

Interview with Michael Anderegg, author of *Lincoln and Shakespeare* and *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*: “Shakespeare in the 19th century could be seen simultaneously as popular as well as elite”

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We recently spoke to Michael Anderegg, professor emeritus of English at the University of North Dakota and the author of *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture* (1999), *Cinematic Shakespeare* (2004) and *Lincoln and Shakespeare* (2015).

Professor Anderegg responded to the recent film *Voodoo Macbeth*, about the ground-breaking and wildly successful 1936 Harlem production of *Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles, with a valuable article January 20, “Dramatizations fall short in telling true story of ‘Voodoo Macbeth.’” He noted that in the new film, “Unfortunately ... errors of fact and distortions of actual events occur throughout.”

For instance, Anderegg pointed out that all the scenes involving Rep. Martin Dies, Democrat from Texas, a diehard reactionary and the future chairman (1938–1944) of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), were “nonsense.” As he explains in our conversation posted below, he also objected, importantly, to the diminishing of the “historical Black figures the film pretends to honor.”

As a whole, *Voodoo Macbeth*, Anderegg concluded in his comment, was unable “to reconcile the complexities and contradictions into a fully satisfactory, coherent drama, one that gives recognition both to the richness of the African American contribution and to the talent and dedication Orson Welles brought to presenting Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in Harlem.”

Anderegg’s *Lincoln and Shakespeare* is a fascinating work, which explores the English playwright’s importance to Abraham Lincoln, and more generally, to 19th century America. We had a chance to discuss that briefly as well.

We spoke on a video call.

David Walsh: I’d like to ask a couple of introductory questions. You taught English at the University of North Dakota?

Michael Anderegg: Yes, I did. For over 30 years.

DW: Are you from that part of the world, so to speak?

MA: No, no. That was where I could get a job in 1972. So I went.

DW: What is your background? Where are you from?

MA: I was raised in the Los Angeles area, but I was born in France. When I was eight years old I moved to California to live with my mother and stepfather. After high school, I went into the Air Force for four years.

I was stationed near, of all places, Selma, Alabama, for three-and-a-half years. Then I went to UCLA.

DW: So that partially explains why you developed the interest in film.

MA: Yes, and from the age of eight I lived in Culver City, which is really a separate town within L.A. My house was a block from the backlot of the Selznick studio, soon to become Desilu Studios. I could see the exterior set of Tara from *Gone With the Wind*, still standing and being reused, out of my bedroom window. So I got interested in sneaking into studio lots. Hal Roach studios was down the other end of the street. I never got into MGM, which was close by. So I guess I was raised around the movies.

Joanne Laurier: How did you develop the interest in Orson Welles?

MA: It probably began with hearing him on the radio as Harry Lime [*The Adventures of Harry Lime*, a radio program in 1951–52, a prequel to the 1949 film *The Third Man*] and then, of course, he was famously on *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s [“Lucy Meets Orson Welles,” October 1956]. But really it was also through Shakespeare, because the first Shakespeare collection I had was a used copy of *Everybody’s Shakespeare*, the texts of the plays he helped edit with his former teacher, Roger Hill. Welles was around in the culture of the time, though at that point no longer really central.

DW: You mentioned coming across the *World Socialist Web Site* a year or so ago, and reading it from time to time. What articles or issues have caught your attention?

MA: I mostly look at the cultural articles, reviews and features. But also the political articles, which are very interesting and present a viewpoint that you’re not going to come across every day. I don’t embrace all the positions, but it often represents something close to my politics.

DW: I’m glad to hear it. On the question of *Voodoo Macbeth*, we obviously thought highly of your article [“Dramatizations fall short in telling true story of ‘Voodoo Macbeth’” on Wellesnet] and the various points you made, the errors, or “poetic license,” you commented on.

You also pointed to, as we did, the ahistorical, anachronistic tendency to project into the past current sensibilities. What do you think about that general issue? It seems to us a dangerous and misleading tendency.

MA: It is, or it can be. Any fictional work that attempts to recreate the past will tend to refashion the historical period it’s using to a certain

degree. There's an inevitable distortion for the purpose of creating drama and interesting dynamics among characters. So the question becomes, what kinds of distortions are acceptable, and what kinds are not?

