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“All’s Well that Ends Welles”: Orson Welles and the “Voodoo” *Macbeth*

Abstract: The Federal Theatre Project, which was established in 1935 to put unemployed Americans back to work after the Great Depression, and later employed over 10,000 people at its peak, financed one particularly original adaptation of Shakespeare: the “voodoo” *Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles in 1936. Debuting in Harlem with an all-black cast, the play’s setting resembled a Haiti-like island instead of ancient Scotland, and Welles also supplemented the witches with voodoo priestesses, sensing that the practice of voodoo was more relevant, if not more realistic, for a contemporary audience than early modern witchcraft. My essay will consider how the terms “national origins” and “originality” intersect in three distinct ways vis-a-vis this play: The Harlem locale for the premier, the Caribbean setting for the tragedy, and the federal funding for the production.

Keywords: multicultural, Caribbean, Orson Welles, nationality, voodoo, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, race.

The quotation in my title was voiced by a frustrated official at RKO Studios, which, in late 1942, hoped to rid itself of Welles in order to release the company from any further financial obligation to the director. Following the success of *Citizen Kane* (1941) and during the editing of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), Welles had been more or less AWOL in Brazil working on a never-completed film project, tentatively titled *It’s All True*, which was over budget as well as overdue. But I would suggest that the quote might also be an apt one when considering Welles’s attempts at re-interpreting Shakespeare throughout his career, for not only does it turn Welles’s beloved Bard’s own words against him, but it also suggests the complex and vexed connection between Welles and Shakespeare. While the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* did not ultimately end Welles or his career (and in hindsight may have done just the opposite), there was enough toil and trouble leading up to the debut of the play that many thought, and others vehemently wished, that the curse of the Scottish

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play had traversed the ocean to find a new home at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, the renovated auditorium where the production premiered in 1936. Although funded under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Theatre Project centered in Washington D.C., the program was locally administrated by John Houseman for the Negro Theatre unit of the FTP.

The essay focuses on three aspects of Welles's production of the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*. After looking first at Welles's engagement with Shakespeare in general, I turn my attention to his adaptation of the tragedy, including his relocating of the play from Scotland to Haiti, as well as his supplanting of the wayward sisters with Voodoo priestess. The third section considers Welles and race more generally in the five years following the 1936 performance in order to show that the all-black production may have influenced Welles both professionally and personally at a pivotal point in the twenty-year old's life.

Welles and Shakespeare

Welles's early exposure and interest in Shakespeare formed the foundation on which his lifelong devotion to the Bard was staged. "At the age of two he spoke fluent and considered English," claims the noted English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan (13), and before he was three, he "was familiar with the plays of Shakespeare from his mother's readings." One story even features Welles throwing a fit when he realized his mother was reading to him from Lamb's version of the tales condensed for children; he preferred the genuine text it seemed, and he was savvy enough to detect the difference. Welles's mother died when he was only nine, unfortunately, and his father passed away six years later, leaving Welles to his own devices as well as in charge of his own education. In a provocative portrayal from *The Saturday Evening Post*, published in three installments in 1940 (entitled "How to Raise a Child: The Education of Orson Welles, Who Didn't Need It"), Alva Johnston and Fred Smith (Jan. 20: 94) continue the child-prodigy and Shakespeare connection when they allege that Welles "was presenting his own versions of Shakespeare before he knew his A. B. Cs". We learn in the next installment that at a very young age, Welles's guardian, "angered at discovering a light on in the boy's room at three A.M.," crept up the stairs and "entered to find a little old man with flowing white hair and beard"; the guardian soon realized, according to numerous versions of the account, that Orson was merely "practicing King Lear" (Jan 27: 25). I cite these examples not to suggest they are free from hyperbole, but instead to show the numerous times Shakespeare is invoked in life or in legend as an early and important influence on Welles, the child prodigy par excellence.

When he was finally sent off to grade school in 1926, a fate Welles had avoided till the age of eleven, he entered the Todd School in Woodstock, Illinois, where he remained until his graduation in 1931. While attending the school, Welles came under the tutelage of the Headmaster Roger Hill; the relationship, however, was more a collaborative venture than a mentor-student relationship, for Hill noted his student’s genius early on. While Welles did not do well on the math portion of the entrance exam, he scored a 146 on the I.Q. test, the low range for the category of genius. Recalling the admissions tests, Hill later proclaimed that he was certain Welles would have “set some kind of world’s record” score if there had been some way “to test his A.Q., or Aesthetic Quotient” (qtd. in Johnston and Smith, Jan. 27: 25). During his time at the Todd School, Welles starred in and directed a number of plays, including a production of *Julius Caesar* (when he was only twelve), in which he played Marc Antony, the Soothsayer, and Cassius, while he later “edited, illustrated, printed and published his own acting version” of the tragedy (Houseman 146).

