

## **American Caesars: *Me and Orson Welles* (Richard Linklater, 2008)**

Sébastien Lefait, *Université de Corse*

**Mots clés** : Shakespeare, adaptation, appropriation, *Jules César*, Orson Welles, angoisse de l'influence.

**Keywords**: Shakespeare, adaptation, appropriation, *Julius Caesar*, Orson Welles, anxiety of influence.

### **Introduction: Shakespeare's *carrier***

Rather than as a pure Hollywood myth, Orson Welles can be thought of as a go-between. His back and forth travels to the old continent have gradually structured his persona as a ferryman between European culture and the United States. This reputation is based on the utterly symbolic fact that he made Shakespeare present again on the American stage. In fact, for Wilmeth and Miller,

In the 1930s and '40s Shakespeare's flame flickered only faintly in the American theatre, though there were several singular productions and performances. In 1936 Orson Welles mounted a controversial 'voodoo' version of *Macbeth* with an all-black cast, and a year later presented a provocative modern-dress version of *Julius Caesar* that ominously suggested parallels to Fascist Italy (Wilmeth and Miller, 1993, 592).

After resurrecting Shakespeare's works on stage, Welles brought them to the more intrinsically American Hollywood screens. This evolution in his artistic career adds a further step to the process of Americanizing the Bard in which he was engaged, at a time when Shakespeare's plays, although they "had become by the nineteenth century an integral part of American culture" (Levine, 1988, 15), needed to be taken out from the "genteel prison" in which they were confined as classics to find again "their original vitality" (Levine, 1988, 32). As I shall seek to demonstrate through the analysis of Richard Linklater's *Me and Orson Welles*, a fiction film that deals with Welles's persona and focuses on his presentation of himself as Shakespeare's heir, a specific way of appropriating the plays is required for the Americanization procedure to be resumed, and film adaptation is a necessary part in

this process. Based on the analysis of the film's back and forth movement between an onstage and an offstage treatment of *Julius Caesar*, but also between Shakespeare and his would-be American equal, Orson Welles, I will show that the film reflexively studies and assesses the various possible ways of dealing with a paradoxical heritage by adapting the Bard's works, and perhaps even his persona, to an American context.

## 1 Taking Shakespeare beyond the classroom walls

Adapted from Robert Kaplow's novel by American film director Richard Linklater, *Me and Orson Welles* treats the director of *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1966) as the missing link between Shakespeare and American cinema. The film is set in the context of the rehearsals and subsequent performance of Welles's 1937 production of *Julius Caesar* at the Mercury Theatre, in New York City—the very same production that Wilmeth and Miller quote as proof that Welles was the one who truly rekindled the Shakespearean fire in the United States. The rehearsal scenes, which, while fictional, are based on historical research into Welles's theatrical career, narrate the genesis of this extremely successful production, up to and including the first-night performance. They form the background to the main story, in which Welles (Christian McKay) unexpectedly casts the protagonist, Richard Samuels (Zac Efron), as Lucius. This leads the boy to confront the genius's hubris—each of them subsequently has an affair with Sonja Jones (Claire Danes), the production assistant, for which Welles punishes Richard by firing him immediately after the premiere. Far from being anecdotal, however, the theatrical backdrop is a key feature in the film's cross-cultural adaptation process. As Denise Albanese has shown in her recent book *Extramural Shakespeare*, removing Shakespeare from his original location to bring him into a different environment is one of the main vehicles of the Bard's Americanization:

In perimillennial American culture, Shakespeare seems always marked by displacements—by the sense that he is elsewhere, hovering above or beyond, neither fully naturalized nor fully rejected as alien—and that those displacements must be endlessly conjured only to be endlessly corrected for (Albanese, 2010, 41).

In *Me and Orson Welles*, Richard Linklater implements displacement thanks to film adaptation, and exploits the technique as part of an acculturation procedure. He does so in quite explicit and even sometimes didactic manner.

As a complement to the rehearsal scenes, the backstage elements in the plot are essential to suggest an Americanization process is underway. They allow the numerous British actors in the cast (Christian McKay, Leo Bill, Eddie Marsan, Ben Chaplin, Kelly Reilly), some of whom were chosen to interpret British members of the Mercury Theatre company such as George Coulouris, to interact with more archetypal American actors such as Zac Efron, of *High School Musical* fame, Zoe Kazan, who is director Elia Kazan's granddaughter, or New-York born Claire Danes, whose first leading role on the big screen was in Baz Luhrmann's Americanized Shakespeare adaptation, *Romeo+Juliet* (1996). The variety of accents in the film is itself a symptom of crossbreeding, as the English accent generally used on the American stage at the time of the plot justifies employing British actors for an American film about the American production of an English play by a producer, Orson Welles, whose accent, according to dialect coach Judith Windsor, was "a kind of hybrid" between British and American ("Production notes," 2010, 7). Finally, the casting of Christian McKay as Welles adds another layer of cross-cultural interaction, since McKay, a Royal Academy of Dramatic Art graduate, was spotted by Linklater as he performed a play called *Rosebud: The Life of Orson Welles* in a New York Theater ("Production notes," 2010, 8).

Another method the film uses to examine the various ways of bringing Shakespeare to the United States is through the presentation of Richard Samuels's experience. The first sequence, for instance, introduces Richard, but also suggests that adapting the plays to a different audience is a necessity. The opening shows a bored Richard attending a Shakespeare class given by an elderly teacher whose character seems designed to embody the classic way of familiarizing young minds with the world's greatest playwright. The teacher seems to ignore that, as Elizabeth Renker has noted concerning college education, between 1870 and 1920 Shakespeare evolved into "a curricular given, and the only active question was that of pedagogy" (Renker, 2011, 151). Furthermore, Richard's reaction to the tersely biographical teaching of Shakespeare he receives in class in this initial sequence illustrates that what Albanese calls the "drive to pedagogy" is an important force not only within the classroom, but also when adapting Shakespeare for the silver screen.