In the case of the 1936 *Macbeth*, if you're presenting a specific historical and cultural event, primarily valuable for its cultural context, then you have some obligation to try to be faithful to that context.

I recently read *Booth* [Karen Joy Fowler], a very good novel, about the Booth family of actors, something I know a little about. I could always tell when the author wasn't sticking to the facts. But whenever *Booth* departed from what we know, it did so in a way that did not falsify the essence of what occurred in the past, perhaps giving facts and events a little different direction. Ultimately, the novel is extremely faithful to what we know about the Booths and their era while remaining a satisfying work of fiction.

But when a novel or film departs too much or misrepresents something for the sake of supposed dramatic necessity, particularly if there's a political context, it becomes highly problematic.

DW: What were the distortions in *Voodoo Macbeth* that disturbed you the most?

MA: The presentation of the main performers in *Voodoo Macbeth*, the African American actors, who were seriously slighted in terms of their accomplishments—or were falsely distorted to advance a dubious romantic plot.

This is particularly true in the case of Edna Thomas, the Lady Macbeth, who was a significant performer in that period. In the film, she's turned into a potential romantic interest for Orson Welles, who's acting like someone in a #MeToo scenario, of all things, which is ridiculous, harassing her while casting her as Lady Macduff. Thomas was a well-known performer and director in Harlem.

Jack Carter, who certainly had problems with alcohol and had at times been involved with shady characters, was a major performer. He had significant roles in *Porgy* and *Stevedore*, and other plays. He's presented in *Voodoo Macbeth* mostly in terms of his drinking and unreliability. Certainly, Carter had issues, but, in my view, that was not the primary way in which he should have been presented.

The whole HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] background, the appearance of Rep. Martin Dies at a rehearsal and opening night, all of that, was just distorted in a very foolish way. They picked one individual and made him stand for the entire right-wing world of the period, and they didn't do it convincingly. It simply makes a mess of that history, which is important.

JL: In your article, you talked about the diminishment of the black characters. I felt that Rose McLendon [an actress, who also performed in *Porgy*, and served as co-director of the Negro Theatre Unit in New York] was probably given her due more than the rest of the characters.

MA: Yes, I agree. Although they make it seem as though she had rehearsed the part of Lady Macbeth, which she hadn't and couldn't have. She was very ill, and died in July 1936, only a few months after the play opened. That wasn't the characterization that bothered me the most. But there was an overall refusal to treat the individuals as the professionals they actually were.

McClendon was a very important figure in the Federal Theatre Project, and the film doesn't go into that, and perhaps couldn't. She was originally the head of the Federal Theatre's Negro Theatre Unit, but again she had to drop that soon afterwards, because of illness. John Houseman ended up taking over for her, along with some African American associates.

One thing interesting about her is that she was not intimidated by Welles. She often criticized him for the way he treated some members of the cast and the crew, and he took it from her. He respected her. The film does acknowledge that.

Welles himself was portrayed in *Voodoo Macbeth*, as he so often is in

works of fiction, as an egotistical, clueless individual—the experience with *Macbeth* is painted as sort of a wake-up call for him by the end of the movie. This is somebody who finally realizes what's really going on—but this is a vast simplification of Welles.

JL: The whole representation of Welles in contemporary cinema is atrocious.

MA: Yes. It really goes back all the way to his very first appearance in Hollywood in 1938–39, when he was brought out by RKO to make a movie. People resented him because, for one thing, he got a particularly great contract with the freedom to pretty much make what he wanted, to bring his own cast with him and so forth. Plus, Welles was seen as a man of the theater who had no place in Hollywood.

The powers that be at the time, and others too, really resented him. And that resentment seems to have lingered for years. In a way, it never stopped. There's a great story by F. Scott Fitzgerald ["Pat Hobby and Orson Welles," 1940] in which Welles is constantly referenced. Everyone in Hollywood is totally flabbergasted by his very existence. They're afraid he's going to totally revolutionize movies in a way that is going to destroy their careers. This, of course, was before *Citizen Kane*. And so that note was struck early on, but it continues in movies like *Mank*.

