

Richard Linklater's Julius Caesar

Titles

The title *Me and Orson Welles* may seem a bit obscure if you do not know all that much about Orson Welles – but it certainly raises questions. Who is Orson Welles? Who is 'Me'?

■ Activity – The title

Conduct a quick brainstorm inspired by that title. What could it be about? In what different ways do you feel the 'Me' and 'Orson Welles' might become entangled?



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

Below is a brief biography of Welles' early career:

Born in May 1915 Orson Welles experienced most of his childhood in Chicago. He lost his mother to jaundice (a liver disease) when he was just nine and his father when he was 15. His father spent the last years of his life drinking heavily. Welles was educated at the Todd School for Boys and it was there that he first established himself as an uncannily gifted theatre director – despite his tender years.

- 1930 Welles uses a small portion of the inheritance from his father to fund a trip to Europe. While there, he decides to go on a walking and painting tour of Ireland. He walks into the famous Gate Theatre in Dublin and claims he is an established Broadway (New York's famous 'Avenue of Theatres') performer and bluffs his way into the company. He makes his stage debut at the Gate in 1931, appearing in *Jew Sī*, as the Duke. He is received with great acclaim and reports of his success reach the United States.
- 1931-3 Orson returns to the USA and finds that his hopes of theatrical stardom were unrealistic. He turns to writing and produces two highly popular series of books about Shakespeare. It is a time of important meetings with influential people including the actors (and directors) Micheál MacLíammóir and Hilton Edwards from Dublin's Gate Theatre.
- 1934-5 Orson secures a role in an off-Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet* (as Tybalt) and comes to the attention of John Houseman (actor, film and theatre producer), who is casting for an unusual lead actor and about to take a lead role in the Federal Theatre Project – a US Government-funded venture designed to encourage theatre at the time of the Great Depression.

- 1935-6 Married and newly a father, Welles is hired by John Houseman to direct an all-black cast version of Macbeth. It is known as the Voodoo Macbeth because it is set in Haiti. The play is rapturously received and Welles is declared a genius and also the 'King of Harlem'. The play later tours the United States and when the leading actor falls ill on tour, Welles jumps on a plane and takes over, playing the role blacked-up.
- 1936-7 Welles enjoys further acclaim as a result of his production of Marlowe's Dr Faustus which contains some very extreme lighting effects expressing the struggle between good and evil in the play. In 1937, he rehearses Marc Blitzstein's highly political Operetta The Cradle Will Rock. Because of severe federal cutbacks, the show's premiere at the Maxine Elliott Theatre is cancelled. The theatre is locked and guarded to prevent any of the government-purchased materials being used for a commercial production of the work but the show goes ahead in a spontaneous performance with actors speaking and singing their parts from the auditorium.
- 1937 Welles and Houseman resign from the Federal Theatre and form their own company: the Mercury Theatre, which eventually includes actors such as Agnes Moorehead, Joseph Cotten, Ray Collins and George Coulouris – all of whom continue to work for Welles for years. Their first show is a melodramatic and heavily edited version of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, set in a contemporary frame of fascist Italy. In it, Cinna the poet dies, at the hands not of a mob but a secret police force. According to Norman Lloyd, who played Cinna, '...it stopped the show'. The production is widely acclaimed.

■ Activity – Other movies

Is there a moment in Welles' life up to this point that might have made as interesting a period to focus on as that chosen by the writers of Me and Orson Welles? Explain your choices and, if you have gone for the period involving the staging of Julius Caesar, explain what special elements made that time the most interesting, in your view.

■ Activity – ‘If you want to discover life...learn from the master.’

This is the strap-line to Me and Orson Welles as shown on the film’s poster.

What does this suggest to you?

What sort of things might you want to learn about life from a ‘master’?

Make a list.

There is a telling clip from the film Me and Orson Welles on the film’s website where Richard first meets Orson Welles on the street outside the Mercury Theatre:

www.meandorsonwellesthemovie.com

It has been chosen to give visitors to the site a flavour of the film and it demonstrates the strap-line in action. It is a moment in which things change for our hero high-school student Richard Samuels who is about to have a chance encounter with impresario Orson Welles outside the theatre in which the director’s Julius Caesar is due to be staged.

Watch the scene and decide what it is that leads to Richard being hired?

