

ME AND ORSON WELLES

Teachers' Notes

This educational resource features study materials and film clips designed to stimulate debate, discussion and reflection on Orson Welles, Shakespeare, performance, theatrical production and filmmaking. This resource is accompanied by a 34 minute Study documentary which you can watch now. The resource addresses core elements of learning in English, Media, Film and Theatre Studies, the materials are most suitable for students aged 14-18.

The Film

Me and Orson Welles is a fictionalised account of Orson Welles' production of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in New York in 1937. Although based on actual events, the film links two separate stories – a love story involving fictional character Richard Samuels (Zac Efron) and the actual staging of the play. The character of Orson Welles spans both stories. How does the film link these two stories? How does it convey the emotions of the various characters and give us ideas about them? How are we, as members of the audience, drawn into the narratives?

Synopsis

Me And Orson Welles is set in the exciting world of the New York Theatre. Teenage student Richard Samuels (Zac Efron) lucks his way into a minor role in the legendary 1937 Mercury Theatre production of Julius Caesar, directed by a youthful Orson Welles (strikingly portrayed by newcomer Christian McKay.)

Over the course of a magical week, Richard makes his Broadway debut, finds romance with an ambitious older woman, and experiences the dark side of genius after daring to cross the imperious, brilliant Welles. Richard has to grow up FAST.



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Shakespeare

If Welles was the artistic genius of his time, then Shakespeare can undoubtedly be considered the same for Elizabethan England. Why is Shakespeare one of the cornerstones of English Literature and culture? What makes him stand apart from others not only of his own time but also now? What do we know about Shakespeare? And does he deserve the fame and cultural value that is now attached to him?

Who Was He?

William Shakespeare is recognised by most people as the greatest dramatist and poet in the English language. His plays have retained their place in the centre of literary culture throughout the world, demonstrating their astonishing depth of human understanding and ability to illuminate experience across centuries in which ideas about life and society have undergone huge changes, and theatre practice has moved into different media and environments.

Shakespeare is an enigma, in that very little is known about the facts of his life. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire in 1564 and grew up there, marrying Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. They had three children – Susannah born in 1583, and Hamnet and Judith (twins) in 1585. It is believed that he travelled to London around the mid-1580s where he worked as an actor and writer for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later known as the King's Men). He was a co-owner of the Globe Theatre, built in 1599. Around 1613 he returned to Stratford and retired, dying there in 1616.

Recent scholarship has sought to fill in the gaps in this biography, but this can only ever be conjecture, however thoroughly researched, as there is very little surviving evidence, although a wealth of legend and hearsay. There is also a thriving academic argument about whether or not the William Shakespeare we know existed actually wrote the plays. This debate, which began in the eighteenth century and has flourished in recent years, has suggested several possible alternative candidates. Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604), courtier, poet and playwright, none of whose works survive, and who is currently the most popular candidate, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), the most famous dramatist of Shakespeare's time, whose works include 'Tamburlaine the Great' and 'Dr Faustus' or Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the philosopher, diplomat and statesman whose works include 'The Wisdom of the Ancients' among others. This argument controversially suggests that because of Shakespeare's working class origins and lack of education, it would be unlikely that he could have produced plays displaying such a range of vocabulary and breadth of knowledge. Whoever the author of the plays, they are unsurpassed in his dramatic genius and mastery of language to convey an extraordinary range and depth of expression.

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Solitary Genius or Collaborator?

As we've seen, the image of Shakespeare is one that emphasises the solitude of 'genius'. Writers need to work alone and we can imagine the concentration required to produce great work. However, Shakespeare was also a man of the theatre, an actor, a producer, who wrote parts for the actors he worked with and whose plays utilised the skills of his company. It's interesting to think about him as a collaborator in the process of creating a production – did he agree to changes in the text? Did he refuse to accommodate other people's suggestions? How open was he to the idea of a shared creative process?

TASK

Consider all the people that are involved in putting together a school drama production – is it in the end one person's show or the result of an ensemble effort? How many bits of the production pie could be removed – lights, sets, costumes, before you didn't have much of anything left?

