

Voodoo Macbeth: Dramatizing Orson Welles' 1936 Harlem production

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Voodoo Macbeth is a fictional film account of the legendary 1936 staging of William Shakespeare's tragedy by the Negro Theatre Unit—part of the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project. The production, directed by Orson Welles, was staged with an all-black cast in New York City's Harlem.

The new film, funded by a grant from Warner Bros., is the first-ever theatrical release from the University of Southern California (USC) School of the Cinematic Arts. Its 10 directors and eight script writers are all USC students or recent graduates. *Voodoo Macbeth* is available for streaming.

The 1936 episode is an intriguing choice of subject matter. The original *Voodoo Macbeth*'s creators, including Welles and Negro Theatre Unit co-directors Rose McClendon, a veteran African-American actress with left-wing associations, and the British-American, Romanian-born producer John Houseman, provided the production with a radical thrust.

In the first place, the Harlem *Macbeth*, which shifted the action of Shakespeare's work from 11th century Scotland to early 19th century Haiti, was consciously directed against racism and the exclusion of black artists and performers from cultural life.

What's more, setting the play in the period of the Haitian Revolution, during the reign of Henri Christophe, slave-turned self-proclaimed monarch (1811-1820), would have had clear anti-colonial associations for the more astute audience members. Haiti had just emerged, in 1934, from a brutal 19-year occupation by the US.

(Welles would go on in 1937, with his Mercury Theatre, to direct an "anti-fascist" version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* intended to evoke Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany.)

Voodoo Macbeth was an historic moment for New York theater, a cause célèbre and a huge popular success. It was performed before enthusiastic and integrated audiences, at a time when even most northern venues were racially segregated. According to one account, on the evening of April 14, 1936, "10,000 people stood as close as they could come to the Lafayette Theatre on Seventh Avenue near 131st Street, jamming the avenue for 10 blocks and halting northbound traffic for more than an hour... After the curtain fell on the final grim tableau of the witches holding Macbeth's severed head aloft as Hecate intoned ominously, 'The charm's wound up!', cheers and applause filled the auditorium for 15 minutes." The production went on to have national success. (This is a brief excerpt.)

The interest of the USC graduates and students in this historic work and the era in which it was performed is welcome and heartening. It indicates a concern with more substantial and even oppositional artistry.

Having said that, however, one immediately has to add that the film suffers sharply from contemporary cultural problems, problems that tend to be amplified when the creators turn to the past. Objectively, big and complex historical subjects are raised by *Voodoo Macbeth*, including the character of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal; the role of the Communist Party and the American left intelligentsia; the rise of fascism; the emergence in 1936 of revolutionary conditions in

Spain and France; and the preparations for Stalin's political genocide against socialists in the USSR, the Moscow Trials.

The various writers and directors are simply over their heads when confronted with those events and processes. One indication of the difficulties, incidentally, is the *total absence*—in the course of artistically attempting to deal with a highly political epoch, production and set of historical figures—of any discussion by the characters of *politics*, including the above-mentioned issues.

Like so many artists at present, taking the line of least resistance, *Voodoo Macbeth*'s makers largely project their own limited concerns and interests back into the past. The results are weak, flat and muddled.

The film opens with a title explaining the origins of the Negro Theatre Unit, a subdivision of the Works Project Administration and its Federal Theatre Project, and the role of its two co-administrators: McClendon (Inger Tudor) and Houseman (Daniel Kuhlman). Both are committed to organizing a production of *Macbeth*. Houseman wants to tap the youthful Welles, busy with radio work, to direct the titanic drama.

After some hesitation, Welles accepts the challenge. His wife Virginia (June Schreiner), enthusiastic about the project, proposes the play be set in Haiti.

With the exception of McClendon, a trained thespian, as Lady Macbeth, the rest of the cast, according to the film's somewhat distorted version of events, is mostly non-professional and largely untrained in Shakespeare. The actors include veteran Jack Carter (Gary McDonald) and newcomers Cuba Johnson (Wreckless Watson), a boxer, and Juano Hernandez (Ephraim López), a Puerto Rican, hired to play Macbeth, but who gets deported instead.