Indeed, for Albanese, the medium of film cannot “readily escape the drive to pedagogy, so deeply entrenched is that mode of apprehending Shakespeare in the American imaginary” (Albanese, 2010, 65). This urge for didacticism, which is initially diegetic, soon impacts the structure of the movie to turn it, albeit partially, into a Shakespeare adaptation. The classroom in which the opening sequence is set is clearly too small an enclosure to allow Shakespeare’s works to filter through and take root in American minds. Rather than following the dull lecture on Shakespeare’s biography, Richard immerses himself in a copy of Rosamond Gilder’s *John Gielgud’s Hamlet*. The book offers a scene-by-scene depiction of the famous English Shakespearean actor’s performance of the role in a production that ran from October 1936 to January 1937 at the Empire Theatre in New York (Maher, 2007, 4). Richard has concealed the copy inside his textbook, and goes on reading the volume in the train sequence that follows.

To Richard, acting in productions of Shakespeare’s plays is clearly more important than learning about the playwright’s life. Linklater expresses Richard’s preference by making him use the train window as a mirror on which he puts side by side his own reflection and that of Gielgud on the book’s cover (See Plate 1).



**Plate 1**

This beginning does more than introduce Richard’s thespian dreams. By identifying Gielgud with Hamlet and Richard with Gielgud, the sequence suggests the possibility of substituting a contemporary figure for the Shakespearean character, but also a young American actor for a venerable English one. Additionally, it refers to a production that featured Gielgud, with whom Welles wanted to compete—or so the

film suggests, at least, through the fictional Welles's many sarcastic comments on Gielgud. Finally, by presenting Gielgud as the author of his own *Hamlet*, it brings forward the notion of appropriating Shakespeare thanks to a groundbreaking production.

The film emphasizes appropriation again in one of the first conversations between Richard and Orson, who came across Richard in front of the Mercury Theatre. During their chat, Welles expresses his contempt at seeing the young man read a record of *John Gielgud's Hamlet*, a performance he describes as archaic. He thus implies that his own perspectives on Shakespeare's plays are radically innovative. Moments later, Orson hires the boy to play in his production of *Julius Caesar* at the Mercury. He does so after recalling that critics railed at him for cutting out "to be or not to be" from one of his radio adaptations of *Hamlet*—which he is about to do again for his one-and-a-half-hour production of *Julius Caesar*. Richard's hasty hiring seems motivated by Welles's discovery of a spiritual common ground with the boy in the notion that Shakespeare's plays are no longer the playwright's sole possession, notably due to the "ability of Shakespeare to connect with Americans' underlying beliefs" during the nineteenth century (Levine, 1988, 42). The belief Welles and Richard share is also, more generally, that Shakespeare calls for appropriation because he "now exists in an environment of textual multiplicity. The text is multiple, iterable, subject to an inevitable law of change. It is never original, always copied" (Holderness, 2005, 6). Besides, Welles hires Richard in spite of the contempt he expresses for Gielgud, whom he depicts as "in love with the sound of his own goddamn voice." Finally, the train sequence places Gielgud's cover portrait and Richard's reflection in the frame of the carriage window. This generates an image in which pictures in motion surround their faces, to introduce the art of film as a projection of Richard's artistic hopes and as the ideal tool to appropriate Shakespeare. *Me and Orson Welles* thus starts by symbolically presenting cinema as the best way of annexing Shakespeare. This perfect adaptation instrument, however, is looming largely ahead, at the end of a long series of steps away from the play-texts and towards their cinematic re-creation.

The next sequence further underlines the distance between a famous work and its more or less official avatars. It presents Richard's conversation with Gretta (Zoe Kazan), a young lady he meets in a music shop where she has extemporarily sat down to play the piano. The dialogue soon turns into a discussion on the merits of

interpreting a famous score as the first step to personal creation. Later in the film, another scene involving Greta and Richard completes this didactic beginning. It takes place in a museum, in which the young lady recites the first lines of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* in front of an ancient vase:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme (1-4)

The passage Linklater selected for inclusion in his film reads as a commentary on its plot. Keats praises a concrete and visual means of expression as superior to poetry when what is at stake is the celebration of works of art that prove able to survive the passing of time. Accordingly, the quote implicitly informs the real Welles's unflinching desire to update Shakespeare's plays. In their own way, his "flowery tales" as well endow the Bard's works with new illuminations, be they provocative or even sacrilegious. In his article about Welles's prematurely aborted project of adapting *Heart of Darkness* to the screen, James Naremore describes the transformations effected by Welles on cultural monuments such as Shakespeare's plays:

Thus, just at the moment when Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were developing their savage critique of the culture industry, Welles tried to use the mass media as a democratic weapon, popularising high culture on behalf of left interests, mixing Shakespeare with thrillers and science fiction, blurring the boundaries between the classic and the vanguard (Naremore, 2011, 62).

Through his film's opening, Linklater thus invites the spectators to focus on the various stages that will lead from the prototypal image of filmed Shakespeare to its full-fledged version. The result of the process becomes visible in the cinematic rendition of moments from the *Julius Caesar* production, and indeed in *Me and Orson Welles* itself. In fact, although the film was called a "backstage movie" by many critics, among them the *Wall Street Journal's* Terry Teachout, one should not forget that the film includes many sequences that would easily fit into a cinematic adaptation of *Julius Caesar*—an aspect Teachout insisted on by praising the film's recreation of Welles's actual production of the play (Teachout, 2010).