Welles eventually co-edited three plays with Headmaster Hill, entitled *Everybody’s Shakespeare*. First published in 1934 by Todd Press, the volume contained three plays, reprinted and edited using modernized spelling: *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. Originally issued as single editions, the targeted audience for the stand-alone editions, as well as for the compilation, was high school and college students, not so much as a way to increase the students’ critical understanding of the plays, but instead as an attempt to engage them emotionally with the works. This idea was signaled immediately in the introductory essay entitled “Advice to Students” for “Studying Shakespeare’s Plays,” for it was followed by the single word, “Don’t”, followed by an exclamation point for emphasis. Instead, Welles (3) instructed students to “Read them. *Enjoy them*. Act them.” In an attempt to create a more performance-based understanding of the plays, Hill “cut the texts [and] Welles created nearly 500 drawings to illustrate the plays” (Rooney 64). In addition, the two shared editorial essay duties and collaborated on stage directions. Not only was this a task of somewhat sophisticated team editing, but we should not forget that Welles was only nineteen when it was first published (Rooney 63).

Welles’s adolescent Shakespeare activities turned out to be merely rehearsals for his later life. He made his Broadway debut in December 1934, playing the Chorus and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*; he starred in and directed a production of *Hamlet* in 1936, as well as a radio version of *Julius Caesar* in 1938; and his multi-media Shakespeare activities continued throughout his life. For example, he played Lear onstage in a wheelchair at New York’s City Center in the 1950s; and he acted *Lear* for Peter Brook in a 1953 televised version on CBS; in the 1960s, he filmed a version of *The Merchant of Venice* which was never released; and in the 1970s, he produced a West German-funded documentary called *Filming Othello*. Yet for all his depth in working with

certain plays from the canon, Welles's breadth remained fairly restricted, as he tended to focus on a limited number of Shakespeare texts, specifically *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, the Falstaff plays, and *The Merchant of Venice*; a number of these favorites, such as *Julius Caesar*, were reproduced over and over again in different formats, including a textbook version, a radio version, a stage production, two audio versions, and at least three planned film versions, none ever actually shot (Anderegg 20).

But the tragedy of an overly-ambitious overreacher, such as *Macbeth*, seemed to particularly and pervasively haunt the dark recesses of Welles's imagination (it is worth recalling that Welles also produced a celebrated version of *Dr. Faustus* in January of 1937). In addition to the "Voodoo" *Macbeth* considered in detail shortly, his first directorial credit on radio was a half-hour abridgment of *Macbeth* for CBS Columbia Workshop on 28 February 1937. And in 1940, he again turned to *Macbeth*, in a fuller recorded version, which included his and Roger Hill's Mercury Shakespeare edition of the script as a bonus with the album when it was finally released in 1941. The later film version of *Macbeth* was as troubling and cursed as the protagonist in the play. Originally entered in the 1948 Venice film festival, the movie was withdrawn from competition by Welles when he learned that Lawrence Olivier's version of *Hamlet* would be awarded the Great International Prize of Venice which he had seemingly sought to capture. But back in the States, Welles continued to be the actor/director most closely associated with the Bard. If "classic Hollywood, for better or worse, is our theater," claims Michael Denning (363), "then Welles is our Shakespeare, the Mercury, our Globe," and even "if that comparison is made with tongue in cheek," as Denning adds, I would agree with his suggestion that "it is, nevertheless, the comparison that Welles demanded."

Welles and the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*

The public perception connecting Welles with Shakespeare seems to have originated during the depression era in the U.S., specifically the 1930s, when the WPA helped fund his "Voodoo" *Macbeth*. In 1935, the WPA sponsored a separate division called the Federal Theatre Project, whose twin goals were to mitigate unemployment in the theatrical world, as well as to make good theatre available to the predominantly-unemployed audiences. As Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer (119) point out, the FTP "proved a godsend to colored actors during the Depression," as it enabled blacks, for the very first time, "to learn something about stage management, lighting and other technical matters relating to backstage activities—an opportunity the commercial theatre never allowed due to the objection of the white stagehands union and other craft syndicates." They also note (119) that "even Negro-owned theatres . . . had to have white

stagehands,” and in movie theatres or “vaudeville houses,” the union insisted that only “white operators” be allowed to “run motion picture projectors or operate spotlights.” But in the Federal Theatre organization, they remind us (119), blacks “could do all those things.” This attempt by the government to assist in subsidizing the arts was obviously not the first nor the last attempt to wed politics to culture; this particular endeavor in the U.S., while pronounced in impact, turned out to have a short shelf-life, as Congress voted to defund it only four years later in 1939, resulting in “a great loss to Negro actors and to young technicians anxious to continue the backstage training they could not get elsewhere” (Hughes and Meltzer 120). Yet its legacy continued long after the doors of the Federal Theatres were, literally, bolted shut.¹ “The success of the Negro Theatre,” for instance, allowed Hughes and others “to create a series of independent black theatres,” one called the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, which performed a number of short sketch pieces written by him (Denning 369).