(As a Puerto Rican and therefore a US citizen, Hernandez could not be deported. In fact, he turned down the lead to take another acting job. This is only one of the film's many errors, or examples of ill-advised "poetic license," an issue to which we will return.)

Nightclub singer, single mother and neophyte actress Edna Thomas (Ashli Haynes) eventually plays Lady Macbeth after McClendon comes down with pleurisy. (This is another instance of the film's unnecessary historical sleight of hand. Thomas, in reality, was also a veteran performer, who "came to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance," according to one commentator, "and was pivotal in the development of serious African American theater in the 1920s and 1930s." Her portrayal of Lady Macbeth in the Welles production "solidified her as the 'First Lady of Negro Theatre' in the Harlem press"!)

In *Voodoo Macbeth*, Welles is often drunk or egomaniacal, or both, as well as insensitive to his wife's acting career and feelings and generally petulant and immature.

Representative Martin Dies (Hunter Bodine), a right-wing Democrat from Texas, appears on the scene and wants to shut down the production. He blusters that this *Macbeth* is full of "foreigners and witching mumbo jumbo." The New Deal, he goes on, "funds American theater and this is

un-American.” The US “is under attack by communism... Communism is a cancer,” Dies pontificates. “It breeds in nests of subversive radical ideas and slowly corrupts our society. And it is my righteous cause to eradicate it wherever I see it. I can assure you that monstrosity will never see opening night.” Rose asks provocatively whether Dies is concerned the production is too subversive, or that it’s too black?

Dies is unable to carry out his threat despite paying *New York Herald Tribune* theater critic Percy Hammond to write a negative review. Welles nearly tanks the production by taking over the role of Macbeth in “blackface” for one key rehearsal. After much erratic and destructive behavior on Welles’ part, Houseman eventually admonishes the latter to “get your act together, or I will never work with you again.” Welles finally complies, telling his troupe that theater is a “campfire” and the actors are “storytellers.”

The film’s final intertitles inform the viewer that “*Voodoo Macbeth* played for 10 sold-out weeks in Harlem, then toured throughout the US and became a landmark theater event,” that “Funding for the Federal Theater Project was canceled in 1939 after congressional objections to the left-wing tone of many of its productions,” and that “Rose McClendon, a Broadway star in the 20s and 30s, created Negro Theater Units in 11 cities across the US. She died of pneumonia on July 12, 1936.”

Voodoo Macbeth ends up leaving a decidedly unfavorable impression, despite its perhaps decent intentions. The film is not nearly up to the task of accurately and insightfully representing the events and personalities it aspires to treat.

Again, many of the problems originate in the assumptions that hold sway currently on college campuses and in the media and entertainment world. Far too often individuals in the past are judged, above all, by the degree to which they live up to the race and gender fixations (and pieties) of the present-day affluent petty-bourgeoisie.

That social layer has a very difficult time making sense of artists who were driven by great social and cultural aims and sentiments such as opposition to fascism, the struggle against racism and colonialism, sympathy for and identification with the oppressed, a desire to see the world radically changed—as well as the popularizing of Shakespeare and other classics and the general democratizing of culture.

The makers of the new *Voodoo Macbeth* and the leading participants in the original production speak different languages, as it were.

Welles was treated badly by Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, and his fictional self has hardly fared better in recent decades. The contemporary film industry, as we have pointed out more than once, is both incapable of comprehending an artist with towering, radical ideas and ambitions, and affronted by his artistic accomplishments, which put its own efforts so severely in the shade. In this regard, *Voodoo Macbeth* can now be added to a list that includes *RKO 281* (1999), *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), *Me and Orson Welles* (2009) and *Mank* (2020).

In place of the “towering,” *Voodoo Macbeth* focuses on the secondary and tertiary, or worse.

In a valuable article on the Wellesnet website, “Dramatizations fall short in telling true story of *Voodoo Macbeth*,” Michael Anderegg, professor emeritus of English, University of North Dakota (and the author of *Lincoln and Shakespeare* and *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, among other works) points to some of the film’s more egregious failings.

Anderegg notes that all the scenes involving Dies, a diehard reactionary and the future chairman (1938-1944) of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), are “nonsense.” The Texas congressman, of course, neither attended rehearsals of the Negro Theatre Unit’s *Macbeth* nor its opening night—nor did he offer a bribe to critic Hammond to pan the production.

