“Orson Welles: Tragic Figure or Lame Duck?”

Throughout the years of theatrical myth and superstition, one play alone sends a blood-curdling sensation up the arms of directors and actors alike; even the mere utterance of the title causes dramatists to run for the hills, spin around three times, and spit on the floor. Despite the common belief that Shakespeare’s infamous Scottish play *Macbeth* is nothing but bad luck, filmmaker and actor extraordinaire Orson Welles used the play as a launching pad for both his theatrical and cinematic careers. Although Orson Welles escaped the doom of *Macbeth* onstage, his early life and career managed to mirror that of the Bard’s tragic Scot: a man set up for greatness falls out of grace and collapses in the pit of his own contempt.

Humanity thrives on empathy: if nothing else, our innate desire to relate to one another defines the ever-evolving question of what it means to be human. Although Shakespeare creates a tragic character in Macbeth, he certainly does not make him empathetic or even relatable. Macbeth’s call to be Thane of Cawdor happens through what can only be described as an aligning of the stars: the Thane of Cawdor commits a seditious act, and Macbeth steps in. Three witches hailing Macbeth only support the absolute absurdity of the claim of Macbeth as king. There is hardly any back-story to his rise; Macbeth merely fits the bill and gets lucky, an ironic statement considering how unlucky the play is thought to be. Rather than relating to the kindness of his character or finding hope in his ability to lead, the audience feels slighted because Macbeth’s success is rooted around mysticism alone.

Like Macbeth, Orson Welles was born into the same romantic and yet unearned greatness. On May 6, 1915, George Orson Welles was born in Kenosha, Illinois to Richard Welles, an alcoholic father, and Beatrice Ives, a fiercely intelligent mother (Callow 10). From the very beginning, Welles formed an allusion around his being. His brother was the reject offspring; his brother was a short, tubby boy with the smarts of a rock, thus, Orson was thought to be “bright as a button, bonny, iron-lunged, and lusty,” and the child his already dysfunctional parents had always wanted (Callow 2). However, the idea that a newborn demonstrates talent right out of the womb is unreal. Without a substantial explanation, Welles was deemed the gem of Kenosha, a trait that made him just as un-relatable as his Scottish counterpart.

However, behind every prodigy, there is a controlling woman. Macbeth and Welles are not exceptions. Whether he liked it or not, Welles was primed for an extensive education in the arts. By the tender age of one, his mother was reading him bedtime stories from *Tales of Shakespeare* and by eighteen months he was speaking articulately (Callow 13). If Welles didn’t possess supreme intellect, he was able to fool the public into thinking he had it with the guidance of Beatrice. His mother was a strong woman to say the least: in 1919, when divorce was still fairly uncommon of, Beatrice separated from Richard, focusing all of her academic aims on Orson until her death in 1924 (Callow 29). However short lived her presence was in Welles’ nine-year-old life, it certainly was not without effect. In his book *Orson Welles: the Road to Xanadu*, author Simon Callow contends, “it is not an exaggeration to say that from her position deep inside him, she dictated his actions and influenced the course of his life up to his own death, more than sixty years later” (29). If such sentiment does not echo the deep peril that Macbeth experienced under the direction of Lady Macbeth, nothing can compare. If Macbeth had lived to reign, it is possible he might have been a reliable and fair ruler. However, Lady Macbeth had another agenda: Macbeth had to be king. In Cambridge’s edition of *Macbeth*, in reference to planning the death of Duncan, Lady Macbeth states, “Only look up clear: to alter favour ever is to alter fear: leave all the rest to me” (Dover Wilson 16). Not only does Lady Macbeth plant the idea of Macbeth’s kingship, but she also orchestrates the entire coup d’état. However grand Lady Macbeth’s ambitions for Macbeth may have been, she was never able to see them realized. Both Lady Macbeth and Beatrice shared the fate of dying before their plans had come into complete fruition: Beatrice, before Orson reached success in the arts, and Lady Macbeth, before Macbeth met his match as king.