JL: Why do you think that there's still such hostility today?

MA: That's hard to answer. I think one thing about Welles in terms of Hollywood and the movies is that he always went his own way. He was not a studio person. He was perfectly willing to, in a sense, endanger his career in Hollywood by simply doing what he wanted to do. And that kind of maverick figure, I think, is always resented, because Welles lived out their most ideal version of themselves, that ideal version that they're no longer willing or able to follow. So Welles stands there as a figure who shames them. "We can't do what Welles did or wanted to do. We can't be that kind of maverick."

DW: Both for being a maverick personality and also for the actual artistic and social content of what he did. It stands as an affront as well.

MA: Yes, what he accomplished in spite of all the barriers that he had to encounter.

JL: This group of student-filmmakers couldn't possibly imagine anybody who had that kind of stature artistically, politically and as a human being.

MA: I think that's true—unfortunately.

Welles was a flawed human being, no question. What he discovered early on was that making himself into a "character" was a way of staying in the public eye, and part of that character, one that rubbed people the wrong way, was being some kind of "genius." Nobody in the movie business likes geniuses. The image he created, or at least went along with, didn't make him friends, but it did make him initially attractive to some producers and directors. He went to RKO, because the studio wasn't doing particularly well, and they wanted someone who could shake things up.

JL: The Shakespeare component is always central. Welles saw the world in a Shakespearean manner, so to speak, in and through Shakespeare.

MA: That's true. Of course, that's the other issue. Shakespeare is also a very conflicted subject in American culture. To be associated with Shakespeare, as Welles was very early on, was something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, Shakespeare represents high culture, something generally inimical to Hollywood. But, of course, Shakespeare has also been seen as a popular entertainer.

There's also the snob issue. If Welles was a Shakespearean actor, that gave him another negative, because that is part of his theater background. Hollywood had a love-hate relationship with the theater. Many Hollywood people came from the New York theater. But once they left it, they felt somewhat guilty. They seemed to have given it up for sunny climes and more money.

JL: He was a Shakespearean actor, but for him, Shakespeare spoke to

today's world in an important manner.

DW: In your book, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, you speak about Welles as a great popularizer of Shakespeare. You say that he attempted to reverse the process by which Shakespeare had ceased to be seen as lowbrow and instead become highbrow.

You point out that the Harlem *Macbeth* associated Shakespeare with popular culture in a manner not seen since the middle of the 19th century. I realize this is a big issue, but could you expand on it?

MA: As you know, I took a good deal from Lawrence Levine in his study of Shakespeare in America in the 19th century ["William Shakespeare in America" in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*], in which he emphasizes Shakespeare's great popularity. Essentially, I think Levine is right, although his account might be a little over-simplified.

It's certainly true that Shakespeare was everywhere in 19th-century America. We have, of course, the example of *Huckleberry Finn*, with the two Shakespearean actors who are also con men. Welles actually used that episode in an adaptation of Twain's novel for one of his radio shows, and he played one of the con men.

It's true that Shakespeare's plays were put on in all sorts of venues that you wouldn't expect, in the 19th century. Now sometimes it was Shakespeare diluted, sometimes it was more a matter of someone reciting speeches and things of that sort. But the plays were put on too. People like Junius Brutus Booth, father of the Booth brothers, traveled all over the West, to Nevada and places like that, playing *King Lear* in mining camps and so on, and people appreciated it.

Booth, the father of Edwin and John Wilkes, was a larger than life figure, and sometimes intoxicated when he acted, but he was well-liked. He combined in his own person the highbrow and lowbrow sides of Shakespearean performance.

So there is this idea that Shakespeare in the early 19th century could be seen as popular entertainment—or could be seen simultaneously as popular as well as elite. The argument goes that by the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, Shakespeare became more and more relegated to the elite side of that equation.