The USC *Voodoo Macbeth*, Anderegg comments, “projects backwards

from the 1938 HUAC hearings where the Dies committee distinguished itself by suggesting that [Elizabethan playwright] Christopher Marlowe might well be a communist.” Again, the intentions may not be malicious. The filmmakers presumably wanted to point toward the anti-communist witch-hunt to come. But this sort of mythologizing, “left” or otherwise, which seriously disfigures history, helps no one.

Importantly, Anderegg objects to the diminishing of the “historical Black figures the film pretends to honor,” including Edna Thomas. Anderegg writes that “Jack Carter is barely acknowledged as the successful performer he was. Though his long run as Crown in *Porgy* [the 1927 play by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, the basis of the libretto for George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*] gets a passing mention, nothing is said of his starring role in the important play, *Stevedore*, two years earlier. Carter’s drinking problem, for which there is, admittedly, convincing evidence, here takes precedence over everything else about him.”

In the film, Welles hires a street musician for his “voodoo” production. Here again, Anderegg points out, “far from celebrating known Black artists, the film fails to acknowledge the contributions of African musicians Asadata Dafora (Sierra Leone) and Abdul Assen (Nigeria), and others, to the success of ‘Voodoo’ *Macbeth*.”

Anderegg also objects to the “poorly constructed gay subplot, to which too much time is devoted, and which is not clearly relevant to anything else in the film.”

Voodoo Macbeth makes a meal out of Welles’ stepping in at one point and playing the lead character in “blackface.” His fellow performers seethe with anger, and this seems nearly a breaking point for the entire production.

The historical facts are quite different—and telling. The scene in the film refers to an episode that occurred months later in Indianapolis during the national tour. Jack Carter’s replacement as Macbeth fell ill, as Barbara Leaming’s biography of Welles explains, “only to be replaced by Orson himself.” As Welles laughingly described it to Leaming (and there is no reason to disbelieve his version), this was “the only time anybody’s ever blacked up to play Macbeth!... I was a much darker Macbeth than Jack was. I had to prove that I belonged.” No one recognized him because “I was an anonymous radio actor,” Welles went on. The black cast “thought it was very funny.” They had “an expression in black show business, which is: instead of ‘making up,’ you ‘make down’—make yourself darker. So they said, ‘There’s Orson making down again!’”

In his article, Anderegg also points to the overall falsity of *Voodoo Macbeth*’s depiction of Welles. “The portrait the film gives us,” he writes, “is, at one level, predictable: everyone, it would seem, enjoys diminishing him [Welles] as a human being while honoring, to a greater or lesser extent, his accomplishments.” This *Voodoo Macbeth* “is a redemption story: after being clueless for three quarters of the film, Welles, with the help of Rose, turns himself around.”

John Houseman, who later had a bitter, permanent public falling out with Welles and was not someone likely to praise his former collaborator lightly, wrote movingly about Welles in his memoir *Run-through* (1972): “It was during the preparation of *Macbeth* that Orson revealed his surprising capacity for collaboration. For all the mass of his own ego, he was able to apprehend other peoples’ weakness and strength and to make creative use of them: he had a shrewd instinctive sense of when to bully or charm, when to be kind or savage—and he was seldom mistaken...”

“The *Macbeth* troupe,” Houseman continues, “including understudies, stage managers, cripples, children and dependents, finally numbered one hundred and thirty-seven. Orson led them with an authority that was extraordinary in a boy just out of his teens. He had the strength; but he also had the infinite and loving patience which, in my experience, distinguishes the great from the competent director. And he displayed a capacity for total concentration without which our whole

perilous venture could never have been brought off.”

Unfortunately, in so many ways the new *Voodoo Macbeth* fails to capture the historical, artistic and personal realities.

The writers and directors would have done better, first of all, before launching into their production to heed the advice that Welles apparently gave a group of USC film students a half-century ago, in the 1970s. According to film historian and critic Joseph McBride, when speaking to the students, “Welles advised them not to concentrate on studying film—but to study history, to study the world!”



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