Both Welles and Macbeth seemed destined for paths outside of their control; however, their own skill in exploitation should no be discounted. Take for example, Macbeth’s deceit after Duncan’s body is discovered. Although his blood-soaked hands forced him to admit to murder, he defends his cruel act as a defense against the entire kingdom, killing the two power-starved servants in an attempt to avenge his king. Certainly, Welles did not do anything of such great measure, but he did have a way of commanding an audience everywhere he went. After graduating from the Todd School for Boys in the 1930’s, which was highly influential in for furthering his interest in the arts, Welles took off for Dublin, Ireland (Callow 73). Upon arriving upon at up-and-coming Gate Theatre, Welles experienced Macbeth’s “right place at the right time” phenomenon: an actor had been fired, leading to open auditions for the play, *Jew Suss* (Callow 85). There was one problem for Welles: he had never had any substantial experience, something frowned upon in the acting world especially when to competitive auditions for an important role. Thus, like his Scottish counterpart, Welles lied to protect his integrity, stating that he had worked at the Theatre Guild in New York City, which gained him an audition, and ultimately, the role of Karl Alexander (Callow 87).

However, there is a distinct difference in the way that Macbeth and Welles carried out their deceit. Macbeth may have commanded his subjects in the beginning of the play, but due to an overwhelming amount of paranoia, his concern for keeping his head trumped his ability to keep up his confidence. Welles, on the other hand, never had a complex with his cool because, quite simply, he was never told no. Again, quite differently from Macbeth, Welles’s success came via his sexuality. To be completely honest, Welles was not a man you would think to have appeal: he was sixteen; complete with baby-fat, big brown eyes, and a wide mouth. The saying, “You’ve got a face for radio,” holds especially true for Welles (ironically, he would later find success in the medium). However, his natural talent of acting allowed for him to play roles much older than his actual age, including the role of seducer. Callow notes, “Orson, young and old, had a way of invading you that had nothing to do with the sheer size of him, but to do rather with a knack of immediate intimacy that was one of his greatest assets” (89). Welles’s unusual knack for sexual persuasion was always present; however, whether it was a result of his life with his mother or his failure of a father is unclear. Even while his father was alive, Welles spent most of his early life searching for men to fill the shoes: directors, doctors, principals, Welles tried them all. Macbeth found his support in two murderers. Welles found it in playwright and director John Houseman.

Despite Welles’s critically acclaimed success in Ireland, his return to New York City brought him nothing but blank faces. Once more, Welles used his sass to catapult him up the theatrical ladder and landed the role of Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*. After attending a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, John Houseman knew he had to befriend Welles (Callow 195). Welles used his sexuality to overwhelm Houseman: Callow describes their interaction as, “the longing for something in another which one feels oneself to lack…the desire for completion by one whom perceives already to be complete” (195). Thus, with such unbearable chemistry, Houseman’s first choice for his latest work with the Federal Theatre Project was, naturally, Welles (Callow 219). With the complete support of Houseman and his love of Shakespeare by his side, Welles finally met with his Scottish counterpart, choosing *Macbeth* as his directorial debut for the Negro Theatre Unit at the Lafayette Theatre (Callow 219).

Although Macbeth and Welles share many of the same traits and flaws, it seems somewhat unnatural to choose a cursed play for an opening production, much less to inaugurate the Federal Theatre Project’s African American Unit. There had to be some tension surrounding the fact that Welles chose an Elizabethan classic for an African-American audience. In a time of “us vs. them,” the notion that there was conflict over the fact that an African-American troupe would be producing one of “our” plays sounds terrible, but could be legitimate. *Macbeth* stands as another testament to Welles’s narcissism: if Welles created it, they would come. But Welles didn’t just create *Macbeth*, however, he reinvented it, with the same grandeur that Welles had come to expect in his own life. Instead of the traditional Scottish *Macbeth*, Welles created what is now called, “voodoo Macbeth”: set in early nineteenth-century Haiti, Welles’s *Macbeth* focuses on the Haitian court of Emperor Henri Christophe (Callow 222). The change wasn’t merely conceptual, and the entire production-set, costuming, direction, sound-received alterations. On April 14, 1936, “voodoo *Macbeth*” opened to what Callow remarks as, “a bold statement of intent: black actors…will create something thrilling and bold which will rival anything that the white theatre can offer” (240). However, one has to ask: Is changing the entire setting of a classic play the only way to make it relatable to a massive contemporary audience-or even to make it an Orson Welles production?