The origins of the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* harken back to the time when Houseman was hired by Rose McClendon, the head of the Negro People’s Theatre, to help administer the Negro Theatre unit of the Federal Theatre. She believed, probably correctly at the time, that a white man with Houseman’s stature and connections would have more access to the Washington, D.C. purse strings, and to the New York critics, both of whom would more or less judge the success of the project. When Houseman found out that Welles was open to the idea of directing a play with an all-black cast, their vision of collaborating on a Shakespearean-era tragedy was one step closer to becoming a reality. “I suggested that our dream of staging a whirling Elizabethan drama might now be realized under unusual but attractive conditions,” Houseman (185) wrote to Welles, particularly “with Uncle Sam as our angel.” As both would soon discover, Houseman had been correct, for they were able to employ other resources of the Federal Project to assist them and so keep costs to a minimum compared to a commercial production. For example, “both the set and the costumes were executed in W.P.A. workrooms at a cost of only two thousand dollars” (France, “The ‘Voodoo’ *Macbeth*” 74).

Welles recognized that a Scottish setting would not be suitable to accommodate and situate the all-black cast, and while discussing it with his wife Virginia, she came up with the 19th century Haitian setting (circa 1820), as well as the idea to complement the Witches with Voodoo priestesses. Together they

¹ In the most notorious case of these forced closures, Welles and Houseman went ahead with a production of composer Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* even after they were warned by a congressional mandate to halt all cultural activities. When the Maxine Elliot Theatre was padlocked and guards were posted at the doors in June of 1936, Welles finally secured an empty stage space at the Venice Theatre about twenty blocks away. Most of the audience and many of the cast and crew walked to the new location for an impromptu but historic performance.

set out to research tropical vegetation, musical waltzes, and Napoleonic costumes from the Directoire time period (1795-1799), when Haiti had a colonial affiliation with Napoleon's empire. Welles found his model for a Macbeth-like Haitian historical figure in Henri Christophe, a tyrant who ruled over the island nation from 1811-1820. Thematically, then, the setting made sense in other ways too, some unrelated simply to race. As Susan McCloskey (410) points out, "Haiti's history of colonial rebellion and civil war warranted Welles's presentation of a world divided against itself, defined by the contrast between the jungle and the Francophile court."

Once the setting was determined, Welles and Houseman assembled a cast and crew to begin the process of staging the play (the large number of people they hired eventually totaled 137, all earning just over \$20.00 per week). The preparation period, however, was not a particularly pleasant experience, and as the time for the opening grew shorter, so did the tempers of both director and cast. Always the perfectionist, Welles worked long hours and he expected his cast to as well, and we know for certain that at least once, Welles kept the rehearsal going for "nearly seventy-two hours (with time out only for catnaps)" (Leaming 103). There was also a sense of anxiety in the black community in general about what Welles was up to; worried that the play was going to be "an insult to black people," one man went so far as to slash Welles in the lobby of the theatre during rehearsals. As Welles recalls: "The fellow had a razor blade strapped with adhesive to his wrist," but Canada Lee, the former boxing champion who had been hired to play Banquo, "saved me" (Leaming 104). In later interviews, Welles would recall that rehearsing the actual lines with the cast was one of the easier tasks, for he felt that black actors had an innate understanding of the playing conditions of the stage: "The negro with the virgin mind, pure without any special intellectual intoxication, understands the essence of the Greek theatre better, which demands simplicity and the absence of artificial interpretations." He also claimed that in the rehearsals for *Macbeth* he "never had . . . the trouble to read or correct speech and intonations," because they "discovered all themselves" (qtd. in Rippey 71). While this quote seems to border on bigotry, suggesting the stereotypical childlike naiveté of black people in general, and black performers in particular, I believe Welles moved beyond this notion due in part to working with the cast of the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, as we will see in the final sections of my essay.

Opening night was set for 14 April, and as the sun went down, a sixty-five piece combined band from the Monarch Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks dressed "in uniforms of light blue, scarlet, and gold, began to march in two detachments through the streets of Harlem behind two huge, crimson banners that read: MACBETH by William Shakespeare" (Houseman 198-199). When they finally reached the theatre, the group assembled on a temporary grandstand which had been erected by the Parks

Department in front of the Lafayette (France, *Orson Welles* 13). According to the *New York Times* (199): “All northbound traffic was stopped for more than an hour, while from trucks in the street, floodlights flared a circle of light into the lobby and cameramen took photographs of the arrival of celebrities.”

