Orson Welles' 1937 Production of Julius Caesar
Settings

Christian McKay ('Orson Welles') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

Ben Chaplin ('George Coulouris') in ' Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

Playing with Shakespeare – Orson Welles & Julius Caesar
Settings 1

Orson Welles' decision to make his 1937 Mercury Theatre production of Julius Caesar a study of fascism – a response to the dramatic political developments in Europe – was considered a bold one in 1937, but theatre-goers are far more used nowadays to productions that attempt to re-locate Shakespeare in different times and periods. The same is true of film versions of Shakespeare. In the last twenty years we have screen versions of As you Like It set in nineteenth century Japan; Hamlet set in a contemporary New York and numerous interpretations of Macbeth including one set on a modern estate and another in the world of 1930s Chicago gangsters. Whether on stage or film, these choices will be made by a director to emphasise elements in the play he/she thinks are important. In Welles' case, the play's subject seemed suited to an investigation of a political ideology which was impacting on millions of lives. As we'll see, this involved making some drastic changes.

One of the most radical and exciting things about Orson Welles' production of Julius Caesar was its staging, designed by Samuel Leve and Jean Rosenthal and reproduced exactly in the film, *Me and Orson Welles*.

The designs derived from the very precise instructions of Welles himself:

'Welles dictated very clearly and exactly the kind of look he wanted the production to have, a very simple look based on the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg. The patterns implied in the Nuremberg 'festivals' were in terms of platforms, which were the basis of the scenery, and light which went up or down. The uplight (derived from two-rows of 500-watt-up-lights sunk into the stage) was really taken from the effect the Nazi's achieved.'

Jean Rosenthal (Lighting Designer)

■ Activity

Carry out some research of your own, investigating what Nazi rallies actually looked like. Inputting 'Nuremberg Rallies' into Google images will provide a wealth of shots and there is also the extraordinary (and frighteningly compelling) 1934 film by Leni Riefenstahl documenting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg called Triumph of the Will, which is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcFuHGHfYwE&feature=related

Use your discoveries to sketch a simple stage design likely to evoke associations with these events. You will see that the Nazis were very skilled in their use of lighting to create a dramatic atmosphere and sense of massive architectural scale. How did they do this? If you can think of a way to create the same effects as are suggested by the images you find, then add this element into your sketch.

A good scene to provide a sketch for might be Act III Scene II – the famous 'Forum' scene in which first Brutus and then Mark Antony mount 'a pulpit' and make their respective speeches about Caesar's death. Interpret 'pulpit' as you will – how would such a place need to be transformed to fit staging reminiscent of a Nazi rally? You will be able to check your version against the stage design for the same scene in Me and Orson Welles.

Settings 2

Welles' minimalist production needs also to be understood in the context of other forms of staging that had gone before. In some ways his return to a bare stage was in keeping with their first appearances of the play on Shakespeare's playhouse stage, where much of the information about who people were, where they were and even what time of day or night it was had to be listened for in people's speeches. But even more radical was his decision to emphasise a sense of immediacy and contemporary relevance by giving the audience clear visual signs – in both lighting and costume – that this play was about something they were seeing happening in newsreels at the cinema, the spread of fascism and the questions it raised about a response.

■ Activity – Changing fashions in production

This activity is also an exercise in stage design. Follow the links to two images of Shakespeare plays on the stage:

David Garrick as Romeo, George Anne Bellamy as Juliet in David Garrick's adaptation of Romeo and Juliet in 1748. Painting by Benjamin Wilson

www.1st-art-gallery.com/thumbnail/183594/1/David-Garrick-$281717-79$29-And-George-Anne-Bellamy-$28c.1727-88$29-In-Romeo-And-Juliet,-1753.jpg

Henry Irving and Ellen Terry as Hamlet and Ophelia in the famous production of 'Hamlet' at the Lyceum Theatre, London in 1878. Lithograph of painting by Edward H Bell

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Henry_Irving_Ellen_Terry_Hamlet_Nunnery_1879.jpg

List what you notice about them – including the way in which the actors are dressed and the scene is decorated. What differences do you notice between these visions of the play and the kind of design that Welles was aiming to achieve with his Julius Caesar? A good way to get to grips with this is to imagine how an image of the same scene – Act III Scene II might have appeared in the Garrick and the Irving productions.

The following brief notes may help:

'The image shows various improbabilities in Garrick's production that were mocked at the time: the fact that Romeo has taken trouble to change into black between this and the previous scene, and that the tomb is already lit by the lamp before Romeo breaks into it… The image provides a rare insight into stage scenery (of the mid-eighteenth century). The shutters – painted flat screens – have been slid across in their grooves so that they meet in the middle. The double-doors of the Capulet tomb have been in some way built onto these shutters with a graveyard painted around them. The doors open on the remaining depth of the stage, making the inside of the tomb. In many ways this is a survival of the 'inner stage' of Shakespeare's day.'

(Desmond Shawe-Taylor)

'A set of scenes would normally include wing shutters placed on either side of the stage and large flats that 'closed' the scene towards the back. The shutters were supported in grooves set upon the stage and in corresponding grooves suspended above. Scenes were changed by sliding the wing shutters and large black shutters off the stage in order to reveal new shutters behind. 'Sets' of scenes were painted, often by visiting Italian artists who were considered specialists in such work, and became the stock of the theatre. They were used time and again, as the repertoire required, until they were too over-painted to serve.'

(Christopher Baugh)

'(The) harsh brilliance of electric lighting overexposed the delicate scenic language of painting and painted shadows. The starkly lit reality of the three-dimensional actors threw the painted artificiality of stage scenery into jarring contrast. Stage managers responded by using ever more real and built-up details, but inevitably, fuelled by new technologies, the 250-year-old scenic tradition began to collapse beneath the sheer weight of its own scenery. Heavy, three-dimensionally constructed scenery could not easily be manoeuvred within the elegant simplicity of the sliding groove and shutter system. Scene changes became longer and longer (Henry Irving's meticulously stage-managed Macbeth in 1888 had five intervals totalling forty-six minutes…) and to meet the final trains and omnibuses to carry the audiences home, the plays were rearranged, cut and further adapted, until they became little more than accompaniments to spectacular tableaux vivants.'

(Christopher Baugh)

Now look at this photograph of Herbert Beerbohm Tree in Julius Caesar at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1898 with costumes and sets by the famous painter Lawrence Alma Tadema:

http://shakespeare.emory.edu/postcarddisplay.cfm?cardid=206

Imagine how long it would take to get all the people in the photograph on and off stage!

■ Activity – Costume

The critics were divided about the decision to place the play in modern dress. Most felt it, and the overall contemporary setting, were liberating and exciting.

Your task is to choose one or more characters from the play and decide how you might dress them if you were the costume designer. For example, how would you dress Cinna – the street poet? You could attempt your own drawings or you could look for images in magazines to suggest the style you are looking for.

■ Activity

In contrast to the elaborate and sumptuous sets and costumes associated with nineteenth century and Edwardian Shakespeare productions, Welles' Julius Caesar was a breath of fresh air – though he certainly was not the first to restore the idea of a bare stage in the inter-war years. What was perhaps novel was what has been described as Welles' 'cinematic' style. What do you think is meant by this description? How did Welles achieve this?

Consider:

– *Length of scenes*

– *Simplification of the narrative*

– *Naturalistic ways of delivering lines with lines overlapping*

– *Costumes and lighting effects*

– *Number of scene changes involving moving furniture/sets*