

Richard Linklater as a Filmmaker

Edited production notes

Richard Linklater – The director and the film

RICHARD LINKLATER (Director/Producer) was born in Houston, Texas, and attended Sam Houston State University, before leaving to work on offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Moving to Austin, he founded the Austin Film Society in 1985, to showcase films from around the world that were not typically shown in the city. He began work on his debut film as writer/director, 1988s 'It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books' and, three years later, he wrote, produced and directed 'Slacker', which became an indie sensation in the early 1990s. Despite its minuscule budget, the movie became the subject of considerable mainstream media attention, with the term 'slacker' becoming a much-overused catchall epithet for America's disaffected youth. In 1993, he wrote and directed *Dazed and Confused*, another influential and popular coming-of-age comedy. Next, Linklater made *Before Sunrise*, a romance set in Vienna, starring Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. Nine years later, he, Hawke and Delpy received Oscar® nominations for their screenplay of *Before Sunset* which continued the lovers' story in Paris. His eclectic canon continued with *SubUrbia*, based on the Eric Bogosian play; *The Newton Boys*, a 1920s-set historical crime drama; *Waking Life*, an animated feature based on live-action; *Tape*, based on Stephen Belber's three-character one-act play; the short film *Live From Shiva's Dance Floor*, featuring 'Speed' Levitch; the international comedy hit *School of Rock*, starring Jack Black; *\$5.15/Hr.*, an ensemble comedy about restaurant workers; *Bad News Bears*, a remake of the hit baseball comedy; *Fast Food Nation*, a searching dramatic examination of the burger business; Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*, an animated futuristic thriller starring Keanu Reeves and, most recently, *Inning by Inning: A Portrait of a Coach*, a documentary about University of Texas baseball coach Augie Garrido. Linklater continues to serve as the artistic director for the Austin Film Society, which has given out almost \$1,000,000 in grants to Texas filmmakers and in 1999, received the first National Honoree Award from the Directors Guild of America in recognition of its support of the arts.

As an independent feature, *Me and Orson Welles* needed to make creative use of every penny of its limited budget and found a solution in basing the production in London, where a combination of Pinewood Studios and some imaginatively chosen locations brought New York to life. And thanks to some visual trickery, the imposing scale and distinctive architecture of the bustling city has been vibrantly recreated on a comparative shoestring.

'This movie doesn't really exist any longer in New York,' says Richard Linklater. 'If you go to where the Mercury Theatre was, you would never know. It's an office building – there's not even a plaque. That street looks so different; it didn't really matter to me where we shot the film. As a filmmaker, wherever I could make this film I would, (and I did).'

'It's been wonderful working with production designer Laurence Dorman,' continues Linklater. 'We went over to New York together – he wasn't that familiar with the city, so we went to a lot of the actual addresses in the movie and I showed him around.'

Dorman's visit inspired his design of the street set on Pinewood's Orchard Lot:

'It was worth every second actually, because we were able to visit the site of the theatre and I was able to get the geography of 41st Street into my mind, with Bryant Park and all the things that are mentioned in the script. And even though 41st Street was completely different to how it would have been in those days, I was able to just wander around the neighbourhood and take pictures all over midtown and all the way down to 22nd Street. I was picking out all of the old stuff, the architecture that I imagined would have been there at the time and turning it into our little composite street. I've taken a selection of buildings based on my photographs and put them together to suit my purposes.'

For the exterior of the Mercury Theatre we found a single photograph taken in the early 1900s when the building, then the Comedy Theatre, was putting on its first production. We took a little bit of licence here and there, but it's great to see that original picture and then to be able to look at our street – it's quite thrilling to do something like that.'

The theatre

Crucial to the success of the enterprise was finding a theatre that could play the interior of the Mercury itself. By a stroke of good fortune CinemaNX, the production company, is based in the Isle of Man and there in the capital, Douglas, is the magnificently restored Gaiety Theatre, an almost exact contemporary of the Mercury. *'I don't think we would have been able to make the film if we hadn't been able to shoot it there,'* says the producer, Marc Samuelson. *'It was just the most fantastic set for us. It worked really well, looked great in the film, was just the right size – in every way it fitted the bill.'*

The theatre opened originally as a large pavilion in 1893 and following a redesign by Frank Matcham, it re-opened as an opera house and theatre in 1900. After early success, years of neglect began to take their toll and the building was acquired by the Isle of Man Government in 1971. A comprehensive programme of restoration was launched in 1990 and completed in 2000. One of the last elements to be restored was the famous Corsican Trap, the only known original version of this classic stage effect.