More than 10,000 people crowded around the theatre and a surrounding ten block area; inside was equally crowded, the lobby so mobbed that people could not get to their seats, delaying the opening curtain by more than thirty minutes. As Wendy Smith (“Voodoo *Macbeth*”) asserts, “the frenzied mood outside the theatre was matched by that within.” In other words, the walls of the theatre hardly separated the din of the streets from the excitement inside the structure. But that was not a problem for Welles, who seemed to draw on the sounds filling the air around, and sometimes seeping into, the Lafayette Theatre. As Clare Corbould (861) notes in her essay “Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem,” the crowd clamor and the huge parade before the play that day were not uncommon sights and sounds in this section of the city, nor was the “noise” that filled the streets, seemingly emanating from everywhere at once. For unlike their white counterparts uptown, who wanted increasingly to curb the intrusively “cacophonous and atavistic” sounds of the cityscape, those blacks who called Harlem home used such noises as a “way to claim that space as their own.” And it was through sound, Corbould (862; 863) adds, that “Harlem’s residents created a counterpublic sphere . . . of black self-expression,” an “inherently political act” played out on an obviously auditory landscape. It seems to me that Welles was learning as much about Harlem as Harlem was learning about Welles’s production of Shakespeare.

More attuned than most to the music of the Harlem streets, Welles used a number of sound devices to create a “spectacle of thrills and sudden shocks” (France, “The ‘Voodoo’ *Macbeth*” 67). Even the decorous Brooks Atkinson (25), the lead reviewer for the *New York Times*, could not overlook the surrounding terrain of the theatre, claiming that the “opening was an exciting event” due to the “Elks band serenade” and the gathering of “a denser mob than the Ethiopian mass-meeting on Lennox Avenue” which spilled over onto the sidewalks in front of the theatre.² As the crowd was being slowly seated inside, another sound filled the air, and the ticket holders were greeted by a loud overture, “made up of spiritual, syncopated, and blues melodies” written especially for the occasion by James P. Johnson and arranged by Joe Jordan, the famous African-American composer (France, *Orson Welles* 39).

Once the curtain parted, the aural assault continued, the audience hearing a “*First trumpet boom*,” followed by a “*Second trumpet [and] Low roll*

² Mussolini’s forces scored a major victory on April 9th and captured Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, on May 5th; the same day Haile Selassie was forced to flee his country and live in exile.

of thunder” (France, *Orson Welles* 39), just as they began to witness Welles’ transformation of the barren-heath of Shakespeare into a tropical forest, both compelling and sinister, an island-wide unweeded garden. All of the jungle scenes were played in front of a backdrop, and behind that partition Welles located the only permanent part of the set, a palace-like castle inspired by drawings of San Souci, Christophe’s capital city. The play opened with Macbeth and Banquo thrashing their way through leafy palms and tall grass, where the opening line is spoken by Macbeth: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (Welles, ed. 1.1; France, *Orson Welles* 39).³ Suddenly seeing Hecate, Macbeth asks, “How far is’t called to Forres?,” a line spoken by Banquo in Shakespeare’s version. After getting no response, Macbeth and Banquo immediately notice a ring of about a dozen women dressed as Voodoo priestesses, and an almost equal number of men dressed as natives. They all circle the three witches, as they pronounce their lines of prophecy, each punctuated by voodoo drums.⁴

These tom-tom type drums, which beat incessantly throughout the production, were played by a group of drummers from Sierra Leone, who, according to some contemporary reviews, dominated the show. Although the African troupe spoke almost no English, they were led by Asadata Dafora Horton, who himself had a “flawless Oxford accent” (and who would later become minister of culture in his homeland). But the real star of the drumming ensemble was named Abdul, “an authentic witch doctor,” according to Houseman (190).⁵ While I agree with Margurite Rippy (72) that Welles used the “auditory cue” of the constant drumbeat to represent “the figurative place of the ‘primitive’”, I would suggest that the drumming and chanting were more than merely symbols. Using an African troupe from a British colony probably underscored the theme of Welles’s production, even if it was inadvertent. But the role of the drummers has become louder and louder in recent critical discourse, particularly in Benjamin Hilb’s interpretation (658), in which he claims Welles’s role in the “production’s Haitian dimension was ancillary,” and finds the “black drummers and dancers” in the play to be “far more important”

³ The playscript in France (2001) is nearly identical to the Welles Ms. in the Lilly Library, so I use the page numbers from France, supplemented on occasion by the line numbers from Welles’s edition. The same text can be found at the Library of Congress: *Coast to Coast: The Federal Theatre Project: 1933-1939*. A four minute clip from the conclusion of “Voodoo” *Macbeth* can be seen on Youtube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZLrqJka-EU>>.

⁴ In his never-completed *Heart of Darkness* for RKO studios, Welles used drumming again, but this time he employed it as a dark counterpoint to classical piano music which represented the Americanized Elsa, who, more or less, symbolized white civilization.

⁵ Welles was even concerned about the authenticity of voodoo chants (Houseman 193). When he insisted that the chants did not sound “wicked enough,” Asadata confessed that they were strong spells to ward off the Beriberi, “the evil spirit,” “not to induce it” (193).

than the director in respect to the voodoo rituals.⁶ The first decision made by the African musicians, for instance, was “to file a formal requisition for five live black goats,” who were “brought into the theatre by night and sacrificed, hugger-mugger, according to tribal ritual, before being stretched into resonant drum skins” (Houseman 190).⁷ These mystical drums rarely fell silent, and in many cases the close of each act was amplified by noise, or the sudden silencing of it. As Bernice Kliman (118) points out, Welles provided “an aural underpinning of almost all the action.” At the end of Act 1, for example, Hecate (a male brandishing a bullwhip in Welles’s version), sharply cries out “Peace! The charms wound up,” as the drumming ceased and the stage went dark (France, *Orson Welles* 44).

