Orson Welles’ three Shakespeare films: *Macbeth, Othello, Chimes at Midnight*

**Macbeth**

To make any film, aware that there are plenty of people about who’d rather you weren’t doing so, and will be quite happy if you fail, must be a strain. To make films of Shakespeare plays under the same constraint requires a nature driven and thick-skinned above and beyond the normal, but it’s clear that Welles had it. His *Macbeth* was done cheaply in a studio in less than a month in 1948. His *Othello* was made over the years 1949-1952, on a variety of locations, and with huge gaps between shootings, as he sold himself as an actor to other film-makers so as to raise the money for the next sequence. I’m going to argue that the later movie shows evidence that he learned all kinds of lessons from the mistakes he made when shooting the first, and that there is a huge gain in quality as a consequence. *Othello* is a minor masterpiece: *Macbeth* is an almost unredeemed cock-up.

We all know that the opening shot of *Touch of Evil* is a virtuoso piece of camerawork: a single unedited crane-shot lasting over three minutes. What is not often stressed is that there’s another continuous shot, less spectacular but no less well-crafted, in the middle of that film (it’s when the henchmen of Quinlan, the corrupt cop, plant evidence in the fall-guy’s hotel room). What is never mentioned is that there are two shots still longer in the middle of *Macbeth*. And they aren’t just in any scene, either. One makes up the whole of the Daggers Scene, and the other the whole of the England Scene: the two most pivotal scenes in the whole play. However, where in *Touch of Evil* the acting is so good and the story so gripping that the second, unostentatious long take doesn’t draw attention to itself, in *Macbeth* the acting is so bad in the first scene, and so sketchy and under-rehearsed in the second, that you are reduced to waiting clinically to see when Welles has to resort to an edit.

I imagine Welles decided to do the two scenes in single takes not just to allow the actors freedom, but to economise on time. If you get it right, not having to alter the lights and camera set-up over a nearly ten-minutes-long sequence means hours saved in the studio. But you have to get it right. They had to do the *Touch of Evil* opening three times because the actor playing the policeman who says the film’s first line (“You folks American citizens?”) was so terrified by the responsibility that he dried twice. No-one dried, so far as I can see, when filming either of the two *Macbeth* takes – they got it right in that sense – but they got everything else wrong; which brings me to Welles’ first big error.

He decided that all the characters should speak with Scots accents, which neither he nor any of his actors were able to manage. Nearly all of his actors are American, and Americans don’t hear Scots as often as they hear Irish. Its vowel-sounds and rhythms defeat them, and it doesn’t sound natural when they try it. Like actors all over, they aren’t always completely at home with Shakespeare, either – “For Shakespeare, you need a special kind of voice: more solemn” – so that to ask them to do Shakespeare with Scots accents is to put everything they say at two removes from the idiom in which they’re used to act. The result is that this is a *Macbeth Spoke In No Language*, with a thick layer of damp sponge between you and the experience of the play. Sometimes they drop into Irish, or rather, Oirish. Welles’ own vowels often slide into Oirish, and the Second Murderer speaks unalloyed Oirish. On the other hand Macduff (played by an Irishman) has one perfect Scots vowel-sound: hear him on “Is thy marester stirring?” For most of the rest of the cast, Scots simply means lots of rolled “r”s. This leads us to the second big error.
Having decided on a Scots sound, Welles then either commissioned or borrowed Genghis Khan costumes and headgear, for a Mongol look. Dan O’Herlihy as Macduff wears a furry helmet with a cross on a spike.

Sometimes Macbeth has a precariously-balanced box-shaped crown with bits sticking up at the corners, and his make-up emphasises his high cheek-bones:

In the last scenes, Roddy MacDowall as Malcolm wears a sort of high, holy helmet with what could easily become a cross on top.

For his third error, Welles decided that the play wasn’t too well-written, and needed a lot of re-arranging and editing. In the case of Macbeth, the best-written play ever, this is serious overreaching, hubristic to the extent that you feel he deserves what he gets. Thus it’s Macbeth who says “Leave all the rest to me” to his wife, not his wife to him; thus he doesn’t write, but dictates, the intimate letter (“They met me in the day of success …”) to an invented character, The Holy Man, with Banquo listening in. And thus the Daggers Scene (II ii) has, in this version, fragments of I vii and III i floating about in it. Shakespeare’s rhythm and psychological sequencing is cut to pieces, and the result is as confused as might have been predicted.