It's notable that one of Welles's first important acting jobs, at the age of 18, was in actress Katharine Cornell's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which, along with two other plays [George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* and Rudolf Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, about poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning], famously traveled all across the United States in 1933–34 and was staged in small and large theaters—a 16,000-mile tour lasting 36 weeks. It was probably the last time that a major performer like that took a whole company with him ... or her, in this case.

Romeo and Juliet was just one of the plays, and it was not the one most frequently put on, but Welles was in that production. I think that pointed out to him that there was an audience and not just an elite audience, a larger audience that could appreciate Shakespeare.

Why did Welles do *Voodoo Macbeth*? At that point, when he was—we need to remember—only 20, he had had some theater experience—the Gate Theatre in Dublin, the Cornell tour—and he had done some radio, although at that point he was still largely anonymous, so he had a kind of up-and-coming reputation as a performer, but he was not yet "Orson Welles." He was not yet really known. So, in one way, what choice did he have?

He was offered the chance to direct this play with a generous budget from the Federal Theatre Project. It would be done in Harlem, with African American performers. How could he turn it down? It was an opportunity. It could have been a failure, of course. People often say, Welles did this for his own reasons, for his own ego. That may be part of it, but the fact is, it could have been a disaster.

He didn't know that it would be such a success, but that is when he became "Orson Welles." That's what really created that larger than life

figure, the boy genius, the wunderkind. So he obviously saw an opportunity and he took it. I should point out that when he was touring in 1934, he had had the idea, which he never carried out, of doing *Romeo and Juliet* with a white and black cast. The whites would be the one side in the play, and the blacks the other.

Also, after meeting John Houseman, he and Houseman had thought of doing a Shakespeare-era play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, by John Ford. They worked on that for a while to see if they could mount it. So both of them were interested in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and theater. *Macbeth* became a natural offshoot of that interest and idea. It is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, the shortest of the tragedies, and so in a way that makes it ideal for a popular production. It's not going to take three-and-a-half hours to watch this. It can be done in two hours. It could be done in even less, if you cut it a good bit, which Welles did.

It was one of the most popular tragedies going back to the 19th century in the American theater.

Macbeth hadn't had any major productions in New York in a long time. So even though in the movie *Voodoo Macbeth*, the Orson Welles character says, "You know how many productions of *Macbeth* there are in New York right now?" Well, actually, there were *no* productions of *Macbeth* in New York at the time. Another silly distortion, for no particular reason.

JL: You also get the feeling that Welles had a commitment to and an interest in Haiti, because of its history, its revolution, because he was against colonialism and racism.

MA: Yes, yes.

DW: Let's put it this way, for whatever reason he took the job, I think his other commitments and other views certainly made it a success. Yes, it was a job. But then to take on that issue, having a black cast, that subject matter, that location, all that seems to me had its own life.

MA: Absolutely. He knew that he could work with black actors, he was an anti-racist. Many, many occasions later in his career show that.

DW: There was his radio program in 1946 dedicated to obtaining justice for the black veteran Isaac Woodard, who was beaten and blinded by police.

MA: He knew he could work with the people in Harlem and, as you say, the Haiti issue was in the culture. The American military had only recently given up its occupation of Haiti, which had lasted since 1915.

A number of books and plays on the subject of the Haitian Revolution had been written in the '20s and into the '30s, so the subject of Haiti was one that was in the zeitgeist.

So it wasn't a coincidence that the setting was suggested. The story goes that it was Welles's wife Virginia who suggested Haiti, and it may well have been she, but it was in the atmosphere. It seemed a logical choice, since the actors and much of the audience would be black, to take it out of medieval Scotland and present it in a world that would be more non-white.

Of course, it was also a revolutionary idea to do this. It would not be true to say there had been no productions of Shakespeare with black actors in America before, but there certainly weren't many. The most famous American black actor, Ira Aldridge, in the 19th century, did almost all of his Shakespeare work in Europe.

DW: How popular was the idea in those days of transposing Shakespeare into modern dress, or into more recent historical periods?

MA: The crucial moment came in 1925, when a producer in London [Barry Jackson] put on a production of *Hamlet* in modern dress. It was very controversial—and successful. Some people were put off by the use of guns instead of swords, and so on. But then a couple of years later they actually did *Macbeth* in the same way, in 1927, I think. That wasn't as successful. I think it was harder to translate that directly into modern day.

