

Orson Welles' Interpretation of Julius Caesar

Cutting the play

It is not only the character Julius Caesar who got cut up in Orson Welles' version of the play! Welles decided it was largely to be a play about Brutus and his misguided and ultimately futile attempts to halt Rome's surrender to dictatorship. Welles' production was just over 90 minutes long – it is reported he was still cutting and re-arranging on the night when the play was reviewed by the press. But was Welles justified in cutting Shakespeare's play into a shape that suited his vision and removed those elements that weren't



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

so helpful? When does a play stop being the play and become merely the inspiration for another original work? How much of his play would Shakespeare have recognised and does it matter if it isn't much? Welles made sure that there was no confusion about what this production was about by subtitling it, 'Death of a Dictator'. It can be argued that Shakespeare's play is about a lot more than that – indeed as always with Shakespeare, the events in the play are opportunities for complex and multi-layered explorations of human experience. Was Welles interested in this aspect of Shakespeare? And does it matter if he wasn't?

■ Activity – Subtitles

Welles' subtitle is very punchy and specific – a bit like a newspaper headline. In groups, think of subtitles for these other plays by Shakespeare:

- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Macbeth*
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*

If you don't know these plays, then you can use some films you know. Which elements in the story have you highlighted? What does that say about the elements you haven't highlighted? How important are they now? Compare the choices you have made with those made by others.

■ Activity – Welles' cuts

Consider the list of Welles' omissions and alterations in order to decide which you feel is the most seriously damaging to the play.

- Caesar's dictatorial instincts were emphasised while those elements of his character that suggested a more self-doubting or vulnerable individual were downplayed.
- Welles made Brutus the focus of the play – 'the bourgeois intellectual', writes Welles, 'who under a modern dictatorship, would be the first put up against a wall and shot.'
- the relationship between Brutus and Cassius was reduced – a relationship which is now considered by many to be the most important in the play
- Lepidus was removed entirely from the play
- the parts of both Mark Antony and Octavius were heavily cut
- the plebeian characters lost their individuality so that the crowd/mob became merely a chorus to the main action
- the last 20 minutes of the play were heavily cut

It is interesting that although Orson Welles may have made Julius Caesar suit his agenda and his desire to make it a production that 'spoke to the times', in one important way he restored a crucial part of the play that had remained cut for nearly two centuries – the murder of Cinna, the poet.



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

■ Activity – Taking liberties

Were Welles' alterations exceptional? Consider these changes to Shakespeare's plays. Which do you feel to be the most extreme and/or clumsy – and note that all of them have been done in productions?

1. Romeo and Juliet:

Removing reference to Rosalind (Romeo's first love) from the text so Romeo being in love with love isn't featured.

Having Juliet awake before Romeo is dead so they can be reunited.

2. King Lear:

Allowing Lear's daughter Cordelia to survive along with her father in contrast to the play's actual conclusion featuring Lear's emotionally fraught death clasping the dead body of his daughter.

3. Macbeth:

Actresses playing Lady Macbeth refusing to perform the fainting scene after the murder of Duncan because they dislike the character's deceitfulness and also because they needed more time off to get into elaborate costumes for the coronation scene.

Adding scenes involving dancing witches and a new character Hecate in order to cater to the late seventeenth century's taste for such spectacle.

4. Othello:

Many of the more obscene descriptions of Othello and Desdemona making love which pepper the deceitful Iago's speeches at the start of the play are removed in line with contemporary sensitivities about such explicitness.

Are these changes like those made by Orson Welles?

Are they made for the same reasons?



James Tupper ('Joseph Cotton'), Megan Maczko ('Evelyn Allen'), Simon Nehan ('Joe Holland') and Ben Chaplin ('George Coulouris') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel.

■ Activity – Cutting Shakespeare

Below is the first scene of Julius Caesar as it is written. If you were the director of a new version of the play, how do you think you could cut the scene? Consider which lines you feel to be the most effective and what is lost and gained by the changes you make.

Julius Caesar – 1599

Act I Scene I

Enter FLAVIUS, MARULLUS, and certain Commoners

FLAVIUS

Hence! Home, you idle creatures, get you home!
Is this a holiday? What, know you not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a labouring day without the sign
Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?