When the lights came on in Act Two, Lady Macbeth could be seen on the castle battlements reading the letter from her husband. Duncan and the whole entourage enter the scene, and it is only a short time before they both hatch their plan to kill the King, which Macbeth then executes. Hecate reappears onstage after Macbeth’s coronation, which almost immediately follows the murder. As he hovers over Macbeth’s throne, he curses him amid loud drumming: “I will drain him dry as hay. / Sleep shall neither night and day / Hang upon his pent-house lid” (drums stop) / He shall live a man forbid” (1:2. in Shakespeare; France, *Orson Welles* 62). As Richard France (“The ‘Voodoo’ *Macbeth*” 70) notes, “[o]ne thump of a drum accented the very last syllable, and a blackout brought the first half” of the play to a close. This prominent punctuation of one thump of the drum rung like an auditory exclamation point closing the scene.

Welles’s three act play proceeds through the basic plot of Shakespeare’s with a few notable exceptions, many related to aural changes. After the coronation and almost immediate murder of Banquo in Act 2, Scene 1, the banquet scene occurs, but Welles’s version features an elaborate Napoleonic-era fashionable ball, complete with period waltzes by Josef Lanner (not by Strauss, as is commonly asserted). The “*Waltz music starts, very faint and weird*” (France, *Orson Welles* 71), according to the stage directions, as the lords and ladies of the court—the men attired in military costumes and women in ballroom

⁶ Hilb’s essay (660) challenged a number of prominent critical voices on the “Voodoo” *Macbeth*, unjustly claiming, at least to my mind, that the “prejudice of early white reviews . . . insidiously comes to inflect contemporary criticism” of the play. The editors of *Shakespeare Bulletin* wisely allowed three of them (Margurite Rippy, Peter Erickson, and Ayanna Thompson) to respond in the next issue (Volume 32.4 [2014]). I am grateful to Scott Newstock for sending me the responses in draft form as I was writing this essay.

⁷ As Hilb (664) points out by quoting Voodoo (or in Hilb’s spelling, Vodou) lore, this was an important part of the Haitian ritual, for “[o]ne special drum, the Assoto . . . bears the status of a god,” and so the drums “dressed with sacrificial skin” were considered more powerful than the other “servant” drums.

gowns—slowly dance and Banquo’s ghost begins to appear to Macbeth. After the second sighting, just as in Shakespeare’s version, the King loses his composure, causing the guests to exit. But in the Welles production, as Macbeth and his wife are left alone onstage, the drumbeats of the jungle slowly but steadily become more incessant, finally drowning out completely the elegant orchestral notes of the waltzes. At the very end of the scene, the “*Music of the voodoo steals in again, rising to a crescendo*,” (France, *Orson Welles* 76) and as Macbeth vows to visit again the “secret, black, and midnight hags” and to see Hecate, their obvious leader, his speech is accented by a “*Tremendous burst of thunder*” (2:1; France, *Orson Welles* 76). The combination of natural and supernatural shocks of sound surely kept the audience engaged as the tragedy quickly sped to its gruesome conclusion.

Act 3 begins with the massacre of Lady Macduff and her child in the first scene, and we then witness the significant conversation between Malcolm (Duncan had only one son in Welles’s version) and Macduff in scene 2, located near the coastline of Haiti instead of in England. Lady Macbeth’s suicide occurs in scene 3, and in scene 4 the play moves toward its finale as Birnam Wood, portrayed by numerous cast members carrying tree branches, moves across the stage. Finally, Macduff wounds Macbeth with his sword, after both their pistols fail, and Macbeth delivers his final line to the Witches who have all the while been chanting below. “All Hail, Macbeth! Hail King of Scotland,” the witches cry, to which he replies, “Accurs’d the tongue that tells me so / And these jiggling fiends no more believed,” just before he is decapitated and his head tossed into the vegetation below (3:4; France, *Orson Welles* 96). The jungle scene immediately “*collapses, revealing a stage filled with people*,” as Malcolm sits “*on the throne, crowned*” (France, *Orson Welles* 96).

The play does not come to a triumphant conclusion such as Shakespeare’s appears to; instead the ending may suggest the never-ending cycle of corruption in many post-colonial era leaders. For after Malcolm’s army proclaims, “Hail, King of Scotland,” we hear the voodoo women chanting again, punctuating each line. But suddenly Hecate cries out “Peace!” and “*the drums, army, music, voices of voodoo women – all are instantly silent*,” before Hecate delivers the closing line of the play, in an echo of where the tragedy began: “The charm’s wound up” (3:4; France, *Orson Welles* 97). The next raucous noise came from the thunderous applause of the opening-night audience, which supposedly lasted for fifteen minutes. “On opening night . . . the curtain never fell,” Welles would later recall, as the “audience swarmed up onto the stage, cheering” (qtd. in Tynan 18).

