at Midnight*, more satisfyingly transplanting his anxieties and delights to the Late Middle Ages.

By the late 1960s, after the commercial failure of *Chimes at Midnight* (helped along by *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who dismissed the film as an often “incomprehensible” and “confusing patchwork of scenes and characters”), a certain demoralization seems to have set in, although Welles actively continued to pursue numerous projects. The final completed films (*The Immortal Story* [1968], *F for Fake* [1974] and *Filming Othello* [1978]), although each contains amusing or thoughtful moments, have a more resigned and passive tone.

An entertaining documentary-essay about “trickery, fraud and lies,” *F for Fake*, for example, concerns Elmyr de Hory, the “greatest art faker in the world”...a “true Paganini of the palette,” and his biographer Clifford Irving, who became notorious for producing his own forgery—a faked

autobiography of reclusive mogul Howard Hughes.

One of Welles’s targets is the quackery of art experts, “the new oracles—god’s own gift to the fakers.” While there may be some truth to the view that the “art world has been a huge confidence trick,” if Welles wants to be taken at face value, he is wrong when he contends that the artist is fundamentally a conman and a liar, even of a peculiar type. True, the artwork is not the same as the thing represented. Nonetheless, it conveys a relative objective truthfulness. Unfortunately, in its overall sensibility, *F for Fake* tends to call into question whether objective reality is the basis of a work of art and even gives comfort to nascent post-modernist moods.

Conclusion

Welles was a remarkable artist, one of the most immensely gifted ever produced in the US. He brought to bear his depth of culture, sense of drama and understanding of history and society to the world and times he lived in, with poetic and evocative, if flawed, results. Watching his films is one of the great pleasures and challenges afforded by the cinema.

This was a man who for much of his life stuck his neck out, a man whose art reflected both an intense fascination with and concern for humanity and a protest at the conditions under which it lived.

To his considerable credit, Welles repeatedly insisted that the first task of the filmmaker was *to know something about the world*. The prospective filmmaker, he argued in an interview, “should be taught as much of our whole culture as we are capable of synthesizing. Synthesizing, not specializing. To make a film of today’s world, we should strive to comprehend as much as possible of the human accomplishment in these last twenty thousand years.”

And further: “Hold a mirror up to nature—that’s Shakespeare’s message to the actor [in *Hamlet*]. How much more does that apply, and how much more is it true, to the creator of a film? If you don’t know something about the nature to which you’re holding up your mirror, how limited must the work be!”

Welles’s films at their best represent an argument for thinking about, and acting upon, the complexities of life. He indicated an interest only in that art “when there is the smell of human sweat, or a thought.” His finest work makes the case that art needs to trace out human behavior and social relationships, and that this can be done in a poetic, tough-minded, accessible and elegant manner.

Concluded



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