## 2 The Magnificent Orson: from radio to film adaptations

On many occasions, however, Linklater suggests that, rather than stemming from the need to pay tribute to the Bard, Welles's ode to Shakespeare is a way to make the play his own, based on the assumption that a play only exists in performance, and is therefore primarily the work of a producer. For instance, a scene involving George Coulouris (Ben Chaplin) conveys such a feeling. Coulouris, whom Welles has cast as Mark Antony, complains that his part has been "shorn down to 40 lines" even though he is the pivotal character in the play. Welles has cut Mark Antony's role to displace the play's focus onto Brutus, whom he has chosen to embody. A few seconds later, Welles displays his reverence for the Bard by lecturing Richard for changing a single letter from the script (he said "there are more with him" when the text reads "there are *moe* with him"). He then contradicts himself by describing the lullaby he has added to the text as a key moment in his production. As a result, his much-advertised need to defend Shakespeare is denounced as a mere pose, a culturally correct stance the fictional Welles uses to promote himself as a genuine creator.

Consistently with this critical trend in Linklater's film, which suggests Shakespeare deserves to be treated more humbly, the itinerary from the dusty texts taught in the classroom to the innovative production featured in its final part involves a dissection of the real Orson Welles's complex genius. The film presents Welles as an ambiguous mediator for the Shakespearean lore soon after the end of its first half hour, in a conversation with Richard, whom he patronizingly calls Junior. On his way to a radio transmission in which he will act in a live performance of Booth Tarkington's Pulitzer prize-winning *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Welles uses the pompous tone that characterizes him throughout the film to read aloud a selected passage from the novel. Before doing so, he describes the text as "pure American poetry," after explaining that Tarkington was a family friend and that he based one of the characters in his novel, Eugene, on Welles's father Richard, who died when he was 15—a possibility the real Welles had once expressed (Carringer, 1993, 23). Linklater's Welles then adds that *Ambersons* "is about how everything gets taken away from you." He thereby suggests that the novel may be more largely based on his own life than Tarkington is willing to admit, and even that he could have easily written it himself. Accordingly, he then mentions that he is currently adapting *The*

*Magnificent Ambersons* for the radio. In so doing, he implies that because the text is such a pure instance of American poetry, he must have a part in its creation, or at least in its re-creation.

As many of the spectators will know, although the film never mentions the fact, the real Orson Welles not only adapted the novel for the radio, but also for the silver screen in 1942, the year after he made *Citizen Kane*. The mention of Welles's work for the radio introduces his future destiny as archetypal American director, which owes a lot to the classification of his first two works among the greatest movies ever made in the *Sight and Sound* ranking (Christie, 2012). In the film, going on air with a rendition of passages from *The Magnificent Ambersons* is merely the first step in the larger adaptation scheme leading the artist to the big screen. Radio adaptations appear as a midway point between stage productions and film adaptations, due to the historical Welles's use of his voice as an adaptation tool in itself. In fact, James Naremore has shown that Welles's voice was his initial instrument for creating fiction, and later became the focus of his films:

Having caused a nationwide panic with a radio broadcast, Welles also saw the autobiographical resonance of stories about demagogues who manipulate the masses. *Citizen Kane* was designed to suggest certain ironic parallels between Welles and Charles Foster Kane, and the film version of *Heart of Darkness* would have contained similar parallels between Welles and Kurtz. To some extent, the parallels were already present in Conrad's novella, where Marlow describes Kurtz as 'very little more than a voice,' capable of 'the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words.' Most people in America associated Welles with just such a voice (Naremore, 2011, 62).

In *Me and Orson Welles*, the references to Welles's cinematic persona thus start with a presentation of his radio career, which is a way of alluding to his future yearning to Americanize the Bard's works by using the art of film as an appropriation instrument. The fact it occurs in a film that focuses mostly on one of his theatrical adaptations of a Shakespeare play strengthens the allusion: when given the means to do so, Welles will eventually capture images to fit recorded passages from literary works. Additionally, the choice of the Mercury production of *Julius Caesar*, which Richard France describes as "cinematic," also refers to the real Orson Welles's later filmic career:



In the 1930s, the sight of fascist salutes and martial throngs, and the sound of demagogic ranting and angry mobs, had become a commonplace for anyone who listened to the radio or saw the newsreels or read such popular magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Whatever else was not within their personal experience – such as stealth or conspiracy or gangsterism – had, in all probability, become familiar to the general public through their exposure to the movies. These were the sights and sounds that Welles employed as theatrical devices in *Julius Caesar* (France, 1990, 103).

In the production, allusions to films and newsreels make Welles's adaptation more contemporary, but also include cinema in the performance as a potential medium for the artist to exploit later. In Linklater's film, cinema is thus omnipresent as the ultimate, yet still distant, vehicle of Shakespeare's plays. As I will show in the next section, cinema is also all-pervading in *Me and Orson Welles* because the film itself can be read as an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*. References to the art of film thus serve the gradual assessment of what is at stake in the various possible ways of tampering with Shakespeare to make it suitable for American eyes and ears. Concurrently, Linklater's numerous mentions of Welles's radio plays all point to the imperfections of the medium.

Those blemishes, however, never signify radio's inadequacy when it comes to preserving the essence of Shakespeare's works. On the contrary, in the film, radio adaptations merely fall short of the cinematic medium because they do not leave Welles enough space to express his creative brilliance. When Welles mentions his radio version of *Hamlet*, he explains that he cut "to be or not to be" because the speech is useless in terms of plot. He thus emphasizes the decision to give precedence to performance over the text of the plays, and introduces what will eventually become one of the defining features of his filmic adaptations. Later, in the scene of his live radio rendition of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, he takes advantage of the instant transmission to improvise a speech he adds to the script. The producer subsequently congratulates him for providing the listeners with "the best thing in the show." A jocular Welles then corrects the praise by saying it was "the best thing *not* in the show." Welles thus insists on his constant urge to adorn the greatest texts with additions of his own devising, and to exploit the possibilities offered by the new media of his time to do so. Given this trait in the character, one can easily imagine the alterations in which he will indulge once offered the opportunity to record his own versions and broadcast them afterwards, not to mention the reconstruction opportunities cinematic editing will offer him. Editing is in fact the quintessence of an

art form he has come to symbolize. The radio, therefore, places the fictional Welles halfway through to the point where he is finally able to unleash his artistic talent in a more comprehensive medium. Indeed, as Paul Heyer has shown in his book on Welles's radio years, "conventions he employed in sound broadcasting profoundly influenced his cinema" (Heyer, 2005, xiv), although theater and film were "his artistic priorities" (Heyer, 2005, xvi). At the beginning of the film, Linklater emphasizes Welles's sense of artistic incompleteness. Radio seems too limited for his talent, and so do still pictures. In the few static images Linklater includes in the film, Welles's creativity is condensed and simplified. The best instance of this technique is a paper cartoon Richard comes across during his exploration of the Mercury Theatre production room (See Plate 2).



