

A conversation with Todd Tarbox, editor of *Marching Song*

David Walsh
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I spoke recently to Todd Tarbox, whose grandfather, Roger Hill—the headmaster of the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois—collaborated with Orson Welles in 1932 in the writing of *Marching Song*, a play about militant abolitionist John Brown. Hill was Welles’ lifelong mentor and friend.

David Walsh: *Marching Song*, by Orson Welles and Roger Hill, is an impressive play, whether written by a 17-year-old old [Welles] or not. I think it’s a significant play—especially certain more extended sequences: the scene in the Kansas saloon, the lengthy, complex scene in John Brown’s “safe house” in Maryland. I don’t know anything in American drama like it.

Todd Tarbox: Thank you for your generous assessment.

DW: I hope there are companies in the world that would jump at this. Can you give a brief history of the writing of *Marching Song* and explain its fate?

TT: When Welles was only 11 years old, shortly after arriving at the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois in 1926, he was already very knowledgeable. He read voraciously, about US history in particular. He gravitated toward my grandfather, Roger Hill [1895-1990], who taught literature and American history. One of the subjects that resonated with both of them was the Civil War and the character of John Brown.

DW: Of course, the Civil War had only ended 60 years or so before at that point, the equivalent for us of events that occurred in the late 1950s.

TT: Right. When Welles finished the eleventh grade, my great-grandfather Noble Hill was in his final year as headmaster. An end-of-the-year tradition at Todd that Noble initiated shortly after becoming headmaster was a declamation contest. Welles chose to recite John Brown’s courtroom speech in November 1859 after the incendiary abolitionist was found guilty of treason, conspiracy and murder and sentenced to hang a month later. The speech is quite moving and, not surprisingly, given Welles’s stentorian voice even as a child, he won the contest.

At the age of sixteen, after graduating and upon returning from his great acting success at the Gate Theatre in Ireland, but finding no offers from London or New York theatre companies, Welles accepted my grandfather’s offer to become the school’s

drama coach for the second semester.

When the semester came to an end, this is 1932, Orson [now 17] and my grandfather embarked on writing a play together, teasing out the character, conduct and consequences of John Brown. Brown’s passionate commitment to human parity resonated with both of them. They may not have approved of his methods, but they championed his cause.

My grandfather believed that a play about the inflammatory John Brown would make for a play of searing drama and Welles concurred. Orson went off and spent a month in northern Wisconsin writing. My grandfather wrote the first scene set in Massachusetts about the abolitionists to get him going, and Welles went on from there. In a month he wrote the first draft. Returning to Woodstock, he and my grandfather completed their research on their protagonist and final edits on the play.

DW: They tried to interest producers in New York City in the play and failed, is that correct?

TT: They had no luck getting it produced. It was judged to be too controversial, too long, with too many characters.

DW: This was 1932, in the midst of the Depression. To write about a renowned political radical at a time of widespread misery has a certain significance, apart from any conscious intent.

TT: There’s no doubt that Welles had a strong social conscience in his youth. His writing *Marching Song* at age 17 speaks to the subject. He came from wealth. But my grandfather recalls that even as a youngster, Orson would become quite upset about “the other half,” witnessing poverty in Chicago and injustice in America generally. He spent a lifetime working on those questions.

DW: How artistry works is complicated. But both Welles and your grandfather were attuned to deeper currents.

TT: They both were very concerned with the history of race relations in America at the time they wrote *Marching Song* and hoped that in some measure the play might lead to greater racial understanding and tolerance.

DW: This is only a year after the Scottsboro Boys case, which was widely publicized.

TT: Exactly. My grandfather was sensitive to racism, and I know he talked to Welles about it. I think he helped develop his

social conscience, because Welles' father certainly didn't. Richard Welles was a wealthy bon vivant interested primarily in first person singular. Orson's mother was dead. Skipper [Roger Hill] was one of the few people in Welles' life who didn't want anything from him throughout his life, except for his success.

