

Me and Orson Welles

Exploring the film

It is considered an essential element of any story – especially a film story – that its protagonists (and others) should travel a journey and be seen to have moved on or been transformed in the process. Your task in this exercise is to study the scene in which we see Richard back in his high school ruminating on what befell him and the injustice of his expulsion from the Mercury Theatre Company at its moment of triumph. It is as if he has been expelled from a magic garden filled with wonderful glittering people and has had to return to a far drabber world – notice the dull browns that dominate the colour pallet in this scene.



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

**"THE FEEL-GOOD
FILM OF THE YEAR"**
10 OUT OF 10 ALAN FRANK DAILY STAR

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF
**'SCHOOL OF ROCK'
& 'BEFORE SUNSET'**

**"A CLASS ACT FROM
START TO FINISH"**
★★★★★ CHRIS ROBERTS UNCLUT

If you want to discover life...
learn from the master

CHRISTIAN MCKAY CLAIRE DANES AND ZAC EFRON

ME & ORSON WELLES

A FILM BY **RICHARD LINKLATER**

12A CONTAINS MATERIAL THAT MAY BE OFFENSIVE TO SOME

WWW.MEANDORSONWELLES.THEMOVIE.COM

■ Activity 1

There is a danger that Richard will end up being bitter and twisted about the treatment he received at both Welles' and Sonja's hands. Happily, he achieves a degree of self-knowledge from the speech he ends up quoting to his class – Caesar's to Mark Antony discussing Cassius contains a warning to Richard about a lack of generosity of spirit:

CAESAR

*Would he were fatter! But I fear him not.
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius. 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.*

In what ways does this speech hold out warnings to Richard about his attitude to what has happened to him and his view of Orson Welles – a genius with whom he has had an enviable close contact.

Try to learn the speech for yourself. Once learnt, it is forever yours.

An informal education

Dr Mewling: 'Mr. Samuels, do you really expect to find the answer out of the window?'

Mewling's comment is highly ironic. Richard has done just as his teacher is debunking – he has literally looked out of the window and found the answer by pursuing his own interests and instincts.

At the end of the film what life experiences and learning do you feel Richard has managed to cram into that intense week with the Mercury Theatre Company?

What do you do in your own time that could be defined as informal education – i.e. those activities that deliver benefits to you in terms of expertise and prestige?

Alternative narratives – Gretta and her story

Gretta: 'There's no action in it, if that's what you are looking for. God, can't you just be walking down the street, and suddenly you're happy – or you're having coffee somewhere and suddenly the distance to the door seems impossible? Hasn't that ever happened to you? ...Well stories can be like that, too. Why does everything have to be a big plot?'

■ Activity 2

In breaks from writing I go outside and watch swifts wheeling and diving in the sky in pursuit of insects. Sometimes there are dozens of them banking and swooping with utter abandon and yet such precision. There is never a collision. It is a spectacular aerial display and it is mesmerising.

It would be a good way to get closer to Gretta's vision of life delivering up what the poet William Blake described as 'infinity in a grain of sand' by having a go at capturing a moment in which the world or life seemed to be painted in particularly intense colours. It could be a time when you felt suddenly, for no very good reason glad to be alive or when something small and insignificant seemed to give you great pleasure or sadness. It does not have to be a long piece of writing – in fact it is likely to be quite short. See my effort above about the swifts to show you the kind of activity meant here.

■ Activity 3

Remember the film's strap-line: 'There are moments when everything changes.' Well – assess the scene in which Richard and Gretta meet in terms of that slogan. What 'promises' does this scene contain?

■ Activity 4

This scene depicts a thoughtful and sensitive young woman contemplating a large, decorated, ancient Greek jar ('pithos') – a miraculous survivor of the centuries. As Richard approaches her she can be heard reciting from John Keats' 1819 poem Ode on a Grecian Urn. It would be worthwhile investigating this poem – it can be easily found on-line, for example at: <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/1129.html>. Read the poem and investigate some of the helpful on-line guides to it including: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode_on_a_Grecian_Urn

■ Activity 5

At first glance, this scene is very much apart from the frantic on-rush narrative that characterises Richard's involvement in Welles' production. Your task here is to assess its relevance.

Consider how it fits in well with the film's strap-line – what ripples spread out from this meeting? What lessons might it contain for Richard – currently so preoccupied with the Mercury company.

How does the theme of the poem – the jar and its pictures survival throwing into high relief the mutability (the ceaseless change and decay) that characterises ordinary life, love and most human endeavours – reflect on the crises and 'melodramas' associated with Richard's experiences (his coming of age) back at the theatre?

How, also, does the Keats poem connect with Welles' project – in particular. His desire to bring his vision to life in a way that is 'artistically uncompromised', but also the fact that he is working in perhaps the most ephemeral of artistic media – live theatre?

The final lines of the Ode have always provoked huge debate:

***"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.***

In what way does this reflect on or marry up with the way in which Welles pursues his artistic goals? Does the fact that Welles did create something triumphant, something 'beautiful' that spoke to audiences of 1937 New York, justify the sometimes distinctly unbeautiful ways he achieved it?

Interestingly, the song that Richard sings in the play to Welles' Brutus also contains an element of the same notion of art transcending the everyday and putting us in touch with something universal. It was one of Welles' borrowings from other plays of Shakespeare – in this case Henry VIII (1613), one of his last plays and one he wrote in collaboration with John Fletcher. It was a cannon fired during a performance of this play that set the thatch alight and burnt the first Globe theatre down in the same year.

***Orpheus with his lute made trees,
And the mountain tops that freeze,
Bow themselves, when he did sing:
To his music plants and flowers
Ever sprung; as sun and showers
There had made a lasting spring.***

***Everything that heard him play,
Even the billows of the sea,
Hung their heads, and then lay by.
In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing, die.***