**Plate 2**

In the document, Welles frowns at his actors in military costume on stage, as if frustrated by the motionless and distortive character of the caricature.

The film, therefore, introduces cinematic practice through an intaglio description of a specific moment in Welles's life: one can feel its presence, although nothing asserts it. Through dramatic irony, Linklater toys with the spectator's knowledge that the real-life Welles will finally be famous for his films rather than for his stage productions. This facet of the main character is part of a larger pattern by which *Me and Orson Welles* presents cinema as the ultimate goal and dream of the whole artistic coterie it depicts. Embodying this yearning for the silver screen is the character of Sonja Jones. Sonja uses her work for the Mercury Theatre, and her intimate connection with Welles, as the stepping-stone to a much-hoped for career as

a film actress. Throughout the film, cinema also appears in the distance of other art forms in shots that reflexively put forward the scopopic regime of the seventh art. One of the first sequences involving Richard and Sonja introduces such a shot. It shows the stage, as seen by Richard from Sonja's office in the production room, through a rectangular opening that frames his view of the production under construction with a dark area (See Plate 3).



**Plate 3**

In this subjective shot, the small window is a screen within the screen on which preparations for the play are projected. Linklater thus highlights the distance between the film's fictional treatment of events surrounding the production and the production itself. In the same sequence, another subjective shot had already underlined the difference between the film and authentic events. The shot shows Richard gazing on a photograph of a heavily made up Welles, presumably shot during one of his acclaimed Shakespearean performances (See Plate 4).



**Plate 4**

The photograph, however, is not one of the real Welles: it presents Christian McKay, who plays Welles in the film. Additionally, its typical lighting and black-and-white quality gives it the outside appearance of a film capture. This creates a link between Welles's historical reviving of Shakespearean characters and Linklater's resurrection of Welles himself.

### **3 *Et tu, Orson...* Adaptation and (filial) fidelity**

By inserting such shots regularly in his film, Linklater constructs the notion of the exchangeability between life and its fictional version. The director thus takes up from such films as *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1988), in which Shakespeare's life was a lore of adventure and plots into which he merely had to tap to write his plays. As a result, the plays were adapted in two complementary ways: as filmed theater in the rehearsal and performance sequences, and as a "behind the scenes" film in the other sequences. Linklater uses a similar approach, and applies *Shakespeare in Love's* pattern, in which "reality is a fiction and fiction is reality" (Holland, 2006, 150), to the relationship between *Julius Caesar* and the fictional plot of Welles's life. On many occasions, the director foregrounds the possibility of considering *Me and Orson Welles* an adaptation of the Roman tragedy. When Richard visits the Mercury Theatre for the first time, he unexpectedly meets with the actors rehearsing lines from the play outside the building. This leads him to prove his talent as a drum player, and ultimately to be cast into the production when his drumroll almost magically conjures up Orson Welles, who immediately takes a liking to the boy. Welles's immediate fancy for Richard reflects Brutus's affection for Lucius

in the play. Throughout the film, situations freely adapted from *Julius Caesar* similarly merge with the events of the film's plot. This state of undiscernability specifically transpires in scenes where Welles pretends Shakespeare is speaking through his lips. In some of the film's sequences, Welles's marked tendency to quote chapter and verse and present himself as a reincarnation of Shakespeare even involves plays from the corpus other than *Julius Caesar*. During the rehearsals, Welles goes on stage with one of his mistresses and starts quoting from *Othello* to present himself as "a man who loved the Mercury not wisely but too well"<sup>1</sup>. The ironical reference is appropriate to depict Welles as a man of many adulterous affairs, which is consistent with his life story. It is also a way for Welles to pose as a faithful—yet jealous—adaptor of Shakespeare's plays by seeing himself as the Moor, whose love for Desdemona is beyond question. Moreover, the producer's use of Othello's final speech to express his love for his working place and for his own production sounds like an artistic manifesto. By applying Othello's epitaph to himself, the fictional Welles affirms the need to displace Shakespeare to fit contemporary circumstances, not to say events of his own life. He expands this strategy in his production of *Julius Caesar*, which is crammed with references to the Nazi rallies.

The right to reinterpret the plays thus results from a feature in the character of Orson Welles. This trait endows him with the magnitude of a tragic hero: his staunch confidence that his interpretations of the plays are worth a lot more than anyone else's. A dialogue with Norman Lloyd (Leo Bill), the actor playing the part of Cinna the poet, emphasizes this trait. Welles describes Lloyd's reading of the character as absurd, to pose as the only possible Shakespearean go-between and holder of the intrinsic meaning of the plays. This form of hubris becomes more and more apparent as the film unravels towards its conclusion. Just before the play's premiere, Welles resorts to another quote from *Othello*: "This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite" (5.1.127-8). Iago is now speaking through Welles, which suggests that his artistic pride has gradually led him to villainous treachery, at the expense of Shakespeare himself, whom he betrayed by usurping his identity and his words.

This description of Welles as a traitor to the Shakespearean cause is also present in the film's ending, which provides a possible key to the meaning of the whole. After the *Julius Caesar* premiere, Richard has given up his acting dreams to go back to the

---

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to *Othello*, 5.2.342-43: "then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely, but too well".