Before the first long take starts, Welles opens the Daggers soliloquy halfway through (at “Now o’er the one half-world nature seems dead”) and then does its first line (“Is this a dagger which I see before me?”) Lady Macbeth enters, the long take begins, and they play a bit of I vii (“We will proceed no further …” – “Was the hope drunk wherein you dressed yourself?”), then Welles does the end of the Daggers soliloquy, and at last he goes off to do the murder. The scene itself is given a passage (“Had I but died an hour before this chance …”) from later on in II ii, which occurs in the original after Duncan’s body has been discovered. Finally, “Methought I heard a voice cry, ‘Sleep no more!’” is transposed until after II ii is finished.

Such a mish-mash might have worked in spite of itself. The lines are after all the most dramatic ever penned. Welles’ aim, by keeping the camera low throughout the shot, is to make Macbeth and Lady Macbeth tower over us, figures of heroism and darkness. But it doesn’t work. His own performance is slow and under-energised, as if wading knee-deep
through syrup. Boredom and irritation is what he expresses, not guilt and horror. “I’ll go no more,” he groans, as if the prospect of seeing Duncan’s body again is too dull to think about. And Jeannette Nolan as his Lady is a very ordinary artiste indeed (it was to have been Agnes Moorehead), as well as being lumbered with makeup heavier than anything since the close-up of Susan Alexander Kane on the opening night of the fake Bernard Hermann opera. The makeup is not visible in the above publicity still.

To add insult to injury, Welles himself voices-over the Porter, whose scene (also part of the long take) is reduced to “Who’s there? Knock, knock! Never at quiet!” [burps] “A plague o’these pickled herrings ...” Which, as any self-respecting schoolkid will tell you, is a line from Twelfth Night.

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Othello

There are things wrong with Welles’ Othello. Not to introduce Emilia until the moment after the handkerchief drops, and then to keep her in long shot as she picks it up, so we have no idea who she is, is bad. I assume Fay Compton, the Emilia, wasn’t around for the shooting of the earlier scenes, and that they didn’t have the money for a close-up. In fact she does appear in one shot when Othello arrives in Cyprus, looking over Iago’s shoulder; but if you blink – literally – you miss her. Several important lines are cut away from just before they’re said, “Oh beware, my lord, of jealousy!” being one where we feel especially cheated at not seeing the expression on Iago’s face as he says it. Desdemona is rarely allowed to get a complete sentence out before there’s a cut away from her. Several lines are said with characters’ backs to camera: particularly Othello’s “Pontic Sea” speech, which is a very annoying loss.

These would be irritants if the errors I listed above as happening in Macbeth weren’t avoided, and if a whole new set of imaginative ideas hadn’t been produced out of the magician’s hat to make us forget, or at least ignore them. No-one tries on funny accents – what accents could they use anyway, Venetian? – and the actors – particularly Micheál MacLiammóir as Iago – speak Shakespeare as if it came normally. We hear the words without having to play them back through our heads to work out what they were. As Iago is the biggest part, to have as literate an actor as MacLiammóir playing him sets an example which is infectious. The costumes are convincing – down even to the towels in the bath-house during Roderigo’s murder, the scantiness of which was forced on Welles when an unpaid bill caused a shipment of skips to be delayed.

The Mediterranean locations are used and photographed very skilfully (the film had four lighting cameramen), and become protagonists in the drama, which you can’t say about the polystyrene walls and boulders of the studio-bound Macbeth.

Last but not least, Welles, though he cuts the text heavily, doesn’t re-order it, except for “Oh, now forever farewell”: this he places as a soliloquy, filming himself in solitary close-up against the sun, and speaking it very sadly and beautifully, in contrast to the extraordinary Laurence Olivier, who does it in a strange series of whoops and layered shrieks.
The film’s wordless opening is as impressive as the openings of *Kane*, or *Touch of Evil*. As monks and priests – black silhouettes against a white sky – carry the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona from screen-left to screen-right, soldiers, black silhouettes also, drag Iago in chains from screen-right to screen-left, on his way to the cage in which he is going to be suspended until he starves to death. The music derives from the prelude to Otello’s *Dio, mi potevi scagliar*, from the third act of Verdi’s opera. As Iago is hauled aloft, hundreds of people line the battlements execrating him. The budget stretched, we can see, to at least one substantial crowd scene.

