

Orson Welles symposium at University of Michigan

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To mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of American film director Orson Welles (1915-1985), the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor held a symposium last week, “Wellespring: A Centenary Celebration of the Inexhaustible Inspiration of Orson Welles.”

The university’s library is the home of the largest assortment of Welles archival papers and documents in the world. The material was donated by Oja Kodar, Welles’ companion for the last two decades of his life, and Christopher Wilson, the son of Richard Wilson, Welles’ longtime colleague and collaborator.

Kodar and Christopher Wilson took part in the events last week to discuss Welles’ work and their own connections with it. Experts on Welles, including Catherine Benamou of the University of California-Irvine and film critic-historian Jonathan Rosenbaum, also spoke on aspects of the filmmaker’s life and career.

In conjunction with that, a number of Welles’ completed films were screened: *Chimes at Midnight*, 1965; *The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942; *Mr. Arkadin*, 1955; *Othello*, 1952; *Touch of Evil*, 1958; *F for Fake*, 1973. In addition, *It’s All True* (1993, which includes a reconstruction of one of Welles’ unfinished segments for a film shot in South America), *Too Much Johnson* (Welles’ 1938 silent comedy, intended to be part of a theater presentation) and *Magician: The Astonishing Life and Work of Orson Welles* (a 2014 documentary by Chuck Workman) were also presented.

Stefan Droessler, curator at the Munich Film Museum, was on hand to introduce excerpts from a number of Welles’ unfinished films and some of his work for television.

The University of Michigan event is one of many taking place in various parts of the world to commemorate the centenary of the filmmaker’s birth in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Kodar, a sculptor, actress and filmmaker, was quite charming and affecting (and dramatic!) in discussing some of her memories of Welles during the years 1961 to 1985 and in particular his vicissitudes in the film industry. “Being with Orson, somehow it was like being with an element of nature. If he was in a bad mood, it was really cloudy. If he was happy, birds were singing.”

She movingly described how she had secretly witnessed Welles crying one night in Hollywood while watching *The Magnificent Ambersons* on television, a film that was mangled by RKO, the film studio that produced it.

Kodar noted that Welles, whom she met in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (now Croatia) in 1961, had wanted to make a documentary film about Yugoslavia’s Marshal Josip Broz Tito. Kodar explained that the struggle of the Yugoslav partisans in World War II, led by Tito, “in the fight against the fascists, they came from all over, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria ... was epochal.”

Asked what was her favorite of Welles’ film, ~~Chimes~~ *Midnight*, Welles’ adaptation of several of Shakespeare’s history plays centering on the figure of Sir John Falstaff. She suggested it was the filmmaker’s own favorite too.

There were quite intriguing aspects of the University of Michigan Welles symposium, but it tended toward idolatry, as is perhaps the case with all such events dedicated to the work of a respected artist, especially a relatively embattled and “controversial” one. It is to Welles’ credit that he still arouses passionate feelings, thirty years after his death.

As we noted in our recent comment on Welles’ centenary, his films possess great strengths, but it helps no one to close one’s eyes to the weaknesses or almost inevitable artistic and intellectual problems bound up with the postwar era. There are or should be no gods in this field.

The two intriguing programs hosted and introduced by Stefan Droessler of the Munich Film Museum brought out some of these issues. (After Welles’ death in 1985, Kodar donated many of Welles’ incomplete works to the Munich museum for preservation and restoration.)

To a certain extent, the difficulties in Welles’ work emerge more clearly in the fragmentary or unfinished works, whereas the artistic luster and relatively integral character of the completed works tend to smooth out or push to the background the internal contradictions and gaps.

The first night Droessler screened portions of *The Deep*, *Moby Dick*, *The Other Side of the Wind*, *The Dreamers* and *The Magic Show*.

Based on a 1963 novel by Charles F. Williams (later made into a film under the book’s original title, *Dead Calm*, in 1989 by Philip Noyce), *The Deep* was a Welles project from 1966 to 1969. Intended as a more commercially viable undertaking, the thriller featured Laurence Harvey (whose death in 1973 put an end to any hopes of finishing the film), Jeanne Moreau, Michael Bryant, Kodar and Welles himself. The scenes screened are provocative, but the whole effort seems rather slight.

Revealingly (and we referred to this issue in our recent appreciation), Welles seems most powerful and grounded in these various unfinished pieces when he has a script from Shakespeare or, in the case of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville. Welles staged *Moby Dick* (*Rehearsed*), his two-act play based on the novel, in Britain in 1955, with actors Patrick McGoohan, Gordon Jackson and Joan Plowright. In 1971, Welles read portions of the novel against a blue background with various elements suggesting the sea and navigation. There are only 22 minutes of footage, but the reading is riveting.

Best known, or perhaps most notorious, of the fragments is *The*

Other Side of the Wind, which Welles and numerous collaborators worked on from 1970 to 1976 or so. The story concerns the last day in the life of an aging, Ernest Hemingway-like film director, Jake Hannaford (played by director John Huston).