There was another production in London in 1932 or so that presented *Macbeth* not in modern dress exactly, but again vaguely in a look of the

fairly recent past. That was in the air. Welles would have known about that. *Voodoo Macbeth* was not an attempt to bring the play into the present, it was a compromise, set in the 19th century.

JL: I was very affected the first time I saw Welles's film of *Macbeth*. But, also, as you know, there is a four-minute clip from *Voodoo Macbeth* online, which is extraordinarily riveting.

MA: Yes, it is. I looked at that very closely. I've written a description, moment by moment, of what's shown there. I tried to figure out exactly when it was done as well, because as you may know, the actor playing Macbeth in that clip is not Jack Carter, it's Maurice Ellis, who originally was playing Macduff.

And so the actor playing Macduff was not the same actor either. He had to be switched out. So I think the film was shot when *Voodoo Macbeth* moved from Harlem to the Adelphi Theatre on Broadway for 11 performances.

In the course of that run, Carter had a breakdown of some kind. He basically walked out of the production. So Ellis stepped in. The fact that Ellis is in this film clip tells me that it had to have been done within a three- or four-day period near the end of the run at the Adelphi.

We're not getting the original production in this brief film, and Ellis had not had much time to rehearse the part. Given that, he does well. It's disappointing that we don't see Carter. Looking at it closely, I also determined that it had to be shot with inserts filmed separately, close-ups and so forth.

Because of the technology in that period, filming onsite, it would have been impossible to have multiple cameras. But the clip gives you an idea of the excitement of the production, the energy.

DW: I do want to talk a bit about your remarkable *Lincoln and Shakespeare*, although we can only skim the surface in this brief conversation. But you raise the question of historian Lawrence Levine in your book, and it is obviously very interesting what he says about Shakespeare's immense popularity in the US in the 19th century. I do think it's a bit simplified. You have to take it with a critical grain of historical salt, so to speak, which I think you do in your book.

As a Marxist, the general fact that Shakespeare was popular until after the Civil War and then fell out of favor in official circles says a great deal. It tells us where the ruling elite in America was coming from and where it was going. The northern bourgeoisie of Lincoln, the democratic-revolutionary bourgeoisie, which led or fought the Civil War and destroyed slavery—once that was accomplished—largely lost interest in the epic questions Shakespeare was addressing: the overthrow of kings and regimes, the corruption of those in power, the ruthlessness needed for civil war, the tragic fate of the defeated and overthrown, the moral questions and responsibilities involved in political leadership, the impact of great struggles on individuals. They were no longer burningly interested in these issues once they consolidated themselves in power and faced another antagonist, the working class.

MA: I think that's interesting, I hadn't thought of it in those terms. That's certainly part of what's going on here.

DW: You have this eloquent paragraph in *Lincoln and Shakespeare*: "The tragedies and histories, in particular, appealed to Lincoln at least in part because they appealed to America. These plays again and again illustrated the dangers of inordinate ambition, the devastation of civil war (no less than eight plays are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the Wars of the Roses), and the corruptions of illegitimate rule. In addition to these thematic issues, the oratory of Shakespeare's characters, the speeches and soliloquies, were well suited to a highly oratorical age. Politicians and other public figures quoted or cited Shakespeare in their speeches and writings. Lincoln's interest in Shakespeare can only be understood fully when placed in the context of nineteenth-century American culture."

There were these huge questions confronting the population and figures

like Lincoln. And Shakespeare in some way spoke to the epic character of those issues.

MA: I think that's very true. It was curious that Americans embraced this English playwright, but throughout this period, they did. In terms of why the histories and the tragedies struck Lincoln in particular, that has a lot to do with the Civil War.

And partly had to do with Lincoln's own guilt or horror at the bloodshed, even though he believed deeply in the cause. There is no question but that he was tortured by the carnage in the major battles. Shakespeare wasn't precisely comforting to him, but it was a way of perhaps distancing the events, placing them in a different context.

