

# *Marching Song*, play co-written by Orson Welles about abolitionist John Brown, to be published after 85 years

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During the summer of 1932, 17-year-old Orson Welles, with the assistance of his mentor and lifelong friend Roger Hill, wrote a drama about anti-slavery fighter John Brown (1800-1859). The authors could not interest any New York theaters in staging their work at the time. As a result, Welles and Hill were obliged, in Frederick Engels' phrase, to abandon "the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice." The play has received one production, consisting of a few performances, at the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois, where Hill was the headmaster, in 1950.

Fortunately, Roger Hill's grandson Todd Tarbox has now edited the play and it will be published by Rowman & Littlefield in August. This is a significant cultural event. *Marching Song* is an important historical drama.

The drama consists of eleven scenes, set in Concord, Massachusetts; Pine City, Kansas; an estate in Virginia; a farm in Maryland that served as Brown's headquarters; and, finally, Harpers Ferry—the scene of Brown's fateful raid—and Charles Town—where the great abolitionist was hanged—both in what was then Virginia (now West Virginia). The action takes place from some time in 1857 to December 1859, on the eve of the Civil War.

The numerous characters include Brown, several of his sons and his daughter Annie, John Henry Kagi and other members of "John Brown's Provisional Army," slaveowner Colonel Lewis William Washington (great-grandnephew of George Washington), abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Henry David Thoreau, various journalists, pro-slavery "Border Ruffians," Army First Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart (the leader of the company of US Marines who captured Brown, and future Confederate cavalry commander during the Civil War) and John Wilkes Booth (a witness to Brown's execution and, in April 1865, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln).

The action in *Marching Song* extends from Brown's efforts to find support among Eastern abolitionists, to his battles with pro-slavery forces in "bleeding Kansas," to the raid he leads on a federal armory at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, which results in his arrest, trial and death.

The play opens outside an abolitionist gathering in Concord, Massachusetts. The attendees are debating, "How to abolish slavery—with moral persuasion or force," in the words of a Boston journalist covering the meeting. He later explains, "Oh, there're a few that talk about some sort of armed attack. But they just talk. There's only one man in the world crazy enough to really do anything, and that's—John Brown." Brown, in fact, is on hand.

Henry David Thoreau leads the most militant local faction. "On the 'sacred rights of property,'" he observes, "you will find John Brown as heretical as myself. And even you or the United States Government will find it hard to convince either of us that one man owns another. ... Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are

laws to be enforced simply because they were made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good?"

Several complex sequences take place in a combined saloon and general store in rural Kansas, near the Missouri border, the scene of brutal fighting between pro- and anti-slavery forces. John Henry Kagi, the son of a blacksmith and an agnostic, described by the authors of *Marching Song* as "the rarest of all combinations: a cynic and a hero," shows up, looking for Brown. He will ultimately become Brown's second-in-command.

Brown, as the result of his role in various raids and battles, including the so-called Pottawatomie, Kansas massacre in May 1856, in which five militant pro-slavery settlers were killed, has a fearsome reputation. As a journalist explains, Brown is a "kind of bogey in Kansas. Just whisper 'John Brown' to an army of border ruffians and—Psst!—they're back in Missouri!"

In fact, Brown stares down a group of armed thugs, makes them lower their rifles and has one of their number, guilty of murdering a slavery opponent, taken out and executed. His own son, John Brown, Jr. has been driven mad by events, including the Pottawatomie incident and his mistreatment by pro-slavery forces ("They marched him for weeks in a chain gang").

Kagi's skepticism runs up against the quasi-mysticism of some of Brown's men:

KAGI: So, you're one of those who calls John Brown a fanatic. I never could.

ANDERSON: Don't misunderstand me. Old Brown is a greater man than you and I will ever know. He sees a great light and he speaks—with God. (*Quickly*) I don't know your religious opinions, Mr. Kagi, but—

KAGI: (*Shortly*) I have none.

ANDERSON: (*Continuing*) But there is a God, call it a spirit if you will, an idea, a principal, a Great Unrest, it amounts to the same thing. A God—walking these prairies. You may not know it, Mr. Kagi, but you're seeking John Brown so that you may find that God—

KAGI: Nonsense—

Later, Brown and his handful of men stand off several hundred:

KAGI: No reinforcements?! You can't hold back an army with six men!

JOHN BROWN: I certainly can, sir, an army of bullies. I could hold back six such armies. A handful of men strategically placed, who respect themselves and fear God too much to fear anything human—can resist the universe.

Scenes V and VI, set in and around Colonel Washington's home in Virginia, may prove controversial because Welles presents as characters several "house slaves" who are quite content with their conditions and react with bewilderment and then amusement (in dialect) to the idea of taking up arms and fighting for freedom. The playwright seems to be indicating why Brown had difficulties in rallying the dispersed and

downtrodden slaves to his cause. However, Brown's immediate "army," as the drama also reveals, has several former slaves who are the most formidable and courageous fighters.