DW: What's unusual about *Marching Song* is that it manages to dissolve the politics into the poetry, as it were. You don't feel you're being lectured to or listening to historical exposition. These are genuine individual human beings reflecting a whole variety of social forces and influences. That's very difficult to do.

Many historical plays founder on that, because they merely or primarily flesh out certain preconceptions. The whole thing becomes rather pat, you know from the start what the conclusion's going to be. It's a remarkable artistic achievement for anyone at any age.

Do you know of any influences working on Welles and Hill, aside from the obvious one, which is Shakespeare?

TT: In addition to Shakespeare, another touchstone is the Bible, which had a significant impact on both Welles and my grandfather. Skipper was a Biblical scholar, quite frankly. Welles developed his enthusiasm for the Bible from him. Not infrequently over the years when Welles wanted to quote a passage in the Bible, and he didn't have a Bible at hand, he would call Skipper regardless of the hour to draw upon his mentor's expertise.

DW: I'm interested in the artistic influences working on Welles. Simon Callow in his foreword to your new book 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."

TT: Yes.

DW: There is more of an epic feel to this play, more of Shakespeare via above all what was done in Germany by playwrights such as Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death*, which is a brilliant play about the French Revolution ...

TT: ... which Welles directed and produced in New York in 1938.

DW: I'm just curious as to whether he was aware of Büchner's drama by this point. But, if Callow is correct, and he was following Max Reinhardt's work ... Reinhardt first directed *Danton's Death* in 1916.

TT: I'm confident that he was aware of it.

DW: Or was he aware of Brecht-Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* [1928]? Or, since he had just been in Ireland, Sean O'Casey's remarkable trilogy, performed in the '20s [*The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926)]?

TT: He was extremely aware of theater and its developments globally. His self-taught scholarship on the subject was encyclopedic.

DW: What do you think is toward so-called revolutionary fanaticism? There is skepticism about John Brown as "a prophet of God," but the play is sympathetic to his determination.

TT: I view the play as asking the reader and spectator to come up with that decision. This is one of the charms and strengths of the play.

DW: One of the qualities that link this to Shakespeare and German epic theater is that it doesn't have a single character who is supposed to represent the spectator's viewpoint, who is the spectator's eyes and ears and brain, so to speak. It is a highly objective picture. A dozen or more characters speak, all of whom have their own reasons.

TT: The authors do not bludgeon you ...

DW: It's not ambiguous, ambiguous is a stalling word, but it presents a whole series of different perspectives. There's never any question about its anti-slavery viewpoint, but the various motives, social and psychological, are weighed up and considered before the audience. In fact, that is made the heart of a speech about that very subject, the different motivations, religious, political and otherwise, they all have, from spiritualism and the occult, to Brown's whatever-you-want-to-call-it, to Kagi's agnosticism or atheism. There's a range of views that are given their due.

TT: Kagi is my favorite character.

DW: Well, I think he's the playwright's favorite character. If anyone has the best lines, he has. And he gets to do a love scene, which, in its own way, is a very beautiful scene, with a passage from Lord Byron no less.

TT: I'd like to take credit for the play, but I can't. I did a little bit of cleaning up, typos, wording, and judicious editing, but I didn't change it radically.

DW: Do you know anything about the 1950 production at the Todd School?

TT: The play was staged in the splendid Woodstock Opera House. My mother and sister were in it, my father directed it, and the performance received positive reviews locally and nationally.

DW: 1950 would not have been the most promising year in the US for a play about a revolutionary fighter.

TT: I wonder why Welles never pursued it after he had achieved a certain notoriety. He never attempted to bring it back to life. Just before Welles's death, my grandfather was encouraging him to have it produced.

DW: It's unfortunate Welles never returned to *Marching Song*, but now you're publishing it, and we have it. And we owe you a great debt for that.



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