If you have a chance to watch the whole of the film *Me and Orson Welles* – keep a sharp eye and ear out for the use of the word 'genius' – it was a term that was often applied to Orson Welles. What, in the context of that film, does the title mean? And what privileges and pressures come with such an accolade?

Also – the film is about the putting on of a play and highlights the many individuals' efforts that go to make it happen. Would the production have been a hit if there had not been a presiding intelligence and a presiding vision there to dominate and shape the many different talents and personalities in the company? How might this issue of genius and overall control relate to the making of a film? In order to consider this question you will need to look up the term 'auteur'



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Why Bother?

It is a relatively recent phenomenon that children and young people are expected to have some knowledge of Shakespeare and that his works should feature as a part of the National Curriculum – part of every child's entitlement. It was only in the late nineteenth century that compulsory schooling into people's teens became the rule and with that came a desire to foster a sense of national cohesive identity – a project that Shakespeare was designed to fulfil. By getting to know his plays, the argument went, so the nation would be sharing in a key part of its collective culture which in turn would shape national pride and a sense of belonging – whatever our backgrounds. It's a nice idea.

The question of whether or not Shakespeare should enjoy this privileged (or is it a cursed?) position in our education system continues every time the curriculum is debated or reformed. For many years Dr Rex Gibson was the editor of the 'Cambridge Shakespeare in Schools' project. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he was the champion of a kind of 'active' Shakespeare teaching in schools designed to remind teachers and young people that they were dealing with plays and not books and that it was legitimate to play with these texts, to have fun with them and above all to speak and listen to the language as a means of a better understanding of what is going on.

At the same time Dr Gibson was a key advocate for the importance of Shakespeare in the curriculum and in UK schools. In the spring 1990 edition of Shakespeare and Schools he wrote an article entitled Why Teach Shakespeare? It is an interesting question and one for which the list of answers has probably expanded since Rex compiled his own point-by-point justification.

TASKS

This activity is in three parts – first come up with as many answers to the question 'Why teach Shakespeare?' as you can in 90 seconds. When you have a list, brainstorm your ideas with others to come up with a definitive list.

Now compare it to this list derived from Rex Gibson's observations. Are there any suggestions that you came up with that he did not consider? The list has been arranged in a random order – very different from that in the original article.

1. Shakespeare is relevant. Take Julius Caesar – it is about the struggle for power and the isolation (and dangers) that power can entail; it is about the difficulties for those in power to achieve a balance between their private and personal lives; it also features examinations of the ways in which mass populations can be manipulated and the way mobs can behave in monstrous ways. It is also a cracking 'thriller' – a close study of conspiracy and murder – shown almost in real time. Does any of that seem interesting, or familiar, up-to-date or relevant?

2. Shakespeare worked collaboratively – so should we. Rex's point has become even more relevant with the emergence of the web, social networks and the essentially collaborative opportunities opened up by sites such as Flickr and YouTube where images both still and moving can be shared and opened up to comment and criticism to audiences on a scale that were, until recently, completely unimaginable.

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TASKS (contd)

3. Shakespeare opens up moral debates and provides a source of models for human conduct? This is not to say that we can guess Shakespeare's politics or day-to-day attitudes from his plays. The fact that there is a lot of conflict between fathers and daughters does not mean that he fought endlessly or was defied by Susannah or Judith – his daughters. But there is plenty in his plays to suggest it is not a good idea, for example, to try to take short-cuts to power; or demand the love of one's children – making it a condition of their inheritance; or imagine that good ends justify the means of achieving those ends. These could be the lessons to be learnt respectively from Macbeth; King Lear, and by witnessing the contortions of the conspirators against Caesar.

4. Shakespeare feeds our imaginations. Shakespeare's plays are both open-ended and rich in imagery and emotion – they contain 'an invitation to infer'. For example, the descriptions of the terrible omens and ghostly prodigies that precede Caesar's murder or Cassius' descriptions of examples of Caesar's human frailties are both full of vivid 'pictures' and can provide an invaluable scaffolding upon which to build our own thought and writing.

5. Shakespeare is sometimes difficult to understand. There is nothing wrong in this argued Rex, in fact, getting to know Shakespeare is all the richer for its being a bit of a challenge.