But the budget didn’t stretch to having sound-equipment on location in Venice, as we can also see, from the rapid digest Welles next gives us of the play’s first three scenes. Few if any shots last more than ten seconds; characters say their lines either in long-shot, to make lip-synching redundant, or with their backs to camera, or when the camera’s on someone else, for the same reason; Roderigo may be embodied by Robert Coote, but his words (those he has left) are throughout spoken in the recording-studio by Welles. “Put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” is spliced in over the edit between two shots, and because we don’t know that the Senate is after Othello as well as Brabantio, it’s deprived of its dramatic context. The Venetian locations, however, compensate; we aren’t distracted by the tattiness of the art-direction, as we are in *Macbeth*; and these editing problems seems limited to the scenes filmed in Venice.

The interiors – spare, but beautiful – are designed by Alexander Trauner, who did the same for *Le Jour se Lève* at one end of his career, and for Bertrand Tavernier’s *Round Midnight* at the other.

Welles delivers Othello’s defence before the Senate in a single travelling shot, with reaction-shots edited in (at least two of them used twice). His Othello is at first a nervous-looking, even self-conscious kind of chap, aware that he’s not used to this sort of public utterance; yet as he warms to his theme he relaxes and gains conviction.

Desdemona seems dubbed. Suzanne Cloutier was French-Canadian, which sorts ill with the beautiful Virginia McKenna-RADA tones in which she is made to speak. I believe that MacLiammóir dubs the Herald, who is filmed in extreme long shot: and I’m not certain that Cassio and Lodovico aren’t spoken by the same actor. Bianca’s voice may be the same as Desdemona’s, except common.

The arrival of Othello’s ship at Cyprus is a fine example of editorial bluffing, for it’s clear that the ship existed only in cut-outs, and in small sections. Welles – or his second unit – got some good shots of waves crashing; but couldn’t edit them in continuity with either the ship, or with the protagonists.

Rapid cutting facilitates the partying in the streets, and the drunken brawl, in Act II. Welles – avid here as elsewhere for strong locations – somehow manages to get the fight down into a flooded underground cistern, in which Roderigo’s little white poodle (an objective correlative for his own feebleness) gets lost.
A strange omission in the brawl is that Montano is not injured. The thing might then have passed off as a foolish adjunct to a jolly celebration, and Cassio not have been cashiered at all. Cassio’s punishment is disproportionate, for there has been no crime.

Now it’s my opinion that Othello the general is a bit strange. In the play as written it’s not clear that his marriage is consummated, and I often think that the ease with which he succumbs to Iago’s lies is so that the moment when his manhood is put to the test can be delayed indefinitely. Iago, it seems both to me and to the Freudian Ernest Jones, to whom Olivier went for advice when he played the role to Ralph Richardson’s Othello, is gay for him. Watch the close-up Welles gives MacLiammóir as Desdemona and her husband kiss on “I will deny thee nothing” for the slightest suggestion that Welles and MacLiammóir have a similar suspicion. See the Trevor Nunn version with Willard White as Othello, and McKellen as the greatest and weirdest Iago of them all.

For Welles, the strangeness of it all is in Iago, never in Othello. This Othello and Desdemona go to bed together. Within the limits of what could be depicted the late 1940s (alarmed by the brawl, Othello jumps from his marital couch fully-clothed), their life in the bedroom is an active one, and the strength of Iago lies purely in his own cunning. In Act IV, as Othello says “The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up”, he runs his hand lovingly down her leg, as if it’s territory he’s anguished at having to share with someone else.

Act III scene iii – known in cliché as the Temptation Scene – is also free from the last-ditch editorial and post-synching blips which worry us elsewhere.
It starts with a long tracking-shot along the battlements, but moves, as does the drunken brawl earlier, into a Chamber Within, where Othello keeps glimpsing both himself and his wife in mirrors, which distort their figures (this idea is pinched by Zeffirelli in his film of the Verdi opera). Another image which Welles either invents, or has suggested by Trauner and his locations, is a Hall of Columns, in which husband and wife become lost and bewildered. Within doors, with Desdemona, Othello is confused. Outside, with Iago, all seems to him clear. In one shot, the sun shines high in the sky from behind Iago, giving his words clarifying weight. The brighter the sky, the darker the deeds happening beneath it.

Very dramatic is the sequence “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore”, which Welles shoots on a cliff-top, waves breaking far below, and Iago afraid that he’ll soon go over into them. The metaphor is pinched from Hitchcock movies (Rebecca, Suspicion), and recurs in Olivier’s controversial “To Be or Not To Be” sequence (his Hamlet was made in the same as Welles started to shoot Othello.) As I noted above, “Like to the Pontic Sea” is said by Welles with his back to camera. He is in fact apostrophising a statue of the Virgin and Child, to which Iago crosses himself just before he says “I am your own for ever”.