It is not all that easy to make sense of the envisioned final product from the pieces Droessler showed, because they seem so different in tone and approach, perhaps intentionally. The most promising sequences seem a scathing critique of the “Hollywood scene” in the 1970s, complete with cynical studio executives, various hangers-on and toadies (including Peter Bogdanovich and Henry Jaglom), intrusive paparazzi, vindictive or single-minded critics, and more.

The scenes of leather-clad, terribly “cool” John Dale (Bob Random) pursuing Kodar, as an American Indian, on motorcycle and then on foot in a maze of glass-fronted skyscrapers seem foolish and pretentious, but they may well have been meant as a spoof. Even if it was part of a parody, however, the eventual sex scene in a car between Random and Kodar is particularly gratuitous and unlike Welles.

The film project remains in limbo forty years later. An effort to raise \$2 million to complete the work for a 2015 release is currently under way. In Ann Arbor, Kodar expressed skepticism about ever seeing *The Other Side of the Wind* released.

Welles was an admirer of Danish author Isak Dinesen (pseudonym for Karen Blixen) and attempted to organize a film entitled *The Dreamers*, based on two of her short stories. The most remarkable thing about the twenty minutes of rather tedious footage Welles directed is his transformation, in his Hollywood home, into a 19th-century Dutch-Jewish merchant who recounts the story of Pellegrina Leoni, an opera singer who disappeared after losing the ability to sing in a fire. Otherwise, the project strikes one as a poor and unpromising idea. *The Magic Show*, highlighting Welles’ interest in magic and sleight of hand also seems slight and somewhat stale.

The various television fragments, part two of Droessler’s program, underscore the degree to which Welles, through no fault of his own, was at loose ends throughout much of the 1950s. An exile in Europe, no doubt repelled by the anti-Communist witch-hunts and the generally conformist climate in Eisenhower America, Welles appears bewildered and quite lost at times, groping around for a way to pursue his artistic interests ... and earn a living. One feels that he was shocked by the changes in America, almost shell-shocked, which have resulted in his losing the wide, generally left-wing audience he attracted on radio and in the theater in the late 1930s.

Welles made a series of six 15-minute commentaries, *Orson Welles’ Sketch Books*, for the BBC in 1955 (they are available at YouTube). They are charming and light, perhaps a little too self-consciously light. Again, one cannot help having the feeling that Welles is trying to win back a real or imaginary audience by playing the deep-voiced, knowing, but self-deprecating raconteur. In any event, Droessler showed the fourth episode, “People I Miss,” in which he discusses prompts, magic, Harry Houdini and John Barrymore. (The third episode, devoted to the police and police abuse, is perhaps the most “radical” of the series.)

Welles directed an innovative television pilot in 1956, *The Fountain of Youth* (based on a short story by John Collier), for a proposed Desilu production (which was never made), the company run by Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball. A middle-aged scientist revenges himself on a young woman who has jilted him and her new lover. The 25-minute drama uses still pictures, back projection, interventions by the narrator (Welles) to tell its amusing and somewhat cynical story.

In *Viva Italia*, or *Portrait of Gina*, a quite unsettling mood prevails.

On the surface, the 1958 pilot for another proposed series that came to naught, *Around the World with Orson Welles*, the 30-minute film is a casual look at Italy, Italians and film star Gina Lollobrigida in particular. Welles interviews, or appears to interview (in fact, clearly, his close-ups were filmed in a different place and at a different time than those of his subjects), director-actor Vittorio De Sica and actor Rossano Brazzi about the peculiarities of being an Italian celebrity, more praised abroad than at home. Welles was married at the time to Italian Paola Mori.

There is something a little desperate and even distasteful about Welles traipsing after Lollobrigida, a pleasant but minor figure in world cinema, at a time when it was very difficult for him to carry forward his own film projects. Beneath his perfectly affable demeanor, one can sense a degree of anger and bitterness, perhaps most forcefully expressed in the somewhat chaotic and apparently nonchalant organization of the program.

Welles is amusing as host and performer in *London*, shot in 1968 and 1971. There is a bit of *Monty Python*-type carrying on in the sequences, as Welles plays a doddering old lord, a decrepit female flower-seller, a “one-man band,” four decaying “clubmen” and other parts. Nonetheless, it is startling that there is no reference, no hint, in any of the segments shot in London of the explosive social conditions, quasi-general strikes and mass radicalization of the population at the time. Welles was oriented in another direction.

The final segment Droessler introduced brought together Welles’ various performances as Shylock, the Jewish money-lender, from *The Merchant of Venice*. Here, again, Welles is sure of himself and his material. Particularly striking, and startling, is Welles’ appearance on the Dean Martin variety show in 1967, in which he recites Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech. Can anyone imagine such an occurrence on primetime television today?

Unhappily, according to Joseph McBride (*What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?*), the *Merchant of Venice* piece, “performed as an outburst of righteous anger,” was an exception, most of the time Welles tried “to look like a good sport as he mugged his way through comedy skits and even sweated through soft-shoe musical routines with Martin and other guests.”

Altogether, the Welles event and Droessler’s presentation in particular had their fascinating elements, but to the extent they demonstrated what intellectual and artistic compromises Welles made in the postwar years, and how disoriented he was himself by the political traumas of the time, they may have contradicted the somewhat uncritical approach of the organizers.



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