Millennium Pop, 1998

Visualizing Othello

Orson Welles's "Othello" rips into the inside of Shakespeare's most romantic ~ and probably his most masterfully constructed ~ tragedy, spitting out everything else like orange peel. This is as aggressive a cut-and-paste job as any filmmaker of talent has ever done on a Shakespearean text. Welles wrenches scenes out of their rightful place in the chronology and redistributes them; he splinters many of them, retaining only fragments of the dialogue. The performers ~ a crazy-quilt international cast featuring Welles as Othello, the Irish actor Michael MacLiammoir as Iago, the French actress Suzanne Cloutier as Desdemona, and, from England, Robert Coote as Roderigo and Fay Compton as Emilia ~ don't so much evolve their characters as establish them in quick-sketch fashion, like the stock players in a Hollywood movie from the studio-factory days. If you watch this "Othello" after seeing the brilliant full-length version Laurence Olivier did in the mid-sixties, with Maggie Smith and Frank Finlay, you might feel as if you were being knocked on the head and made to read the play upside down and backwards. In fact, Welles literally tells the story backwards, beginning with the double funeral of Othello and Desdemona, where Iago, caged and sneering like an ill-tempered pet monkey, is hoisted above the procession to watch the consequences of his machinations.

But this "Othello" is one of the great Shakespeare films and not just some desecration. It's a legendary eccentricity from one of the movies' most extraordinary unpredictables. Welles was a paradox: an iconoclast with an old-fashioned ~ i.e., nineteenth-century ~ sense of theatricality. He wore his conflicted feelings about modernism on his sleeve in "Citizen Kane," where his hero, while laying claim to virtual ownership of early-twentieth-century America, retreats to a Gothic castle and dies longing for the Victorian childhood he was torn away from. He wore them even more prominently in "The Magnificent Ambersons," a saga of the decline of an aristocratic family in the burgeoning automobile age that makes its brash, egocentric young hero a tragically ridiculous figure, clinging to feudal rights everyone around him has long since forgotten. (I can't call to mind another American movie that frames so exquisite a eulogy to the passing of romanticism ~ except, in a very different vein, the westerns of Sam Peckinpah.) And nothing embodies the divided heart of Welles, an artist with each foot planted firmly in a different century, more distinctly than his work with Shakespeare.

As a young man, an enfant terrible in the New York theater, Welles staged a brown-shirt "Julius Caesar" and a Haitian "Macbeth." As a moviemaker he turned to Shakespeare again, filming "Macbeth" on the rickety soundstages of Republic Studios and then going abroad to shoot "Othello" and, later, "Chimes at Midnight," his amalgam of the Falstaff plays. He smashed into these texts with the furor of a modern auteur, and he used his almost unprecedented mastery of film vocabulary and technique to make them look different from anything anyone had ever seen, could ever

see, on a stage. (Pauline Kael rightly compares the Battle of Shrewsbury sequence in "Chimes at Midnight" to the best of Griffith, Eisenstein, Ford and Kurosawa.) But his interpretations don't violate the plays; they get at the heart of them ~ at a mere two hours, "Chimes at Midnight" is still the most satisfying reading of "Henry IV, Parts I and II" I've ever seen. And Welles puts his cinematic modernism at the service of a lightning-flash theatricalism that suggests what, from critics' reports, Kean and Booth and Bernhardt achieved when they mounted their soaring interpretations of Shakespeare in the last century. Moreover, his love of spectacle (which you can see in the arrival of Othello's vessel at Cyprus) follows directly in the line of the famous impresarios (such as David Belasco) who ruled the American theater in the days before Eugene O'Neill modernized it. Welles himself was an actor in the declamatory matinee-idol style, like John Barrymore, though he brought a love of irony to his performances that claims him for our time. He was certainly one unclassifiable film artist.