The traditional newspapers in New York were, for the most part, also impressed, even if occasionally ambivalent. Atkinson (25), the prominent critic for the *New York Times* mentioned earlier, was probably the most influential theatre writer of the time, and he too highlighted the auditory embellishment,

declaring that Welles had managed to “crowd the stage with mad and gabbling throngs of evil worshipers” who constantly “beat the voodoo drums,” eventually “rais[ing] the voices until the jungle echoes” with a pulsating and ominous rhythm. Yet even despite Welles’ innovative soundscape, or perhaps because of it, Atkinson came away conflicted about the overall effect. He noted (25) in his review the next day (Wednesday 15 April 1936) that as “an experiment in Afro-American showmanship the ‘Macbeth’ rocked the Lafayette Theatre.” While “uncommonly resourceful” and “stunning,” and in some ways a “triumph of art,” it did not seem, to his mind, to be authentic Shakespeare, for it “missed the sweep and scope of a poetic tragedy” (25). Other reviewers, such as Percy Hammond (25), also seemed slightly befuddled. His critique in *The New York Herald Tribune* referred to the play as “an exhibition of de-luxe boondoggling,” yet one performed with “considerable pomp and circumstance.”

The reviews in the black press were less ambivalent, and some bordered on the laudatory. For instance, Roi Ottley (8) of the *New York Amsterdam News* praised the production for not only “justifying its existence” on its own, but also for making “it clear that the government should continue to subsidize a Negro theatre project.” For in spite of many misgivings by the Harlem community about what Welles was up to (including rumors he was producing a vaudeville version of Shakespeare intended to satirize the black performers), Ottley (8) found Welles’s production to have just the opposite effect. After admitting that the “presence of Broadway and Park Avenue added to the glamour of the occasion,” he noted that those uptown patrons were “not entirely cognizant” of what seemed to him to be an historic moment. In an essay composed shortly after his review, Ottley (qtd. in Smith, *Becoming Something* 378. n. 58). went even further in detailing this significance, particularly praising Welles for giving black actors “an opportunity to discard the bandana and burnt-cork casting” of racist stereotyping prevalent in dramas of the time, and instead allowing a black actor “to play a universal character.”

The play’s success was also signaled by the fact that it played for ten weeks at the Lafayette, where at least sixty-four shows sold out completely, before it moved to the Adelphi Theatre on 54th Street for another series of performances. The production was also presented at local high schools, “where admission could be had for as little as ten cents,” and a road tour of WPA theatres in Bridgeport, Hartford, Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, and Dallas followed (Kliman 115). Segregation made the travel plans for the approximately one hundred black actors and crew extremely complicated, and records show that many of them slept wherever they could find a welcome door: churches, schools, private homes, boarding houses, and even the local YMCAs. While accounts vary (the WPA promotion material claimed over 150,000 saw it in New York alone), even the most conservative estimates suggest that over 100,000 people saw it in Harlem or on tour, and some estimate the total figure to

be closer to 300,000, an incredible achievement by any measure.⁸ Although some skeptics complain that the attendance numbers were swollen by the subsidized ticket prices (in New York, for instance, during so-called “relief nights,” some seats were priced at only five cents), it is worth recalling that part of the FTP’s mission was to facilitate first-time visitors of all races and classes in witnessing a professional dramatic performance.

Welles and Race

Partly due to Welles’s emerging Pan-American approach to racial issues, and as Welles was preparing to leave the country in order to begin filming *It’s All True* in Brazil, he received a call from Nelson Rockefeller, the recently-appointed Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs, a group commissioned by President Roosevelt to improve cultural, racial, and educational relations with South America in hopes of countering “antidemocratic” movements in some countries which may have ultimately led to alliances with the Axis forces. The plan Rockefeller proposed during that call was for Welles to direct a “documentary” film about the Carnival season in Rio, and, in turn, the U.S. government would quietly subsidize the production. At the time, the agency reasoned that the project would work in two ways. First, it would participate in “disseminating good will in the form of culture from the U.S. throughout South America” (although I would suspect the good will came more from cash payouts to the local populace for help during the filming process), and second, the Rockefeller-led project was also designed “to interest the people of the U.S. in their neighbors to the south, something Welles’s film would presumably help to do” (Leaming 231).⁹

According to most accounts, Welles probably saw the funding as a way to help underwrite his own movie, rather than as some patriotic project. There is little doubt, however, that Welles did act on behalf of the Allied effort, at least when he decided to channel his energy in that direction. Although his physical condition (and supposedly flat feet) kept him out of active duty, when he returned to the U.S. from Latin America in 1942, he designed and starred in two shows on CBS radio, both designed to aid the war effort. The first, entitled *Hello America*, continued the South American diplomatic effort every Sunday evening by relating stories to the U.S. listening audience about their neighbors to the south. The other show, *Ceiling Unlimited*, which aired on Monday nights, highlighted the aviation aspect of the war effort. And we should not be surprised

⁸ See Hilb (649) for the higher estimate, where he adds to Rippy’s New York attendance figure an estimated audience number for the tour itself.