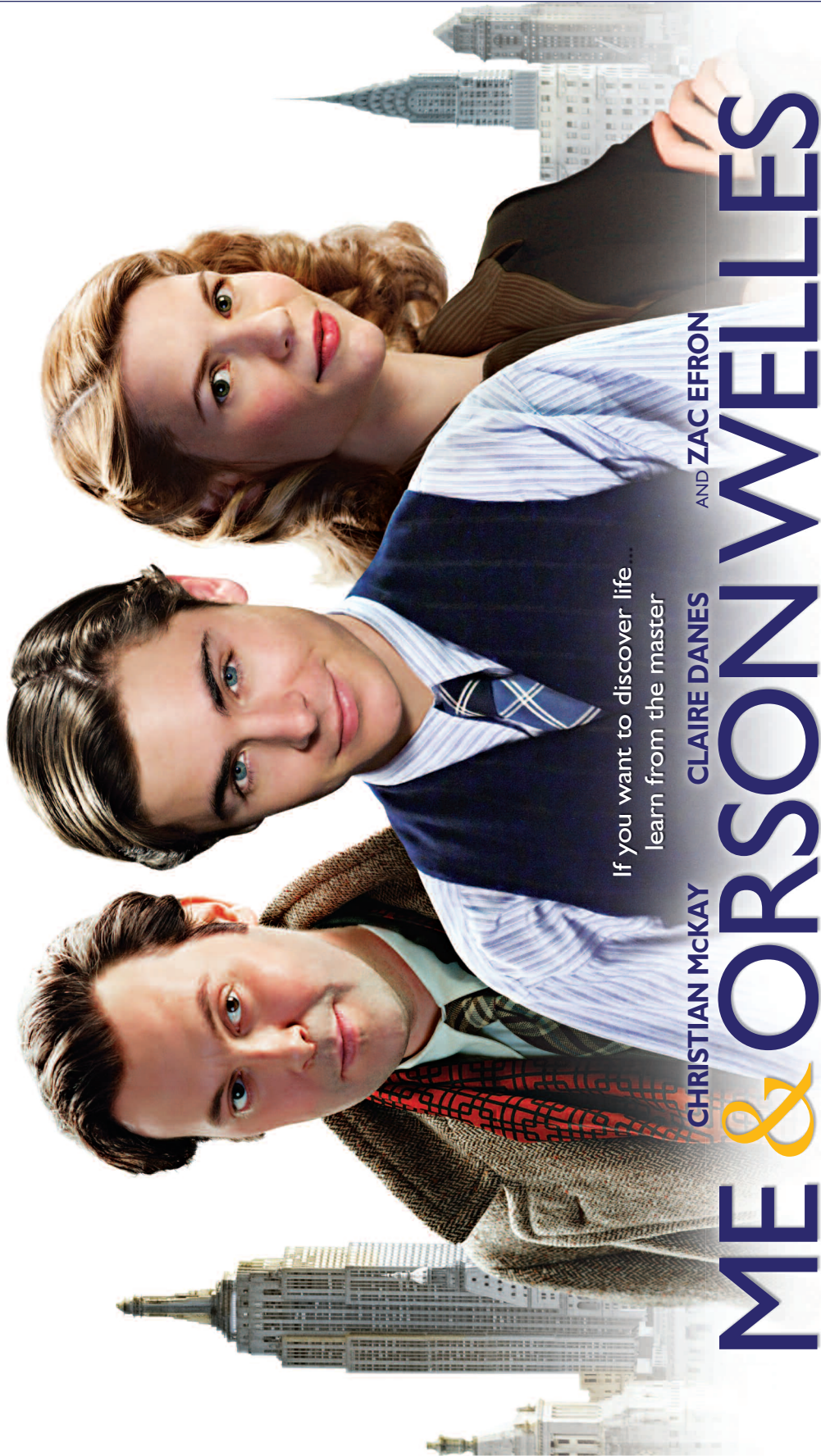
- Is it his flattery of Orson Welles?*
- Is it the fact that Richard knows Welles’ work and can speak of it intelligently?*
- Is it the fact that Richard has the self-confidence to play a drum-roll publically and then sing in the street – well!?*
- Is it the fact that Richard’s choice of song is a (presumably) well-known tune to a commercial – something that Welles – a ‘showy’ man always with one eye on the need to marry the commercial with the literary would particularly appreciate?*

What is your impression of Orson Welles in this scene? Identify anything in the scene that suggests his powerful personality and sense of showmanship. What else do you notice about him and the way he relates to other people?

“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, UNCUT



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
RATING: MATURE
PARENTS STRONGLY
CAUTIONED
SOME MATERIAL
MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE
FOR CHILDREN
UNDER 12
WITHOUT
ACCOMPANYING
ADULT

CASTING BY JEFFREY MAYER. COSTUME DESIGNER: JENNIFER WILSON. HAIR: JENNIFER WILSON. MAKEUP: JENNIFER WILSON. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: JENNIFER WILSON. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: JENNIFER WILSON, JENNIFER WILSON. PRODUCED BY JENNIFER WILSON. WRITTEN BY JENNIFER WILSON. DIRECTED BY RICHARD LINKLATER. BASED ON THE NOVEL BY ROBERT KAPLOW. PUBLISHED BY VINTAGE. SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE ON DECCA RECORDS, A UNIVERSAL MUSIC COMPANY. WWW.MEANDORSONWELLESTHEMOVIE.COM

Early Scenes

In one of his first encounters on being hired to perform in Julius Caesar, our hero Richard Samuels chats to the 'beautiful' Sonja Jones about Orson Welles.

RICHARD

Who was going to play Lucius before I showed up?

SONJA

Some kid. He had a personality problem with Orson.

RICHARD

Meaning?

SONJA

Meaning he had a personality.

Sonja meets Richard's eyes.

SONJA (continued)

Look, Orson's very competitive, very self-centred, very brilliant. He's read everything. Knows everything. Directed his first play at ten-years-old.

RICHARD

What was that?

SONJA

'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.' Which Orson pronounces Dr Jeekyll. He says that's the way Robert Louis Stevenson would have pronounced it.

RICHARD

And how does he know how Robert Louis Stevenson would have pronounced it?

SONJA

I told you, he knows everything. The rule with Orson is that you don't criticise him. Ever. So in the name of talent, and in the hopes of working with him again, you forgive a lot of behaviour that would be unforgivable among civilised people.

■ Activity – Reading between the lines

There is a huge amount of 'promise' in this short scene. It sets up some key relationships and helps hint at some of the fault lines that might emerge between characters. Your task is to read between the lines, anticipating what might emerge from this triangulation of Sonja, Richard and Orson Welles.

- *What could be fateful about the story of the previous boy playing Lucius?*
- *What might be significant about the mention of the first play Welles directed?*
- *What may be the consequences of Sonja's apparent acceptance of Welles' way of working and his 'uncivilised' behaviour?*