This he says looking up at Othello, who stares down at him from the top of a flight of steps: a common image in the film, where people are often separated from one another by wide spaces, one in a high place, looking down at the other far below them. It’s a metaphor at once for power, and for the failure of communication and comprehension. The theme climaxes when Iago towers over Roderigo and stabs down at him through the slats on the floor of the Turkish bath, where the unfortunate simpleton has just failed to kill Cassio; and when Othello speaks to Lodovico at the last, staring up at him from the marital bed as Lodovico stares down at him through a skylight.
There are in fact a multitude of vertiginous shots: as he recovers from his fit, Othello stares up at the seagulls, and at the people mockin g him from the battlements – only to find when he gets up that the battlements are empty. Many shots are done at angles to the horizontal.

The final scenes of catastrophe are unbearably moving – especially the revelation and death of Emilia, which Faye Compton does superbly.

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**Chimes at Midnight**

The urge to use Welles’ work as a metaphor for and parallel to his own frustrated career is a temptation which, it seems, no-one can resist. In real life an illusionist and a phoney, a master of faking, in these two films he turns real life inside-out, and plays the innocent victim of fakes and con-artists: Macbeth is a victim of the witches, Othello a victim of Iago. In his third Shakespeare film, and, I think, his best, he plays the ultimate phoney – Sir John Falstaff – and shows how Falstaff is destroyed by a man cruel in his innocence and sincerity.

*Chimes at Midnight* is a combination of *Henry IV* I and *Henry IV* II, with bits of *Henry V* and *Richard II* (so they say – I’ve never found any lines in the last case) thrown in. Ralph Richardson does a narration derived from Holinshed. The film was a Spanish-Swiss co-production, shot in 1965 in Spain, on a budget so limited there was only cash enough for one take of each shot. If you cocked it up, it didn’t go in (I expect they rehearsed a lot). In some shots you can see that the line of soldiers on the horizon are wooden cut-outs.

The film is a rarity. I’ve only seen it in the cinema once, and that was in Switzerland shortly after it was released, with simultaneous French and German subtitles. I loved it at once: “It’s Shakespeare”, I said, “as if Eisenstein had directed him”. It’s only been on terrestrial TV twice; and has never been on VHS or DVD, unlike the two tragedies, which are always cropping up (the new *Othello*, by the way, is a masterpiece of restoration).

It’s a success for a reason that’s rarely discussed. Welles was not a major tragic actor, he was a character-man, and a character-man’s what you need for Falstaff. He and the public and the establishment were fooled by the magnificent bass voice and the lowering presence into thinking that he was the man for Othello, Lear, and Macbeth: but all he could suggest in those roles was depression, or at his best sadness (as in “Oh, now forever farewell”), not doom. He could do misery, but not being driven, not being out of control of your own life. The actor who can suggest that is Mel Gibson, which is why his is the best cinematic Hamlet.
Gielgud – this and Cassius were his biggest screen Shakespeare roles. A variety of Spanish actors, including Fernando Rey, fill up the muster book, all dubbed. Justice Silence says very few lines, for he’s given an insurmountable stammer; he bears an uncanny resemblance to Richard Nixon, even to the ski-jump nose and five o’clock shadow. Two distinguished French actresses play Lady Percy (Marina Vlady – who’s dubbed) and Doll Tearsheet (Jeanne Moreau – see above – who, being half-English, speaks her own lines). Welles’ daughter Beatrice plays Falstaff’s page.

The largest cut is the Gaultree Forest scene from *Henry IV* II, which just isn’t there at all, so that Prince John of Lancaster’s part is very small indeed. The plot now centres instead on the battle of Shrewsbury from *Henry IV* I. This is a ferocious sequence, designed by Welles as a pacifist riposte to the battle of Agincourt in Olivier’s *Henry V*. It’s set on a huge plain with a cold wind blowing, and starts with a cavalry charge:

![Battle Scene](image)

The still shows another great feature of the movie, namely the cinematography of Edmond Richard, who had previously shot Welles’ film of *The Trial*.

The battle then degenerates into bloody slaughter, with mud knee-deep everywhere, while an angelic choir laments from above. Welles edited it himself, having employed as extras a horde of hungry Spanish gypsies, whom he encouraged to slog one another senseless. This is a battle without glamour: even the climactic duel between Hal and Hotspur is a matter of slugging and tripping, staggering and slashing, not a thing of valour and skill.
One sees that Falstaff, in finding it all uncongenial and ridiculous, has a point.