⁹ It is probably worth noting that Rockefeller was a principal shareholder in RKO studio stock.

to learn that the major sponsors of the program were the Lockheed Company and the Vega Aircraft Corporation, a subsidiary of Lockheed which produced most of the aircraft for its parent company during WW II. The radio programs were just one of many instances where Welles’s collaborations relied significantly on outside financial support. As Tynan (11) perceptively points out, Welles often “managed to work for himself while working for somebody else,” a point particularly apt for describing the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* as well.

In these instances, Welles’s firmly anti-fascist stance aligned with the government’s view, unlike when Welles drew domestic parallels such as his proclamation that the “Nazi mob” is “the same mob that hangs and burns negroes in the South, the same mob that maltreats Jews in Germany. It’s the Nazi mob anywhere.” (Welles qtd. in Callow, *The Road to Xanadu* 324).¹⁰ But the interpretations of Welles’s relation to race issues covers the gamut, from sympathetic biographers such as Callow who claim he was color-blind to Rippy (72) who suggests that Welles’s *Macbeth*, as well as other projects, played into “white fantasies of race.” While she concedes (75) that Welles offered “credible jobs to black actors,” she goes on to add that “[d]espite the communal impulse of the script” of the play, “Welles-as-director often acted the role of colonial governor giving paternal guidance to his cast, a point that created resentment among some cast members.” Although it’s not exactly clear who was resenting whom in that statement, I believe she is closer to the mark when she claims (75-76) that “the youthful Welles acted out primitivist fantasies through his Haitian *Macbeth*, particularly through his relationships with black actors,” specifically Jack Carter, the original lead, who even the reserved Houseman (194) referred to as “a pimp, a killer, and finally an actor.”

Yet to Welles (qtd. in Leaming 101), Carter seemed “beautiful,” reminding him of a “black Barrymore,” with his “pale gray eyes and a wonderful face.” But the relationship was fraught with danger because “[b]efriending Carter inevitably meant boozing it up with him,” not only due to Welles’s “innate fascination” with the Harlem culture of Carter, but also in order “to monitor . . . the actor’s self-destructive impulses” (101-102). When they would return close to daybreak on numerous occasions, Welles would give gripping details of their escapades, including allegedly being arrested at a chaotic Harlem rent party. The tension between Welles and Houseman also seemed to grow during these escapades with Carter: “Orson was both aware and irritated by Housman’s sense of himself as somehow taming his incorrigible young partner” (Leaming 106).¹¹ But Welles never gave up on Carter, and it is worth

¹⁰ This comment seemingly refers to the Cinna mob scene in Welles’s “brown shirt” *Julius Caesar*, subtitled “Death of a Dictator”, performed in 1937 at the Welles and Houseman controlled Mercury Theatre.

¹¹ Rippy (76) characterizes the relationship in Freudian terms, suggesting that the two were “cast” as the “superego/id, with Houseman representing white intellectual restraint and Carter black erotic desire”.

remembering that Welles later paid the actor “a comparatively high salary” of \$200 a week to work on the never-completed *Heart of Darkness* film, even after the studio significantly cut the budget in September of 1939 (Rippy 94). Although he played the “Half-Breed,” also called the “Steersman” in the character list, Carter’s role “had depth,” according to Rippy (96), his status as “mixed,” making him a marker of the tragic failure of whiteness, the fear of and desire for miscegenation.” The conflicted whiteness seems projected onto his role, for even as Carter is described in the character list as “the expatriate, tragic exile who can’t remember the sound of his own language,” he can sense the supernatural powers of the jungle which the white characters cannot because he possesses “an intimate knowledge of darkness” (Rippy 96; 101). Such racial experimentation was just one of many problems the studio found in the project. When the enterprise was eventually abandoned in December of 1939, its experimental narration was also suspect, but the main problem it seems was that Welles could not work within a Hollywood budget, particularly as theaters in Europe were closing as World War II approached.

