

Richard Linklater's Julius Caesar

Overlapping narratives

How many dictators?



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

'I am Orson Welles! And every single one of you stands here as an adjunct to my vision. You want a career in the Mercury Theatre and in everything else I plan to do, then remember one simple rule: I own the store. You don't like the way I work here? There's the door. Find somebody else to star you on Broadway.'

*(Me and Orson Welles'
– script by Holly Gent Palmo and Vince Palmo)*

'Questions of originality and authorship were to plague Welles throughout his career, largely because of his insistence on sole responsibility for his own work and his increasing need to appear as an original genius...'

(Orson Welles – The Road To Xanadu' – by Simon Callow)

CASSIUS:

*'Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.'*

(Julius Caesar – Act I Scene II)

It is perhaps unfair to use Cassius' highly one-sided portrait of Caesar with the other two quotations illustrating Orson Welles' dominance over his production and his company. It becomes more justified when one considers the liberties Welles took with Shakespeare's play. Welles re-built the play to fit his interpretation of Caesar's rule as a categorical dictatorship against which Brutus' flawed resistance was depicted as wholly noble – albeit doomed. His own conduct towards everyone around him, as depicted in the film, shows that Welles himself was certainly a dictator and a tyrant when it came to artistic policy and direction.

■ Activity – Artistic dictatorship?

This is an exercise in weighing up the extent and impact of Welles' dominance as depicted in the film.

Is it as Cassius would have it describing Caesar – that far from being an inherently dominant person, Welles' power derives from the kind of collective acquiescence that surrounds him.

Consider the scenes provided as a part of this resource and assess the way in which Welles is depicted – what is the source of his power?

Welles: 'Exhausted as I am, I will attempt to rise above the arrogance and jealousy around me and get you your opening... The small-mindedness around here. I'm suffocating.'

Welles castigates his co-producer John Houseman for his small-mindedness in worrying about the frequent delays in setting a date for the play's opening night. Welles fulminates against bureaucracy and demonstrates a complete disregard for the need to kowtow to theatrical critics – however influential – in this case John Mason Brown of the New York Post. Welles' expresses his contempt for the kinds of contemporary overblown Broadway productions typified by the Antony and Cleopatra currently being offered by the famous husband and wife team of Alfred and Lynn Lunt – featuring on the cover of Time magazine. (Despite his anti-establishment attitudes, his contempt for the seemingly important elite of the New York theatre scene and the conventional ways of doing things, *is there something ironic in his promise at the end of this extract that 'he – the whole company' (the slip is significant) will soon displace the Lunts from their magazine-cover dominance?*

George Coulouris: 'I thought this was a dress rehearsal.'

We witness Welles in action with his cast. It is days before the performance and things are not coming together. Symbolic of the chaos is George Coulouris' mistaken belief that he should appear in his costume and the accident involving a painter falling down on one of the stage 'traps' (trap doors). *After viewing this scene do you think it makes the case for a dictatorial approach to theatre directing and producing given the need to pull a potentially disparate group of powerful personalities into a collective shape?* Coulouris is an interesting character in the film – he adopts a disdainful and negative view of the entire project on many occasions but is the first to congratulate Welles when they receive a standing ovation after the opening performance.

Welles: 'Absurd interpretation. Completely unjustified by the text. And yet, there may be something there I can use...'

In this sequence we witness Welles in true directorial role – harshly dismissing Norman Lloyd's interpretation of Cinna the poet as an insignificant street poet and claiming absolute knowledge of Shakespeare's intention – though that intention, apparently, is to depict Cinna anachronistically as a kind of 'almost-Byronic' character. 'And yet'...and yet...there is evidence

of Welles the borrower of ideas in this scene, of a man needing others to spar with in order to reach new inspirations.

To what extent do you feel the scene points out this truth even as Welles appears not to acknowledge this truth at all – he needs other people and a play, like a film, is a collective endeavour? Would Welles use the actor's idea if he didn't think it was useful, even though the actor did?

Welles: 'We're closing in on the son-of-a-bitch.'

We see the company rehearsing their bow and Welles giving notes to the actors. The exercise verges on public humiliation for some of the people. *Welles doesn't spare anyone's feelings – is this reasonable? They are very close to opening – is he justified in being tough? What does the way Welles talks to his actors tell us about him as a director (examine the content of what he says as well as the tone)? What does it tell us about where he's focusing at this point? Is it possible that this is Welles teasing or punishing Norman Lloyd for challenging him about the interpretation of this scene?* The end of the scene certainly featured and was considered one of the key moments of the production. One audience member, Euphemia Van Rensseler wrote: 'Cinna is swallowed up by an angry mob, and yet one comes home to find that Shakespeare wrote it just that way.'

Welles' Notes:

'We have to watch the transitions* – they're endless.'

[*how the play moves from one scene to another]

'Start the oration lower; you've got nowhere to go.' (to George Coulouris, playing Mark Antony)

' – tent scene – slow the hell down! We're pushing the river – let the scene carry the baggage.' (to Martin Gabel, playing Cassius)

'When you play that last bit, 'I am as constant as the Northern star...' more! And step closer to the audience. They've really got to hate you!' (to Joe Holland, playing Caesar)

'Lloyd – Cinna the poet scene's out. It never worked anyway. I'm making it a black-out and a musical interlude.'

'We need to re-do all the early cues. We're using our best effects too early.' (to Jean Rosenthal, Lighting Designer)

'You look beautiful, my angel – but I can't hear one word you're saying! I don't know what to tell you except that if you refuse to project on Thursday night, your theatrical career is over.' Consonants, consonants, consonants – and don't forget the vowels.' (to Evelyn Allen, playing Calpurnia)

'Thunderdrum man? Much too loud, you're fighting the actors.' (to the man providing the thunder effect)

Welles: 'You don't like the way I work here? There's the door.'

This is a fascinating scene in which we witness the collective dependence on him that Welles created among his company thanks to the time pressures they had to work under and the general disorder that prevailed – added to which there were his frequent absences due to commitments to radio play performances and meetings with prominent people.

'We open tomorrow. I'm proud of every member of this company. Every single one of you has come through. You're a magnificent company – on a par with any theatrical company in the world. And after we open, every literate person in this city is going to know who we are, and they'll be lining up for the privilege of seeing our work.'

Weigh up Welles' management style in this scene? How effective is this final speech in offsetting the unpleasantness with Sam Leve?

■ Activity – Personal lives – Welles the director?

Richard: 'Don't call me Junior.'

There is a lot going on in this short scene in which Welles persuades a wounded Richard back into the company. Orson has earlier been shown to be having an affair with Sonja who Richard thought he was falling in love with and there has been a confrontation. Richard has been sacked and has not eaten humble pie. Now Welles has pursued him to Bryant Park to work his charms on the boy and get him back into the company again – for opening night at least.

Weigh up the power struggle in this scene – is there any moment when Welles does not seem in control? What techniques does he use to put Richard in his place or to disarm him? What for instance is the value in his confidence concerning the need actors have to play parts? Do you think it is sincere? Are there any gestures or incidents in the scene that suggest Welles may not fulfill his promises?

Welles: 'How the hell do I top this?'

In any study of the film's narrative or Welles' depicted character this would probably be taken to be the zenith – the peak of success. And yet – what element of fear is contained in the boxed quotation above? How does Welles look as he speaks it?