Shakespeare class glimpsed at the beginning of the film. The blackboard in the classroom bears such Manichaean options as “Good Brutus / Bad Brutus” and “Kill Caesar / Spare Caesar,” inscribed in white chalk. It is, at first, tempting to read the questions as adaptation dilemmas informing the content of the preceding plot—has Welles killed *Caesar* with his production and has he killed Brutus with his performance of the part? But the last quote included in the film makes yielding to this temptation a necessity. Answering one of the teacher’s questions, Richard extensively quotes from Caesar’s speech at the beginning of the play, in which he describes Cassius, one of the conspirators against his life, to Mark Antony:

He reads much;  
He is a great observer and he looks  
Quite through the deeds of men: he loves no plays,  
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;  
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort  
As if he mock’d himself and scorn’d his spirit  
That could be moved to smile at any thing.  
Such men as he be never at heart’s ease  
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,  
And therefore are they very dangerous. (1.2.198-207)

The dangerous man he is talking about is the one who has just betrayed him by firing him after the premiere in an act of gratuitous authoritarianism (and presumably also because they both slept with Sonja). The quote, however, does more than serve to express Richard’s disappointment: it indirectly presents Welles as unable to behold anyone greater than himself, and as a man who, despite convincing surface appearances, perhaps “loves no plays.” This fictional perspective is critical towards the cultural figure that the real Welles has become. It is also useful in that it helps understand the implications of Welles’s aesthetic choices with regard to his will to Americanize Shakespeare.

Retrospectively, Welles’s casting of himself as Brutus appears to be the most consistent choice if his aim was to give way to his hubris by outshining a greater artist than himself. As Manfredi Piccolomini has shown, “the Brutus archetype transmitted through time by the Renaissance is an inherently modern persona whose basic characteristics are common and recognizable in modern society” (Piccolomini, 1991, 96). By presenting Welles as an avatar of this identifiable persona, Linklater turns the director into a danger to established order. According to Piccolomini, the

characteristics of Brutus's personality are parricide, intellectualism, futility, and the desire for fame (Piccolomini, 1991, 95-101). All those features apply almost perfectly to Welles's situation in the film. Presented as an incarnation of the Brutus archetype, Welles thus becomes the vain, cerebral, celebrity-craving assassin of a father who, given the correspondences, can only be Shakespeare himself. The film thus introduces a fictional Orson Welles who draws attention to himself through Brutus. By emphasizing this trait, Linklater displaces focus from the real Welles's "portrayal [of Brutus as] an idealist character . . . who finally understands the true nature of corruption that surrounds him" (Thieme, 1997, 139). Instead, he shows Welles exploiting the ideological weight of the Roman historical figure, which became the symbol of rebellion against tyranny during the War of Independence, and has remained an important American icon ever since. Crucially, Brutus epitomizes "the original paradox of Shakespeare as a crucial vector of national feelings in an otherwise largely anti-British country" (Broqua, 2010, 4). The character was imported into the United States with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, then was turned into the archetypal representation of American resistance against British oppression. In the film, Welles's displacing of focus on Brutus is a way for Linklater to show that, as a producer, Welles tackled not so much Shakespeare's play as a version of it already transformed by American history. By posing as the author of this Americanization process, however, the fictional Welles pretends to ignore that the status of *Julius Caesar* in America is not the result of his act of genius, but the outcome of a complex trajectory which Maria Wyke has retraced in a recent book on the topic (Wyke, 2012). The character in the film also seems to forget that "Julius Caesar rode into American popular culture on the back of bardolatry" (Wyke, 2012, 67), since he often appears eager to replace American respect for Shakespeare with the cult of his own persona. Therefore the filmic representation of Welles contradicts Harold Bloom's declaration that "the largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him" (Bloom, 1997, xviii). He poses as a Brutus who frees America from English invasion, but also as one who tries to rid America of Shakespeare, the playwright.

*Me and Orson Welles*, indeed, presents the future director of *Citizen Kane* as the epitome of artistic pride. This is for instance expressed in constant jokes about Orson being late. That Welles is never on time leads Mercury Theatre director John Houseman (Eddie Marsan) to repeat that all they can do after the premiere is to wait

until Orson arrives. His recurrent remark implicitly proposes that the play they are rehearsing should in fact be called “Waiting for Orson,” a remark that is attributed to Norman Lloyd in Kaplow’s text<sup>2</sup>. This is followed by semi-ironic antics by Joseph Cotton (James Tupper), who impersonates Orson Welles as the savior of the play, complete with sword and armor. The sequence constitutes a new hint at Welles’s propensity to alter the great works of literature to cast himself as their main character. Besides, although *En attendant Godot* was written in 1948, the allusion creates an equation between Orson and the divine object of Vladimir and Estragon’s hopes in Beckett’s play. The notion that Welles is posing as the divine creator of everything surrounding him asserts itself when Sam, the designer who worked on the sets, comes to complain that the play’s program does not credit him for doing so. This objection triggers Orson’s rage. He replies that Sam designed the sets from *his* sketches. He then adds that the whole concept of the show is also his. Finally, he jumps at Sam’s throat on stage and, after calling him a mere carpenter, crowns the scene with one of the tirades that have become his trademark:

I am Orson Welles, and every single one of you stands here as an agent to my vision. You want a career in the Mercury Theatre and in everything else I plan to do? Then remember one simple rule. I own the store. You don’t like the way I work here, there’s the door.

Linklater’s inclusion of sometimes enigmatic point of view shots also associates the character of Welles with the superior vision of a deity. One of them is included in one of the first rehearsal scenes in the film showing George Coulouris’s performance as Mark Antony. In the sequence, Linklater includes a slightly low-angle medium-shot that could be part of a filmic adaptation of *Julius Caesar* by Orson Welles (See Plate 5).