Welles also made a number of close black associates during and following both the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* and the *Heart of Darkness* venture, including a professional and personal relationship with Duke Ellington, whom he met in the early 1940s in Los Angeles. A day after seeing Ellington in the all-black review *Jump for Joy*, Welles invited him to collaborate on a short film about the history of jazz, based on the life of Louis Armstrong (who they hoped would play himself), while Ellington would compose the music. As their discussions continued, Welles decided it might work as a segment of film episodes he planned based on “true stories,” and called *It’s All True*. Welles also told Ellington he would pay him over \$1,000.00 per week, which he did, although the composer only produced some twenty-eight bars of music before RKO stopped funding the project (Benamou 27).¹²

The most significant black authors of the time also befriended Welles, partly due to the production of the “Voodoo” *Macbeth*. For instance, when Richard Wright decided to stage a version of his novel *Native Son* published in 1940, he asked Welles and Houseman to produce it, in part because he had “made a special trip” to New York four years earlier to see the play, and “he was purely dazzled by the show’s pyrotechnics” (Smith, *Becoming Something* 76). Wright was specifically concerned that the protagonist Bigger Thomas be portrayed as a human being, not a cartoonish stereotype, which he emphasized in

¹² Four years later, Welles began to broadcast a variety radio show for Mobil Oil called *Orson Welles’ Almanac*, which included comedy skits and jazz performers. When a “production person” suggested to Orson that when Ellington appeared on the program, “he be indentified in the script not as Orson’s *friend*, but as his *servant*, Orson adamantly refused: told that this was just a ‘minor change,’ Orson snapped that it certainly was not minor to call his friend his servant” (Leaming 286).

a letter to Welles and Houseman: “We have already enough plays and movies showing Negroes in . . . traditional roles,” and he implored Welles to present Bigger as a *human being*” instead (Wright to Welles and Houseman, 19 May 1940). Welles made the superb decision to cast Canada Lee, (who had saved his life and played Banquo in Shakespeare’s tragedy), and Welles conjured up a stellar troupe which mixed black actors from the Negro Theatre project with performers from his newly-formed Mercury Theatre company. The production ran for 114 performances, premiering on 24 March 1941, and *Time* magazine singled it out as “the strongest drama of the season” (7 April 1941).

Conclusion

To end where we began, when Welles was still filming *It’s All True* in Brazil, he was continuing to move toward a more diverse and multi-vocal narrative style which was not bound to a single linguistic pattern or culture. The location in South America also proved advantageous to Welles as he began to blur the simple binary lines between black and white, and it facilitated his growing interest in “borderland cultures like Moorish Spain and the American Southwest” located in liminal spaces where an “ambiguous, racially indeterminate identity” could be explored and embraced (Rippy 116). If this move by Welles seems tentative to us today, we should remember the context in which it occurred, the Interwar period in the U.S., where most blacks were still relegated to stereotypical comic roles such as those on the immensely popular *Amos ‘n’ Andy* show which began on radio in the 1920s and continued on TV until the 1950s. And we only have to listen to studio executives who traveled with Welles to Brazil to see how advanced the director was compared to even his closest contemporaries. Tom Pettey, for instance, assistant to Herb Drake, Welles’s publicity director, wrote from Brazil on 5 May 1942: “Now we are doing the Voodoo or macambo stuff which is dynamite in Rio. We have a closed set, a studio full of jigibos and a little set depicting a hut in the hills” (qtd. in Rippy 194, n. 32). But Welles, as Roi Ottley had noted about the Voodoo *Macbeth*, was one of the first directors to allow blacks to play a “universal character” free of stereotypes. Welles (qtd. In Hilb 660) reinforced this assessment in an interview in 1982, when he claimed to Leslie Megahey that he “wanted to give black actors a chance to play classics without it being funny. Or even exotic.” As Catherine Benemou (179) explains, “Welles’s interest in the Afro-diaspora as a cultural concept and active circuit of discourse tied to the formation of black identity can be traced back at least as far as the production” of the “Voodoo” *Macbeth*. So I think it is clear that the “Voodoo” *Macbeth* ushered in Welles’s awareness and promotion of a pan-American identity, because as far as I can tell from biographies, film histories, and cultural studies,

Welles had no interest in such notions till he worked in Harlem in 1936; following the production, however, his engagement with issues of race certainly accelerated becoming more global in scope and more political in application.

Welles's feelings became so strident by 1944, that he published an essay entitled "Race Hate Must Be Outlawed," in which he claimed "the morality of the auction block is out of date," so "there is no room in the American century for Jim Crow." Becoming even more adamant, he declares, "Race hate isn't human nature," as some have suggested; instead, Welles argues, "race hate is the abandonment of human nature." And he combines again the political and the racial, admitting that "there will be men who can't be weaned from the fascist vices of race hate," such as those who "would segregate the colored and Semitic peoples," but just as there are "laws against peddling dope," he proposes there "be laws against peddling race hate." And in a set alone one sentence paragraph, he concludes, this "is our proposition: that the sins of race hate be solemnly declared a crime."

In short, while all might not have been well with Welles's incomplete and fragmented film projects in 1942, all was well with his call for equal rights, and it was in his "Voodoo" *Macbeth* where the fluidity of nationality as determined by race or by locale was first examined by him. For the seemingly all-white Scots of Shakespeare's play were comfortably transformed into an all-black cast performing in a predominately ethnic island setting, even as the production premiered in the heart of Harlem. The play's triumphant success, due in large measure to its creative racial originality, also suggests that just a half dozen years before the RKO executive made his claim with which I began, that at least for the moment in 1936, all was well for Welles and his Shakespearean productions.

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