The comparisons between Welles and Macbeth are vast, but Macbeth has a romanticism to him that Welles completely lacks. One of Shakespeare’s greatest strengths was his ability to convey masculinity through poetry, but Welles had different views. Callow notes that, “(Welles) had a passion for verse, but he wanted to eliminate Poetry from classical theatre” (268). Welles’s intentions aside, the fact remains that classical theatre is poetry in movement, speech, and sound; to abandon the poetry of language entirely is to abandon the very notion of Elizabethan theatre itself. As human beings, it is impossible not to relate to the characters, but, as noted earlier, Macbeth is a character with which the audience does not want to identify. In “voodoo *Macbeth*,” Welles has not only created an empathetic Macbeth, but a Thane whose heinous acts are explainable. Very much like Welles’s life, although the events in Macbeth had no relation to them, Welles created an atmosphere which was conducive to believing them: Callow remarks that Welles used Haiti’s voodoo culture to “make the supernatural scenes a credible centre of the play” (222). Certainly, plays have to make some sense, but the reason that theatre can captivate an audience is because it allows the opportunity to be whisked away to fantastic lands. If say, playwright Bertolt Brecht decided he was not going to employ the alienation effect in *Mother Courage* because it didn’t seem credible, and that the idea of breaking the fourth wall was ridiculous, who knows where theatre would be today.

Despite his attempt to make sense of the mysticism, Welles eliminates some of the aspects of the play that provide meaning. For example, Welles began the “voodoo *Macbeth*” with the witches standing atop a hill calling out to Macbeth. In Cambridge’s classical edition, Macduff and other men are gathered to discuss the Thane of Cawdor’s demise as well as Macbeth’s rise to military fame. Perhaps it is because Welles identified with Macbeth that he thought it unnecessary to have any justification to his reputation, but herein the contradiction lies: Welles forces sense into scenes where sense isn’t needed, abandoning the real clarifying scenes without reason. Although “voodoo *Macbeth*” received fairly positive critical response, Shakespearean elitists and newcomers alike found the play to be a butchered rendition of Elizabethan original. In Richard Frances’s book, *Orson Welles on Shakespeare*, France remarks that “the original text (had) been egregiously violated” (12). In a bluntly titled review, “A Further Consideration of the Way in Which Orson Welles Failed to Develop an Interesting Idea,” John Mason Brown criticized Welles for sacrificing the actual meaning of *Macbeth* for a Haitian gimmick (Callow 238). Whether it was Welles’s need for perfection, or perhaps a perceived connection with Macbeth, the negative reviews did not keep him from the Scottish play, and twelve years later, he turned to the screen to create a filmed production of *Macbeth*.

Whatever the “voodoo *Macbeth*” had in concept, the film *Macbeth* had in terrible editing. The film was created on a budget of $700,000, which was, even during the 1940’s, a relatively small amount (France 34). The small allowance is noticeable from the very start of the movie: first, the film is grainy and pops, a quality attributed to the film and not the editing; second, there is so much mist that it appears as if Welles is trying to mask the imperfect dubbing of the voices to the actors. Unfortunately, technical difficulties are not the only problem with this film. The movie seems to be an edition out of a “No Fear Shakespeare” text: the story is devoid of any frivolity. Harry Raynor remarked that the film was “worse than oversimplified…a destruction of a noble and moving work of art” (France 34). The remark seems harsh, but it is nonetheless true. The movie is a patchwork quilt of elements from the “voodoo *Macbeth,*” the original *Macbeth*, and experiences from Welles’s life. Some of the greater examples of this mismatched tapestry come in the scenes of death. As the original Thane of Cawdor awaits execution, a Haitian drummer beats on a large drum as a Scottish-accented priest reads from the bible. Nowhere is such a literal and culturally confusing take on death present in the original *Macbeth*. Similarly, the movie shows Lady Macbeth falling from the top of a mountain cliff to her death, an unintentionally comic take. The “voodoo *Macbeth*” is not without this literal interpretation as well: in the movie and the play scenes of Lady Macduff’s murder, the killing of the children and Lady Macduff are all done onstage. Welles leaves no room for imagination; his movie stands as an attempt to capture perfection. The struggle for power is perhaps Macbeth and Welles’s biggest similarity: in the quest to attain perfection, the men stumble at the fact that, quite simply, they can only be men.

Although both Macbeth and Orson Welles began as men possessed with fantastic aims, they both crumbled under a fall from the public’s grace. Whether their delusions of grandeur were due to a lack of trust in men, overbearing women, or their own conceit, one thing is certain: they are both men without any true directorial, or kingly, talent.

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