---

<sup>2</sup> “According to Lloyd, waiting for Orson was the principal occupation of the Mercury Theatre company” (Kaplow, 2009, 47).





**Plate 5**

Given the fact Coulouris is in his everyday attire, his rehearsal outfit is not totally different from his costume in Welles's modern dress production. The unexpected shot that follows in the sequence confirms this. One could anticipate a reverse-angle shot showing the other actors sitting in the theatre to follow. This would ascribe the low angle to their visual perception. What comes next, however, is a high-angle shot showing Coulouris from behind, with other actors on the stage below the rostrum from which he is giving his speech (See Plate 6).



**Plate 6**

The shot also includes, even further below, the mostly empty seats of the theatre room. The layout of the actors in the shot creates an abstract shape, a diamond underlined by specific lighting. At one end of the diamond, standing below the stage in the central aisle between the rows of seats, Orson Welles is standing, watching the

progress of his production. At the other end of the diamond, standing with his back to the camera, is Coulouris as Mark Antony rehearsing act three scene two. Each end of the diamond explains the subjective character of the previous shots: the low angle in the previous shot could result from Welles's supervising gaze. Complementarily, the look from above suggests the presence of a superior watching entity, checking on what is happening to the play and possibly keeping an eye on Orson Welles, who is about to distort it into his own landmark version. While Welles is the god of his production watching it from below, there is another god watching the play from above. It is tempting to see Shakespeare himself in this presence. This is all the more relevant if one bears in mind that the few lines spoken by Anthony at that moment in the play will be followed by shouts from the citizens claiming for Caesar's "will."

Throughout the film, this specific use of angles adds up to several bird's-eye view shots that seem to be taken from the Mercury sign on top of the building where the rehearsals are being held (See Plate 7).



**Plate 7**

Mercury being the god of transmission, the point of view from above can easily be ascribed to Shakespeare's presence as original holder of the message Welles is striving to transmit. By including those "Bard's eye view shots," Linklater creates a tension between the playwright and his follower, who is constantly trying to out-Shakespeare Shakespeare. In this oppositional pattern between the legitimate father of the plays and his spiritual child, the production of *Julius Caesar* necessarily appears to be more than a background plot to the main story of Richard's

disappointment in the face of the hardships of artistry and love. The play, mixed as it is with events in the main plot, insinuates itself between its lines to endow it with the status of a *Julius Caesar* adaptation.

#### **4 Adapting betrayal: the *Julius Caesar* subtext**

The main story, to start with, is one of betrayal. Richard, whom Welles had implicitly treated as his adoptive son by calling him “Junior,” is made redundant after the premiere. This is because of his short-lived affair with Sonja, whom Welles started dating after him. The thin motive for firing Richard lies in the threat he represents to the artist’s conquering pride, in public and private matters alike. If one considers the larger picture, however, another story of betrayal and conspiracy between a “father” and his “son” turns out to be directly inspired by the Roman tragedy under performance. This rewriting lies in the story of Orson Welles, presented in the film as Shakespeare’s heir, conspiring against the Bard to usurp his throne of greatest artist of all times.

Most of the rehearsal and performance moments featured in the film complement the main outlines of the plot to foster this interpretation. The scene of the matinee preview, for instance, focuses on Brutus’s speech to the citizens of Rome after Caesar’s death in act three scene two, declaimed with characteristic ardor by Welles himself. Close-up shots of Welles in key lighting alternate with reaction shots of the audience, to generate the notion of an actor/producer focusing on the spectators’ response to improve his production before the premiere. At the same time, however, the editing together of the space occupied by the audience and of the location where Welles is standing gives the impression that the real-life Welles addresses Brutus’s eminently political speech to a real-life crowd. This continuity provides the words spoken by Brutus/Welles with a meaning pertinent to the film rather than to the play:

There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so vile that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. I pause for a reply. (3.2.27-35)

As Welles actually “pauses for a reply,” Linklater shows the now perfectly quiet audience—in one of the previous shots of the spectators, a woman had audibly

coughed. No one among the American citizens sitting in the Mercury Theatre seems willing to criticize Welles for killing *Caesar*, since he did so for the sake of resurrecting the play as an American work. The reply, of course, will never come. This being a performance, as Welles knows, no one among the audience will dare talk back. Interpreted as addressed to the spectators rather than to the Roman citizens<sup>3</sup>, the speech sees the purpose of its rhetorical quality displaced. Using the love of Rome to convince the citizens that it was necessary for Brutus to kill Caesar turns into using the love of America to convince American citizens that it was necessary for Welles to kill *Caesar*, and Shakespeare with him. In this key moment, Americanizing Shakespeare becomes a rhetorical device used by Welles to assert his greatness. Consequently, the confusion between drama and reality he carefully maintains appears as a coercive ingredient in his plot to do so.

*Me and Orson Welles* can be read as an indirect, on and offstage adaptation of *Julius Caesar* in which Shakespeare the father is killed by his adoptive son Welles. For this reading to work, the film has to feature the assassination of Caesar as a purple patch. This key moment finally takes place against the background of the successful premiere of Welles's production. It is conscientiously prepared for in the film, for instance in the scene where the previously condescending Coulouris suffers from a terrible bout of stage fright before playing in front of a full room. To be able to vanquish his reluctance, Coulouris/Antony has to be spurred on by Welles/Brutus, who convinces him by saying he sees in him "an Antony about to create theatrical history." Through this deliberate confusion—Antony, being a character, has nothing to do with theatrical history—Colouris becomes an essential cog in Welles's plot to kill the spiritual father with his groundbreaking production.