In Scene VII, at the Kennedy Farm, "John Brown's headquarters near Harpers Ferry, on the Maryland side," we meet the members of Brown's "Provisional Army." Instead of the 4,500 men Kagi had envisioned when planning the military action aimed at inciting slaves to rise up and carry out a rebellion across the South, Brown's army consisted of 21 men, 16 white and five black—three free blacks, one freed slave and one fugitive slave.

The members of Brown's unit, calling themselves the "invisibles," hide in the cellar of the Kennedy Farm to prevent detection, but a neighbor woman suspects the house to be a stop on the Underground Railway and blackmails Annie Brown, the second youngest of the Brown family.

Kagi and Annie feel something for one another; he even brings a passage from Lord Byron's *Manfred* (1817) into the picture ("The stars are forth, the moon above the tops / Of the snow-shining mountains. ..."). In the end, however, Kagi warns her away from loving him. He fully expects to die, like a martyr, as "others have died before us and as others will die in the years to come." The young man, only 24, goes on, "That's all very fine," but what about "that little broken, wretched army we'll leave behind us, on earth—an army of ruined lives—mothers and sweethearts and sixteen-year-old widows with fatherless children. Oh God, no! Martyrdom isn't worth it! I have a few things to sacrifice, my life, for instance—my future, and a little honor among men. I'm giving all that to John Brown—everything except your happiness. He can't have that!"

Brown's doomed raid on Harpers Ferry and the counter-attack by the US Marines unfold in their terribly tragic fashion, as does his trial and execution. Welles gives Brown the last word on the gallows: "You people of the South, you had better prepare yourselves! Prepare for a settlement of this question that's coming up! The sooner you're prepared the better! You may dispose of me very easily; I am nearly disposed of now, but this question is still to be settled—this Negro question I mean. The end of that—is not yet!"

The play's title refers both to the "marching song" about Brown that became popular in the Union Army during the Civil War, with its famous line, "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on," as well as the "ominous, pulsing and pounding of numberless feet, marching in chains," a sound that recurs throughout the piece.

One of the first things that strikes the reader about *Marching Song* is that it is more advanced in its approach—one might say, *far* more advanced—than virtually anything else in the American theater in the 20th century—including the efforts, as sincere and serious as they certainly were, of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Edward Albee, etc. Welles' play owes far more to Shakespeare and other epic traditions than it does to the cramped psychological drama so beloved by American playwrights or the relatively short-lived and limited "proletarian" theater of the 1930s and 1940s.

In his Foreword, actor and Welles biographer Simon Callow writes, "An avid consumer of theater magazines, he [Welles] was fully *au fait* with the latest developments in Europe, above all in Germany, source of the most radical experiments, from Max Reinhardt to [Bertolt] Brecht to Expressionism."

How literally this should be taken is not clear. I raised the issue in my conversation with Todd Tarbox. In any event, Welles (and Hill) adopted a historical, somewhat distanced and "cool," observational, perhaps cinematic attitude in their play that is refreshing and lively—and unusual in the US. Although *Marching Song* is emotional and committed, it does not submerge the spectator (or reader) and demand that he or she share the experience of this or that character. The play allows the spectators to keep

their wits about them—they are not "in the thick of it," so to speak. *Marching Song*'s outstanding and welcome "objectivity" sets it apart from the American theatrical mainstream.

It is significant that the play is divided into eleven virtually "stand-alone" scenes, not acts. German playwright Bertolt Brecht observed in 1930 that the "epic writer [novelist Alfred] Döblin provided an excellent criterion when he said that with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic, one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life." In his stage directions, Welles also includes the use of titles and contemporary newspaper headlines projected on a curtain to help create "the tenor of the times."

The most important contribution of *Marching Song* is its orientation to enormous historical events, the activities of John Brown ("prophet—warrior—zealot—the most dramatic and incredible figure in American history," the stage directions assert) and the coming of the Civil War—the Second American Revolution, in historian James M. McPherson's phrase. In fact, appropriately enough, a comment by McPherson is included in the new edition of the Welles-Hill play: "This script of an action-filled play about John Brown that was never performed on stage raises profound questions about the role of violence in the crusade against slavery. The drama is compelling—no surprise, since one of the playwrights was Orson Welles, master of stage, screen, and radio, who uses this medium to illustrate a key event that brought on the Civil War."

The historical drama is largely an absence in the American theater. Hollywood filmmaking effectively and enthusiastically took up such drama, although often at the cost of taking great liberties with historical fact.