Welles's "Othello" has a long and unusual history, and its release on laser disk (scheduled from Voyager's Criteron series for summer 1995 release) is only the latest chapter. Unfairly, Welles lost his credibility in Hollywood immediately after the release of "Citizen Kane." Branded an untrustworthy profligate on the basis of paltry evidence, he spent his entire career unsuccessfully battling that image and struggling to raise the money to make the movies he wanted to make. His treatment by both the studios and the press illuminates how paranoid ~ and how savage ~ they could be when confronted with a young visionary nonconformist. Financial troubles delayed the completion of editing on "Othello" for so long that his cast had dispersed for other projects long before he could ready it for release, three years after filming in 1949. What he came up with was a catch-as-catch-can soundtrack that included some terrible lip-synching and inventive approximations (you can hear Welles himself dubbing for Robert Coote in some scenes). Still, the movie won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1952. When it was finally released in the U.S. in 1955, however, it received dismissive reviews and did poorly at the box office. Prints were unavailable for years; when I was in college in the late sixties and early seventies, movie buffs spoke in hushed, wishful tones about the possibility of viewing it, the way they did about Chaplin's "Monsieur Verdoux" (which has since resurfaced) and the forty minutes RKO hacked out of "Ambersons" (which never has). Then, in 1992, Castle Hill Productions released a new print of "Othello" that cleaned up the soundtrack, resynched the dialogue, and re-recorded both the sound effects and the Francesco Lavagnino-Alberto Barberis score (and in stereo). It was a great pleasure to many of us who had always admired the movie (I finally saw a print in Montreal in the late seventies) to be able to experience it in what was far closer to a finished form. Technically, of course, the movie had been reconstituted rather than restored, and inevitably there were film scholars who argued that the Welles soundtrack, however crudely produced, was the "correct" one, since that was the picture audiences saw in the fifties.

And they have had the last word, as far as the laser version of the movie is concerned. The new disk, which carries the official approval of Welles scholar Jonathan Rosenbaum in the form of liner notes, returns to the handmade original.

Some of the points Rosenbaum makes in defense of this choice are worth hearing out. He argues that Welles used a spinetta ~ an earlier form of a harmonium ~ for some effects, and that the original orchestrations employed forty mandolins, whereas the new approximation by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Michael Pendowski reduces the number to three. (Unfortunately, Rosenbaum's source for the latter piece of information about the orchestrations is Welles himself, who was a notorious prevaricator; the evidence would be more convincing if Rosenbaum quoted a musician.) But for the most part, restoring "Othello"'s "dirty" soundtrack ~ just because Welles made it ~ strikes me as a little perverse. Welles would certainly have spent the money to create a more elegant one if he'd been able to lay his hands on it; improving the sound (which is, I'd say, beyond a doubt what the new version accomplished) isn't the same as colorizing a black and white movie. In any case, the existence of a VHS transcription of the 1992 reissue video and a laser disk taken from an original print makes it possible, as Rosenbaum suggests in his notes, for film buffs to listen to both soundtracks and choose.

Both versions make it obvious that the Cannes jury recognized a masterpiece when they saw one. Welles's "Othello" isn't superbly read, line for line; if you saw this cast in a stage production of the play, perhaps only Welles himself, a regal and horrorstruck (and startlingly handsome) Othello, and Michael MacLiammoir's almost fey Iago, a demon with a decaying face, would make strong impressions. (MacLiammoir must have the most peculiar beard in movie history: it slashes across his chin and nicks up at either side like a symmetrical scar.) When great actors have a chance to explore these roles, the results can be devastating. I find the Olivier film so overpowering that, phenomenal as it is, I can't watch it very often, and when Avery Brooks and Andre Braugher played Othello and Iago on stage at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in D.C. four years ago, the play had such an unnerving immediacy that I found myself swallowing a childish desire to immobilize the unstoppable gears of the dramatic action, as if there were some way to protect the gulled Moor and the innocent Desdemona from the doom that Iago had set in motion upon them. No other tragedy makes me feel this way; a first-rate "Othello" almost always does. Welles's film doesn't, though. The worst has already happened by the time the movie begins, and anyway, the film leaps across the landscape of Shakespeare's play at such an alarming speed that you don't have time to pull back from it. Not that you could, anyway, what with the unexpected editing rhythms, the baroque-expressionist (and typically Wellesian) use of shadow and camera angles, and the lush, waterlogged imagery. Welles takes full advantage of the settings Shakespeare imagined, Venice and Cyprus; the ocean rages about the actors, and they wade through water in almost every major sequence.) In place of the actorly intensity of a great unedited

production, Welles's "Othello" offers the lyrical intensity of a great piece of filmmaking.