As can be expected if the parallel between the play and the film truly works, the climactic sequence of the ides of March is preceded by a prophetic moment, in which Richard's clumsiness causes the flooding of the stage. This incident, which constitutes the stroke of bad luck Welles had warned Richard about in a conversation featured previously in the film, threatens the accomplishment of Welles's plot. In this, it is similar to Caesar's dream in the play, which could have deterred him from going to the Senate on the day of the ides of March on grounds of ill omen. The performance, in the film, is the pivot of the plot. It is Welles's instrument of death,

---

<sup>3</sup> Anne Ubersfeld has described such ambiguities of dramatic communication in a section of *Lire le théâtre*, to which the reader may refer for further information (Ubersfeld, 1996, 257-59).

later to be completed by the art of film, in which appropriating Shakespeare's legacy will be given full scope.

Finally, as is not surprising in a backstage movie, the plot leads to a grand finale constituted by the opening performance of the play that was so far under construction. As the film can obviously not reproduce the performance at large, one must treat the director's choice of the moments in the play to include in the film with special attention. The usual way of proceeding is to select the scenes and speeches in the play that are most emblematic of its contents. Yet, like Welles choosing to adapt *Hamlet* without "to be or not to be," Linklater privileges a specific angle on *Julius Caesar*. He does not do so by cutting out the most famous scenes—Caesar's death and Anthony's speech over the corpse of Brutus are present. Rather, he includes a moment that is far from having the same cultural legacy. The premiere performance of the play focuses on the death of Cinna the poet—a moment Welles himself had presented as extremely important earlier in the film. Because of the selection of moments distant from each other in the play, the death of Cinna occurs a few seconds after the scene of Caesar's death, which it seems to repeat. This scene likens the death of the poet—in other words, the Bard—to that of the Dictator. By insisting on Cinna's murder, Linklater produces another change of focus: Welles's subtitle for his production, *Death of a Dictator*, becomes *Death of a Poet*. Rather than the character Caesar, its creator is the one who is executed at the culminating moment of the conspiracy narrated in the film.

### **Conclusion: Americanizing *Caesar* through offstage adaptation**

In *Me and Orson Welles*, therefore, the play under construction is coupled to the film's multiple references to cinema. As a result, the progress of the production takes *Julius Caesar* not only from behind the scenes to centre stage, but also from the stage to the silver screen. Besides this adaptive use of the backstage approach, Linklater's emphasis on dramatic creation reveals Welles's ambiguity as an artist. This reflects his own position as a director in the awkward situation of tackling an illustrious forefather. With Welles, Linklater seems involved in a filial relationship in which the genius's shadow may endanger his spiritual child's creative skills, as the title *Me and Orson Welles* indicates. Linklater foregrounds this anxiety of influence attached to all forms of creation, including his own, by presenting Welles both as an

adapter of Shakespeare and as a reincarnation of the playwright. The fictional Welles thus embodies the paradox in the phrase “American Shakespeare”: his works are ostensibly the Bard’s, yet primarily his own. As a result, *Me and Orson Welles* provides its spectators with an “onstage and offstage” adaptation of Shakespeare’s Roman tragedy. This adaptive strategy can be considered a variation on what Richard Burt calls the “Shakespeare play-within-the-film genre” (Burt, 2006, 55). It innovates on the genre in that it organizes the multilateral interaction between a play, one of its productions, and its film adaptation. Thanks to this technique, the film simultaneously depicts the maturation of two *American Caesars*: the American production of Shakespeare’s play, and the mysterious third man, the imperial Orson Welles himself, on his way to becoming the Bard to American cinema. At the end of the film, the success of Welles’s plot finally grants him a standing ovation from the American citizens gathered in huge numbers to attend his triumph. The tragedy ends in victory for Brutus, who, although supposedly dead, winks at Antony, at his own accomplishment, but also at the Bard watching him from above (See Plate 8).



**Plate 8**

Thanks to this final moment, Linklater encourages the spectators to consider the full scope of Welles’s change of focus from Antony to Brutus. Through this amendment, the conspiring son comes out victorious from an act of artistic re-creation designed to erase the cumbersome ghost of an illustrious spiritual father. In the film’s final shot, a high-angle view of Richard and Gretta leaving the museum in which they had first met, Shakespeare seems to be retiring from the film after constantly haunting it (See Plate 9).



**Plate 9**

The camera gradually moves away from the characters, and the Bard seems to flee, as if vanquished, or impressed, by the cinematic genius of his 20<sup>th</sup> century avatar. Shakespeare, it seems, has been thrown off the stage and brought to America through the Hollywood screens, by an artist who exploited the art of film as a geographical bridge from the old to the new continent, and as a temporal bridge from the early modern age to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whatever remains from the mythical production, indeed, is gathered in Linklater's well-researched film, which is a piece of fiction and an adaptation anyway, and is thus several steps away from a work that, as Graham Holderness has shown "has no original identity" (Holderness, 2005, 4).

In the final analysis, it seems one should gauge the film's degree of achievement in fulfilling its pedagogical purpose by inventing a new way of bringing Shakespeare into American culture on two different levels. The first one is pragmatic. In fact, the status of Shakespeare's plays in the United States is currently paradoxical. According to Kim C. Sturgess, the idea that Shakespeare is part of the country's cultural heritage has suffered no denial since the mid-nineteenth century:

The fact is, of course, that by the mid-nineteenth century the majority of American citizens were not the descendants of 'Britons', but the American nation nevertheless claimed Shakespeare as their own. Shakespeare was considered to be part of American heritage irrespective of how the American citizen in question traced his or her own ancestry (Sturgess, 2004, 135-6).

The irony is that, as noted in a publication by the National Endowment for the Arts entitled *Shakespeare in American Communities*, and dated July 2008, even though

Shakespeare constitutes part of American heritage, this “once universally accessible dramatist” has become “our most sacred dramatist – to whom most audiences [are] not able to relate” (*Shakespeare in American Communities*, 2004, 4). As a character, Orson Welles offers a way out of this dead end. In the film, he deals with the paradoxical status of Shakespeare in the United States: centered as it is on the culturally appropriated figure of Brutus, his *Caesar* is, *de facto*, an American play by an English author. Linklater thus treats Orson Welles as an icon of American culture with whom it is easy to identify, but also as the culmination of an acculturation of Shakespeare, and especially of *Julius Caesar*, that historically took place in the classroom (Wyke, 2012, 48-54), through the character of Richard Samuels.