'I really fell in love with the place,' admits Linklater. *'It was almost too nice, too ornate, but I thought if we brought it down a little bit and didn't look up at the beautiful domed cathedral-like ceiling, it had similar proportions to the Mercury Theatre in seats and size. The stage was about the same size and the below stage area and its trap door arrangement with locks and pulleys was far more complex and interesting than you would ever be able to realise if you were building your own stage. So all of that felt great, and to shoot on the Isle of Man for those weeks was just kind of perfect. Some films are just meant to be. It just feels like it lines up and it's meant to happen.'*

The book

Robert Kaplow, on whose novel the film is based, was eager to see Welles' production of Caesar for the first time on the screen. He remembers the origins of the story:

'I was sitting in the basement of the Rutgers University Library, looking through a copy of 'Theatre Arts Monthly' from 1937, and there was a photograph from Welles' production of Julius Caesar which featured Welles in a dark coat and black gloves, sitting at the edge of the stage. Next to him was a young man playing a ukulele tricked up to look like a lute. My first thought was: the real story here is the kid. What does this moment feel like from the kid's point of view – to bear witness to a celebrity creating himself right in front of your eyes? Investigating the history of this theatrical moment, I discovered the young actor from 1937, Arthur Anderson, was alive and living in New York. He was an invaluable source, and he still has the ukulele, which he played for me at his kitchen table in a remarkable moment that felt as if I were melting through time. Linklater's film astonishingly recreates this photograph with heart-stopping accuracy.'

The design

A key element in the recreation of the period was the skill and experience of the Oscar-nominated cinematographer Richard Pope. *'I had a great meeting with Dick,'* remembers Linklater, *'and I just saw him as a kindred spirit. He had that wild attitude – he seemed like a kind of mad scientist. And what you want in that position is enthusiasm – and skill, obviously, that goes without saying. Other than that, it's a personality match. He seems in the spirit of the film and he said he fell in love with it when he read the passage in the script where one of the actresses, Muriel Brassler, played by Kelly Reilly, is talking about lighting and gels and about getting a little butterfly shadow under her nose. He just thought that was so amusing.'*

With most films, even a stylised period piece, you bend a little towards naturalism. But when you are recreating the exact lighting of this highly dramatic, very theatrical stage show, it's just fun. It was like shooting an old studio film with high contrast lighting and it's probably the only time I will ever get to do that. The story goes that the great cinematographer Gregg Toland saw this production of Julius Caesar and when he heard that Welles was going to Hollywood to make Citizen Kane he told him he wanted to work with him because of the lighting he had done for the play.'

To establish the look of the Mercury Theatre, costume designer Nic Ede researched the fascist imagery of the original Caesar production. *'Thank goodness, there is a lot of visual reference, a lot of photographs and a lot of people wrote about it. When we were on the Isle of Man filming in the Gaiety Theatre, I looked at the way Dick Pope had lit it and the way Laurence had done the set – identical to the original – and it sent a shiver down my spine.'*

In addition to reproducing the uniforms on stage, there was the small matter of costuming the audience for Nic Ede and his team. This required clothing some 570 extras, who also needed to be fully made-up and coiffed by Fae Hammond and her assistants, for the scenes involving

a full theatre. *'I love huge crowd scenes,'* says Ede. *'I don't know what it is – something rather perverse. It's playing at make-believe and that's always a great, great thing to do. The joy of filming, from my point of view, is to create something that the audience will look at that they absolutely believe. Every extra that comes into the fitting room is a bit of a challenge. You want to make them into a character, it's not just a body to put clothes on, it's somebody to represent...a fishwife...or a sweetcorn seller...'*

'The thing that was exciting for me in this film was the fact that in the thirties, leisurewear was much more accepted in America than elsewhere. I don't think it existed in Europe in the same way and certainly didn't unless you were rich and were wearing beach pyjamas! It made a change from the usual 1930s stuff I have done which is pretty upper class and extravagant, whereas this was a chance to do real people leading real lives. It's interesting, trying to achieve totally believable people through their clothes and their make-up and hair.'

The 1930s music for the film was selected by Linklater himself, a big fan of the music of the period and of the arrangements of maestro Jools Holland, described by the director as 'an English national treasure'. Another key element in recreating the sound of the era was the speaking voices of the Mercury Theatre players, which benefited from the specialist attention of distinguished Shakespearean Dramaturge Giles Block and veteran dialect coach Judith Windsor. Block, Master of Verse and Play at London's celebrated Globe Theatre, worked with the actors on the Shakespeare scenes during the rehearsal period, coaching and advising them on the authenticity of their verse speaking. Judith Windsor worked on the actors' delivery throughout the production, paying close attention to the fine details of their accents.

And the Mercury rises

Richard Linklater is a director with an eclectic back catalogue of popular and critically-praised movies and when his long-time associate and first assistant director Vince Palmo recommended Robert Kaplow's book, he thought it sounded an interesting title and took it with him on vacation. He admits to liking the genre of historical fiction because as he says, all histories are fiction, anyway, and in this case the author had based it on every memoir and fact he could get hold of.

'It was just wonderful. The author was actually inserting himself as the young character, seeing Welles through his eyes and at that moment in time. It's history, theatrical history – Welles' career and a young man's coming of age. So I found it utterly charming and really interesting. If you know Welles, you know he mastered theatre and radio before he went on to his more famous film career. It's such a fascinating portrait of a moment in time in his life. I was just about to start another movie, but I could see that Vince and Holly Palmo were really passionate about it – their passion kept fuelling me, which was needed, because it seemed like such an ambitious movie.'