Welles is a wonderful Falstaff, the best I know apart from Frank Pettingell, who played him on television in 1960. The error which both Welles and everyone else had made — assuming that he was best at noble parts — is atoned for here by his casting himself as the least noble hero of them all — though see above for my suspicion that Othello only appears noble through his own projected version of himself, by which he and the world are taken in, until he slaps his wife across the face in public, an action which all can tell is the reverse of noble.

This Falstaff is a mesmerist. King Henry, who wants desperately to believe in Hal, is convinced enough by the way Falstaff describes the way he killed Hotspur, to turn his back on his son in disdain and walk off. Hal, who wants desperately to reject Falstaff, can’t resist a joke and a smile as he does so (“Know the grave doth gape / For thee thrice wider than for other men”), and at once has to kill both by changing tone. Welles wants so much for his Falstaff to be loveable that Doll’s “What humour’s the Prince of?” is asked without her knowing that Hal is listening in: if she asked the question knowing he was there, she’d be betraying Falstaff too.

Despite its budget, everything about Chimes at Midnight is excessive — too big, as Falstaff is, and as Welles had, alas, by 1966 become (I hope he’s wearing a little padding). The castles and monasteries in which the court scenes are filmed are enormous, and echoey; the sets on which the Boar’s Head scenes are shot are too spacious, too clean, and the battalion of ladies of the night with which they’re peopled, too numerous, too pretty, and too young. Gadshill, where Falstaff robs the merchants and is in turn robbed by Hal and Poins, is a forest, too
spacious, aery and beautiful. The army of trumpeters with which the battlements of Hotspur’s castle is equipped is too large, too energetic, and too virtuoso; even Hostpur’s bathroom has too much space in it (Norman Rodway’s bum is visible in one shot).

But none of the excess matters; it adds to the feel of heroism even in the comic scenes – and does indeed remind one of the vastness (though not the inhumanity) of Ivan the Terrible. In both comic and dramatic scenes, everyone is in a hurry – part of the skill of Welles’ directing is indeed the pace at which it all goes, allowing more of the text in than you’d expect, given that the movie’s only two hours long. It’s swift, yet clear. No-one keeps still: Hotspur is hyperactive, Hal is hyperactive, and even Falstaff can run if he thinks it’s necessary.

Welles queries the idea of Hal’s “rejection” of Falstaff: this Falstaff should never ever have thought of Hal as his friend – there’s no relationship to sever. “I know you all” is converted from a soliloquy into a speech made straight to Falstaff’s face; “I do, I will” is said as clearly and directly as it can be; Falstaff has all the warning he could have that Hal tolerates but despises him. But he ignores every sign that Hal gives him, preferring the fantasy-relationship and fantasy-world which his own imagination has created.

Part of the fun of this fantasy-world is derived from the competitions of skill it allows them in doing Gielgud-impersonations: everyone wants to Do the King. Rodway does a Gielgud-impersonation early on, and Welles and Baxter each do superb Gielgud-impersonations in the central tavern scene (“Banish plump Jack”, and so on). Yet Gielgud, when he speaks, even though his elongated vowel sounds and quivering delivery show how accurate they all are, survives with his dignity, subtlety, and power intact.

Welles will have no soliloquies – his wisdom in declaring them implicitly to be uncinematic is shown by Kenneth Branagh’s flat attempts at them in Much Ado and Hamlet. The Honour soliloquy is said to Hal over Hal’s shoulder, and loses nothing by it: the Sherris Sack soliloquy is likewise said to Hal, with a posse of soldiers laughing at it and applauding; but Hal, though at first enraptured, loses interest and walks away, throwing his cup over his shoulder and marching down hill to follow his real father, as opposed to his humorous one. His demonstration of indifference, however, makes no impact on Falstaff’s improvisation, which goes on to its conclusion as if Hal were still there.

Yet, when he comes to reject Falstaff – if it’s done as publicly as possible, that’s only because Falstaff walks right into it – Welles and Keith Baxter manage to suggest that Hal still loves his comedy father as much as he does his serious one. The scene of the rejection is the best in the film, and counts in my judgement as the finest piece of screen Shakespeare I know.
The neglect of *Chimes at Midnight* is a strange disgrace; the film stands with *Citizen Kane* as final proof that Orson Welles was, as Gielgud said when he died, “a bit of a genius”.