The second scale that should be used for the film’s evaluation is aesthetic, and from this perspective, the accomplishment is even greater. By bringing the story of *Julius Caesar* offstage, Linklater highlights the connection that Welles managed to recreate between Shakespeare and American audiences, but also provides a re-enactment of the play that is both culturally and temporally updated. Ultimately it is not Welles, but the director of *Me and Orson Welles* who is active in making Shakespeare’s play part of American heritage. By focusing on Welles’s artistic murder of his spiritual father, Linklater exposes the limits of the method for appropriating Shakespeare that involves “individual acts of ‘re-vision’ that arise from love or rage, or simply a desire to play with Shakespeare” (Desmet, 1999, 2)—his version of Welles seems to be acting on a mixture of love and rage indeed. Reflexively, the director reminds the spectators of the contradiction inherent to appropriation, which is that “we can only know the work by reinventing it,” yet that reinvention is often “conceived as a violent assault on the work’s original identity” (Holderness, 2005, 4). Thanks to his “frontstage and backstage” adaptive strategy, Linklater introduces a critical perspective on Welles’s appropriation, and proposes to transcend the debate on Americanization as a type of appropriation that may be perceived as “an act of cultural colonization” (Holderness, 2005, 3). By treating Shakespeare as an elusive presence, and by paying tribute to a landmark production for American culture, he shows the Bard’s stay in the United States should not be considered immigration. Instead, it is a necessary stage in the progress leading Shakespeare outside the closed doors of theatre rooms and classrooms, over and above into the globalized popular lore of contemporary visual culture.



## Works cited

- ALBANESE, Denise, *Extramural Shakespeare*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- BLOOM, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- BROQUA, Vincent, "American Shakespeare: Introduction", *Transatlantica* 1 (2010), 27. September 2010, online, <http://transatlantica.revues.org/4878>, accessed 14. October 2013.
- BURT, Richard, "Backstage Pass(ing): *Stage Beauty*, *Othello* and the Make-up of Race", in Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray, eds., *Screening Shakespeare in the Twenty-First Century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 53-71.
- CARRINGER, Robert L., *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.
- CHRISTIE, Ian, "Chronicle of a Fall Foretold", *Sight and Sound* 22 (9), 1. September 2012.
- DESMET, Christy, "Introduction", in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds., *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, London, Routledge, 1-12.
- FRANCE, Richard, ed., *Orson Welles on Shakespeare: The W.P.A. and Mercury Theatre Playscripts*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1990.
- HEYER, Paul, *The Medium and the Magician: Orson Welles, the Radio Years, 1934-1952*, Lanham, Md, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- HOLDERNESS, Graham, "Dressing Old Words New: Shakespeare, Science and Appropriation", *Borrowers and Lenders, The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 1 (2), 2005, online, <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/781442/display>, accessed December 10, 2013.
- HOLLAND, Norman N, *Meeting Movies*, Madison, N.J., Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.
- KAPLOW, Robert, *Me and Orson Welles*, London, Vintage, 2009 (©2003).
- KEATS, John, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Barnard, London, UK, Penguin Classics, 1999 (©1988).
- LEVINE, Lawrence W., *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1988.
- MAHER, Mary Zenet, *Modern Hamlets & Their Soliloquies*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2003.

- "*Me and Orson Welles Production Notes*", 2010, online, <http://static.theacia.com.au/reviews/m/me-and-orson-welles-production-notes.pdf>, accessed December 10, 2013.
- NAREMORE, James, "Hearts of Darkness. Joseph Conrad and Orson Welles", in Colin MacCabe, Rick Warner and Kathleen Murray, eds., *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 59-74.
- PICCOLOMINI, Manfredi, *The Brutus Revival: Parricide and Tyrannicide During the Renaissance*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.
- RENKER, Elizabeth, "Shakespeare in the college curriculum, 1870-1920", in Coppélia Kahn, Heather S. Nathans and Mimi Godfrey, eds, *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2011, 131-56.
- Shakespeare in American Communities*, Washington, D.C., National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, online, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/SIAC4.pdf>, accessed August 2, 2013.
- SHAKESPEARE, William, *Julius Caesar*, ed. T S. Dorsch, London, Routledge, 1965.
- SHAKESPEARE, William, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- STURGESS, Kim C., *Shakespeare and the American Nation*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- TEACHOUT, Terry, "Relishing a Lost Production", *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2010, online, [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303362404575580473957377604.html?mod=rss\\_Arts\\_and\\_Entertainment](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303362404575580473957377604.html?mod=rss_Arts_and_Entertainment), accessed August 2, 2013.
- THIEME, Claudia, *F for Fake, and the Growth in Complexity of Orson Welles' Documentary Form*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1997.
- UBERSFELD, Anne, *Lire le théâtre II: L'École du spectateur*, Paris, Belin, 1996.
- WILMETH, Don B., and Tice L. MILLER, eds., *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- WYKE, Maria, *Caesar in the USA*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.

## Filmography

- Chimes at Midnight*, dir. Orson Welles, Alpine Films, Internacional Films, 1966.
- Macbeth*, dir. Orson Welles, Mercury Productions, 1948.

*Magnificent Ambersons (The)*, dir. Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, Mercury Productions, 1942.

*Me and Orson Welles*, dir. Richard Linklater, CinemaNX, 2008.

*Othello*, dir. Orson Welles, Mercury Productions, 1952.

*Romeo+Juliet*, Dir. Baz Luhrmann, Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.

*Shakespeare in Love*, Dir. John Madden, Miramax Films, 1998.