'Rick asked if we'd mind if he optioned it and we said no,' confirms Vince. 'Holly and I had written a couple of scripts which he'd liked to varying degrees and we said we'd really like to take a shot at the screenplay. Having read the book and done our own research, it became an even richer milieu and time and place. We were interested in everything about that era and the fact that it was about young people – Welles was only 22 – was a big lure.'

Finding Orson

'So we had a script and were really excited about it,' says Linklater, 'but I said, before we start doing budgets and schedules and trying to go further, let's get an Orson, because we are not going to do this thing at all unless we can get the right guy to play him. To me, that was the biggest piece of the puzzle that had to fit, before it even had the possibility of moving forward. We thought of all the usual Americans, but we weren't really getting anywhere. And I remember theorising, 'You know who our Orson Welles is? He's in London right now, probably doing Shakespeare. I bet that's where he is – or there'll be some great unknown British actor who kind of looks like him'.

'A few months later, Robert Kaplow sends me an e-mail saying that there's a guy performing in New York at this 50-seat theatre I had never heard of, performing a play called 'Rosebud: The Lives of Orson Welles' for just a couple of weeks. And so I flew to New York and went straight to the play. I'd just had shoulder surgery and I had this brace on, I could barely move, it was really uncomfortable. My only test was, do I believe this guy is Orson Welles? Christian McKay just had that kind of Wellesian manner and he had clearly studied him closely. So I talked to him after the show and I got back to Austin just thinking about him and felt 'let's take this to another level'. So I flew Christian to Austin and we did a sort of old fashioned screen test.'

'We did three scenes from the movie: I cast some people, did period wardrobe, we had an old car and we did a scene in the back; Christian came in and we worked together and hung out for a couple of days. After that, I didn't even need to look at the footage. I just knew the kind of guy he was and thought the film gods was making a very special offering, as they sometimes do. And I remember telling him we don't have money, we don't have anything – it may never happen, but we'd try. We started sending the script out and the good news was many seemed intrigued by it, but one of the stumbling blocks we had was a Welles who was unknown. Can you get a bigger name to play Welles? Ours was always the same argument: no, this is Welles!'

Christian McKay, graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and accomplished concert pianist, is an established theatrical all-rounder, but has been aware of his resemblance to Welles since his student days. *'People said that I resembled him a little bit. I only remember Orson as this big, gargantuan iceberg of a man and at drama school, whenever they said 'You look a bit like Harry Lime', I really thought they were having a go at my weight! So I'd be very anti-Orson – I used to think 'I'm not that big....' Mind you, I must be the only actor who had to lose weight to play Orson Welles!'*

Casting

With the Orsonian hurdle out of the way, the rest of the casting could proceed. The other key element, without which the project would be unworkable, is the leading role in this coming-of-age story, seventeen-year-old Richard Samuels. As Linklater points out, *'He is very active. Even though he is the observer of the movie, he's really the motor, so I needed to find someone who could pull that off. It could come off totally wrong, if he wasn't likeable and sympathetic.'*

Someone mentioned the name of Zac Efron, whose image adorns the walls of teenage bedrooms across the world, following the success of *High School Musical*. *'Frankly,'* admits Linklater, *'at that point, I had just seen Hairspray and my first impression was that he's almost too good looking. But in my experience, you can't judge the full range of an actor based on what you've seen them in – so we set up a meeting. A minute or two into the conversation, I knew he would be the perfect Richard Samuels.'*

'He really responded to the script and got it. Zac's got so much going on, he's a natural song and dance man – he really does kind of have a song in his heart and a little dance in his step and he's really intelligent. But he's young and there's still a wide-eyed, it's-all-ahead-of-him kind of vibe that's perfect for Richard. He's got a rare quality that you don't see very often. Just photographing him, you go 'wow, that's a once in a generation kind of thing'. I just think, with his level of talent, he can go in a lot of interesting directions. He's been great to work with, I can't imagine anybody else playing it.'

When casting his female lead, Sonja Jones, Richard Linklater remembered auditioning a teenaged Claire Danes for a role in *Dazed and Confused* in 1992. *'She was too young for that part, a couple of years too young, but I think she was one of the best actresses I met, she was so good. Even as a kid she was just so natural and real, so I always followed her career and was really lucky that our paths finally crossed. And she remembered that audition too. It's just great when you hook back up with someone you admire. She's such a good actress, a really good person and it's been really fun to work with her, she's a real trouper.'*

'This production of Julius Caesar was radical, because it was a comment on the fascism that was starting to eat away at the world. Welles made it really relevant and urgent and fresh. Shakespeare, up until that point, had been performed in a much more studied, careful way. He just blew all of these conventions out of the water. This film does have a historical dimension that is fascinating and worth considering and exploring. Orson Welles is a hero of mine and a hero to so many people. It's great to take a moment to admire everything that he achieved.'