For this volume, Todd Tarbox has written an introduction to the play: "Gestation of Genius: Orson Welles, Roger Hill, and the Road to *Marching Song*," and an epilogue: "The Social Conscience of Orson Welles," both of which are lengthy and informative.

In the introduction, Tarbox discusses Welles' early family life, his arrival at the Todd School in 1926 and his literary and acting work there. He had the good fortune to come under the intellectual influence of headmaster Roger Hill, Tarbox's grandfather, known as Skipper. Tarbox writes: "No one knew Orson Welles better or longer than Skipper. Their partnership began at Todd when Orson and Roger co-directed several dozen stage productions, including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, and two Hill musical comedies, *It Won't Be Long Now* and *Finesse the Queen*, and ended shortly before Orson died, when he assisted Roger in editing an anti-war film produced at the Todd School, *Rip Van Winkle Renascent*."

Tarbox further notes about his grandfather: "Roger Hill was fascinated with the fervent, contentious abolitionist John Brown and ... abhorred the zealot's methods but championed his cause. When teaching American history, Skipper spent significant time considering the causes and effects of America's Civil War. His mesmerizing lectures on the personalities engaged on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line held his students in thrall. One of the most indelible characters on the Civil War stage that Hill brought to life was John Brown. None of Hill's students became more fascinated by the sinning saint than twelve-year-old Orson."

As Tarbox pointed out in our conversation, as part of a declamation contest Welles, while at the Todd School, chose to recite John Brown's November 1859 courtroom speech. In those extraordinary remarks, Brown observed that had he "interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great," everyone in the court "would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment." The condemned man continued, "I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and

mingle my blood further with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.”

In the conditions of the Great Depression, amid scenes of mass suffering, including the vicious victimization of poor blacks as in the Scottsboro Boys case, how could this not have inspired someone of Welles’ social and intellectual sensibilities, youthful as he was?

In his introduction, Tarbox explains the circumstances under which Hill and Welles wrote their dramatic work. After completing the initial draft of *Marching Song* in September 1932, “Upon Orson’s return to Woodstock, he and Roger spent time working on emendations until both considered their creation worthy of being produced in New York.” Welles was 17! After three months of fruitless efforts to interest producers and agents, Welles wrote to Hill: “I am now firmly convinced that *Marching Song*, despite its merits, will never be produced, at least not this year, unless maybe by *The Gate* [in Dublin, Ireland]. Sometime when we’re famous...”

Tarbox writes, legitimately, that the drama was “the first flowering” of Welles’ social consciousness—“defending the defenseless, the oppressed, the forgotten—that remained in full bloom throughout his life.”

In his epilogue, Tarbox elaborates on Welles’ artistic efforts along those lines. He writes, for example, that on Broadway, “in his early twenties, he [Welles] was starring in and directing revolutionary plays that dealt with race and prejudice. In early 1936, working with the Federal Theatre Project, under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Orson directed Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. ... With an all-African American cast of 150 and set in nineteenth-century Haiti, the play came to be known as *Voodoo Macbeth*.”

A short time later, Welles staged Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* “casting the black actor, Jack Carter ... as Mephistopheles. Not only was the production lauded by the critics and audiences for its innovative staging and lighting, it was celebrated as well for integrating the Broadway stage.” In 1937, he directed Marc Blitzstein’s radical musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, which the authorities attempted to close down. In November of the same year, “Orson starred in and directed another Shakespeare play, *Julius Caesar*, in modern dress on a bare stage, which brought into sharp focus contemporary Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Writing in the *New York Times* of his adaptation, Orson remarked, ‘It’s the same mob that hangs and burns Negroes in the South, the same mob that maltreats the Jews in Germany.’”

In 1941, Welles returned to Broadway and directed a stage adaptation of Richard Wright’s remarkable *Native Son*, which, in Tarbox’s words, “chronicles the short, tragic life of a troubled twenty-year-old black man, Bigger Thomas ... While working as a chauffeur, he inadvertently kills the daughter of his philanthropist boss and is sentenced to die in the electric chair.”

Tarbox also calls attention to Welles’ radio commentaries, especially those devoted to the case of “Isaac Woodard, a twenty-seven-year-old black Army sergeant who on February 12, 1946, while en route from Camp Gordon, Georgia, where he had just been honorably discharged from the military after serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II, was savagely beaten and blinded by the racist police chief of Batesville, Georgia, Lynwood Shull.”

Tarbox continues, “On his July 28 [1946] program, Welles took to the airwaves and eloquently inveighed against this monstrous attack and the attackers. For the next four Sundays, Welles continued his fervent crusade, relentlessly championing Woodard and inveighing against race hate.” Tarbox provides deservedly lengthy excerpts from these broadcasts.

To repeat, the publication of *Marching Song* is a significant cultural event.

The author also recommends:

150 years since the execution of John Brown  
[4 December 2009]

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

[26 July 2013]



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