FIRST COMMONER

Why, sir, a carpenter.

MARULLUS

Where is thy leather apron and thy rule?
What dost thou with thy best apparel on? –
You, sir, what trade are you?

SECOND COMMONER

Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman, I am but,
as you would say, a cobbler.

MARULLUS

But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

SECOND COMMONER

A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience; which is indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles.

FLAVIUS

What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade?

SECOND COMMONER

Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me. Yet if you be out, sir, I can mend you.

MARULLUS

What mean'st thou by that? Mend me, thou saucy fellow!?

SECOND COMMONER

Why, sir, cobble you.

FLAVIUS

Thou art a cobbler, art thou?

SECOND COMMONER

Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl. I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor women's matters, but with all – I am indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes; when they are in great danger I recover them. As proper men as ever trod upon neat's leather have gone upon my handiwork.

FLAVIUS

But wherefore art not in thy shop today?
Why dost thou lead these men about the streets?

SECOND COMMONER

Truly, sir, to wear out their shoes, to get myself into more work. But, indeed, sir, we make holiday to see Caesar, and to rejoice in his triumph.

MARULLUS

Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
What tributaries follow him to Rome,
To grace in captive bonds his chariot-wheels?
You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!
O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft

Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows, yea, to chimney-tops,
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The livelong day, with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome.
And when you saw his chariot but appear,
Have you not made an universal shout,
That Tiber trembled underneath her banks
To hear the replication of your sounds
Made in her concave shores?
And do you now put on your best attire?
And do you now cull out a holiday?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
Be gone!
Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
Pray to the gods to intermit the plague
That needs must light on this ingratitude.

Act I Scene II

SCENE II. A public place.

[Flourish.] Enter CAESAR; ANTONY for the course; CALPURNIA, PORTIA, DECIUS BRUTUS, CICERO, BRUTUS, CASSIUS, and CASCA; a great crowd following, among them a Soothsayer

CAESAR
Calpurnia!

CASCA
Peace, ho! Caesar speaks.

CAESAR
Calpurnia!

CALPURNIA
Here, my lord.

CAESAR
Stand you directly in Antonius' way
When he doth run his course. Antonius!

ANTONY

Caesar, my lord?

CAESAR

Forget not in your speed, Antonius,
To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,
The barren, touchèd in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse.

ANTONY

I shall remember.
When Caesar says 'Do this', it is performed.

CAESAR

Set on; and leave no ceremony out.

[Flourish]

SOOTHSAYER

Caesar!

CAESAR

Ha! Who calls?

CASCA

Bid every noise be still. Peace yet again!

CAESAR

Who is it in the press that calls on me?
I hear a tongue, shriller than all the music,
Cry 'Caesar!' Speak. Caesar is turned to hear.

SOOTHSAYER

Beware the Ides of March.

CAESAR

What man is that?

BRUTUS

A soothsayer bids you beware the Ides of March.

CAESAR

Set him before me. Let me see his face.

CASSIUS

Fellow, come from the throng. Look upon Caesar.

CAESAR

What sayst thou to me now? Speak once again.

SOOTHSAYER

Beware the Ides of March.

CAESAR

He is a dreamer. Let us leave him. Pass.

Sennet. Exeunt all but BRUTUS and CASSIUS

The scale of changes in this brief opening extract is typical of the extent of the liberties Welles took with the play as a whole; boiling it down to fit his vision and to compress it into a very abbreviated running time.

Read the two openings and consider the different ‘dramatic pulse’ of each – the first providing a context to Caesar’s return from war against the sons of Rome’s former hero Pompey, and Welles’ version jumping straight into the drama.

What is Shakespeare doing in the first scene?

What do we find out about the world of the play?

What other facts do we learn that have implications for our understanding of the characters in the play? (What do we find out about Calpurnia for example?)

How do Welles’ cuts change the focus of the scene?

Discuss the depiction of Caesar in both. What kind of portrait do we get from the description of him by those who oppose him?

How does it change things that we are not first exposed to the idea of the fickleness of the mass of the Roman people? Later in the play Antony manages to swing opinion against Brutus by a single emotive speech. Does it matter that we haven’t seen that this is part of the character of the crowd?