But in terms of America, these are the plays that were always popular from the beginning. There were very few productions in the 18th century and into the 19th of the comedies, for example. Occasionally, a comedy becomes popular. But it's really the tragedies and the histories that Americans embrace.

This has to do with the fact, in the first place, that they saw the history plays as being hostile to kings, to monarchy in general. Many people would not say that was the case, but I think you can read Shakespeare's plays as being condemnations of various kinds of rule. The most popular Shakespeare play probably in America was *Richard the Third*. Here there's no question that you have a dictator who is taken down, he may be an attractive character from the point of view of the actor, but he is a bloodthirsty king who is brought down. That is part of the appeal.

It's also true that the tragedies and histories had the most wonderful speeches and oratory. As I mention in the book, oratory was a big thing in Lincoln's youth. People went out of their way to listen to someone give a speech, but also to recite Shakespeare. The recitation of Shakespeare was almost as popular as the plays themselves and certainly easier to manage in terms of production.

So a number of the most prominent actors also did one-man shows of Shakespeare. One of the things that Levine perhaps does not pay enough attention to was the fact that the Shakespeare most people experienced was more of this sort—individual passages, speeches, famous moments in Shakespeare's plays. But that's all right too, as far as I'm concerned, that was an introduction to Shakespeare.

DW: Shakespeare wrote plays in which kings and queens and nobles were corrupt and rotten, and had their heads cut off. How could that not be destabilizing?

MA: There's no question. Shakespeare, at the end of each play, brings on the new king, but usually it's a very diminished figure. It's someone that we're not terribly interested in, which is true of Malcolm in *Macbeth*. He had to do that. But it doesn't wipe out everything that's happened in the previous three-and-a-half hours.

DW: Ever since I first heard of it, I've been fascinated by the story of that steamboat trip shortly before the end of the Civil War, shortly before he was killed by a Shakespearean actor, in fact, during which Lincoln read to these people from *Macbeth* for hours supposedly. You describe that episode in your book.

MA: That story of his reading aboard the ship is one of the most observed events in Lincoln's life. There are a lot of Lincoln stories that are dubious in terms of whether they really happened or not. Here, there are significant witnesses who all wrote accounts of that event. So we're certain of Lincoln's fascination with *Macbeth*.

In his readings from the play, he seems to identify both with Duncan and with Macbeth. He identifies with the king who's killed, as well as the future king who kills him. I'm not saying he consciously does that, but he undoubtedly feels responsible for terrible things, even in a rightful cause. What makes Macbeth such an interesting character is that he's not just an evil person who kills a king, but someone with a conscience and who finds he can't live with himself. At the end of the play, he basically says, all right, I'm done. I can't go on. Take me.

DW: I'm sure there's that element of identifying with the various personalities. But also, it seems to me, there is also the general darkness and bloodiness of the period, and the kind of life-and-death issues that Lincoln's dealing with on a daily basis.

MA: Oh, yes, absolutely. He felt guilt for what he was doing. He also felt that he was doing the right thing, no question about that. He had great self-confidence, but he also had moments of worry. He also had personal tragedies in the period that he was president. He had lost a son already, and lost another one.

One of the most moving moments, and I cite it in my book, is when he recites a passage from *King John*, where Lady Constance is mourning the loss of her son, and Lincoln entirely identifies with that tragedy. He reads it to a man who comes to visit him. He became very moved by his own emotions, he was generating his own emotions through reading Shakespeare.

DW: Who could imagine any US president after that reading *Macbeth* or *King John* to an audience or a visitor?

MA: That's exactly true. Lincoln went to the theater a good bit, as I point out in my book, and he went to see Shakespeare as much as possible. The first few years of his presidency, because of his son's death, he didn't go out at all. But after that he started to go to the theater, he saw Edwin Booth in about five different plays, for example, and a notable *Macbeth* starring Charlotte Cushman. It is not possible to say this about most later presidents.

DW: Which one of them would have those deep, even ambivalent feelings about their own conduct?

MA: You only have to compare the intellectual level of subsequent presidents to Lincoln, who had no formal education at all, totally self-taught, who could respond to great literature—that is very moving in itself.



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