Abridged as it is, the movie is a complete reading of the play; Welles's visual design unifies it. (Alexander Trauner did the magnificent sets, and the prodigious cinematographers were Anchise Brizzi, G. Araldo and George Fanto.) The interplay of light and shadow echoes Othello's fate. Once he swallows Iago's poison, he commits himself forever to a world of darkness (and the scene in which he demands that Iago murder Cassio and declares Iago his new lieutenant is shot so that it looks like he's just sealed a pact with Satan). No Welles movie contains more sunlight than this one ~ it balances out the silhouetted images ~ but after the temptation scene the light feels like a mockery of Othello; we know he'll never feel its warmth again. Suzanne Cloutier's almost supernal blondness (and she wears white) extends that contrast, especially when she stands next to swarthy Welles, who's always wearing dark robes.

Welles derives much of the imagery from Iago's promise that he will "ensnare" Cassio (Michael Lawrence), and out of Desdemona's virtue "make the net that shall enmesh them all." Bars are crosshatched at nearly every window and every gate, their shadows playing across the faces of the actors (especially Welles's, and especially in the scenes just before and just after he murders his wife). Desdemona's abundant blonde tresses are caught in a fishnet snood, and in one scene, where she talks to her waiting woman Emilia, she sit behind a pattern of bars with spiked points that encases her, almost absorbs her, like a figure imprisoned in the stitches of a needlepoint illustration. (This depiction seems magically appropriate for Desdemona, the most touchingly domestic of Shakespeare's heroines.)

Welles fans who are approaching "Othello" for the first time will have fun finding the visual links to his other movies. When Cloutier's hair is braided and strung with pearls, she resembles Dorothy Comingore in the opera sections of "Citizen Kane," and her exit after Othello humiliates her, slapping her without provocation in front of Venetian guests, is shot in that weird Wellesian (expressionist) variation on deep focus, her face immense in the foreground. The amazing bathhouse sequence, in which Iago maims Cassio and eliminates Roderigo, climaxes in a scene, taken from Roderigo's point of view, where he scurries like a rat beneath the floorboards, struggling vainly to elude Iago's down-plunging sword; the sudden thrusts of that weapon through the slats anticipate the slivers of light piercing the corridor Anthony Perkins races through in a famous bit from Welles's film of "The Trial." (Botht he entrapment motif and the water imagery culminate in the bathhouse violence.)

The film is full of jarring high and low angle shots ~ another Wellesian touch. A number of key scenes are filmed, or partly filmed, from an unusual height (when Othello demands of Iago that he "prove my love a whore," the two men are standing at the edge of a cliff, Iago pitched precariously over the roaring

ocean), and the buildings all seem uneven, tipped, so that we never feel we're on secure ground. When Iago's envenomed words throw Othello into an epileptic fit, Welles, shooting the moment from the Moor's point of view as he hits the ground, turns the whole world upside down. He does the same thing at the end, when Othello learns the truth from Emilia ~ that her husband has lied about Desdemona, that she has been chaste and faithful all along ~ and the camera admits us directly into the turmoil in the Moor's mind. At that point we may recall that the opening image of the film is an aerial shot of Othello on his bier, his body thrust upward into the frame like a figure hurled into an abyss. At the end of his life Othello eulogizes himself, begging to be remembered as a man who loved not wisely but too well. But as this image makes clear, Welles defines the Moor through three lines he omits from the film:

> Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
> But I do love thee. When I love thee not,
> Chaos is come again.

This "Othello" is a remarkable visual and emotional portrait of a man who tumbles into chaos. But like the earlier Welles pictures, it feels strongly divided at its heart. The bold directorial hand and the startling jagged effect of Welles's assault on the syntax of the text (as well as the strong implication of improvisation ~ a curious, exploratory playfulness ~ in the use of the locations) make the film as modernist as any interpretation of Shakespeare put on the screen. But the movie suggests a yearning for other eras, earlier artistic visions. Trauner's decor and Welles's visual choices for the playing out of the entrapment motif are defiantly baroque; the performances ~ especially by Welles and MacLiammoir ~ display a romantic lineage. Yet somehow it doesn't feel like a pastiche, because this bizarre mixture exactly defines Welles's style. "Othello" is a masterwork by the most inspired eclectic American movies have ever known.

April 22, 1995