6. Shakespeare needs to be de-mystified. Get to know Shakespeare well and it is hard then to be taken in by those that say he would have voted 'conservative' or that he was unequivocally in favour of royalty; or that he thought young people should be 'seen and not heard'. It is also important to be able to resist the idea that Shakespeare is something very solemn.

7. Shakespeare is fun. Give young people a blanket, tell them a storm is brewing – rain starting to fall, first one person takes shelter beneath the blanket, then a second – a stranger to the first, and then the third enters to find the two 'arranged' in a funny way beneath the cover – what ensues? What is the rude comic potential of this scene? In this way *The Tempest* is playful and obscene and slapstick all at the same time, just as it is beautiful, poetic and philosophical. Although, there is less low comedy in *Julius Caesar* – the exchanges between the tradesmen and the two tribunes – their representatives – in the opening scene is full of comic potential: the more powerful being cheeked by their inferiors.

8. Shakespeare opens up radical thinking. It would be hard not to wonder at some point about the relationship between rulers and the ruled when the practice of power and the struggle for power are both opened up as they are in *Julius Caesar*. It is a play in which there could always be a niggling idea that societies could be better run. At the end, there are plenty of indicators that the future for Rome and the Roman world is not going to be a harmonious one. Just how lacking in harmony it will be emerges in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

9. Shakespeare is great to learn by heart. As with all great poetry, it is a good thing to learn it by heart. Once you have a speech embedded in your memory, it is always yours. To learn Mark Antony's speech from the pulpit about Caesar is also to gain a crash course in rhetoric and so potentially make one's own powers of persuasion all the greater.

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TASKS (contd)

10. Shakespeare is constantly renewed. Although Welles' *Julius Caesar* with its modern dress was less original than he would have liked to think, it did underline the play's relevance in 1937 in a world lurching towards fascism and war. Know a Shakespeare play well, and you can gain huge insights into the times in which it gets produced – each production being in many ways a barometer of that moment. A recent *Henry V* for example, suddenly acquired a huge relevance because the country was involved in foreign wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

11. Shakespeare's international reputation as a playwright and poet of genius – a reputation that has grown rather than diminished over the last four centuries – means that it would be putting modern British children at a disadvantage not to know their own country's residing literary champion. He is a part of what it is to be British.

12. Shakespeare is a passport to other literature. Writers have loved Shakespeare and it is hard to appreciate aspects of their work without a knowledge of the original. At its most extreme, modern authors have come up with modern versions of Shakespearean stories and filmmakers too. There is a wonderful 1950s sci-fi called *The Forbidden Planet* which is very entertaining but even more so when you realise it is closely based on *The Tempest*.

13. Shakespeare allows for 'true education'. By this Rex meant that Shakespeare opens up the world rather than closes it down. One way he does this is to leave unanswered questions: Who was the mother of King Lear's three daughters and what happened to her? What happened to Lady Macbeth's child? What is the cause of the enmity between the Montagues and the Capulets in *'Romeo and Juliet'*? As well as such glaring unanswered questions, the plays also have a habit of presenting both sides of an argument – leaving space for the play-goer to make up their minds about what's right and wrong.

14. Shakespeare provides a crash course in theatre. It is hard to imagine how young people or adults might understand theatre today without having a grasp of Shakespeare and how he worked his plays to suit the playhouses for which he wrote. Drama is also justified in schools because of the ways it provides young people with outlets for their emotions and creativity while helping to develop their powers of empathy. Shakespeare does all these things too.

15. Shakespeare's language: the power and energy of Shakespeare's language, its vitality and muscularity, its physicality and emotional immediacy helps us experience the drama of language and how powerful it can be for us.

Now get into small groups and put these 15 points – and any others that you came up with earlier – into what you think is their order of importance. When you've done that, share your list with the other groups, compare the differences and justify your choices.

(You can also use this exercise to get students to write their own summative piece about the relevance (or otherwise) of Shakespeare. If they are familiar with *Julius Caesar* or another particular play, then invite them to use examples from it to illustrate their views.)

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The plays

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays between 1588 and 1611 that are usually divided into three categories – Comedies, Histories and Tragedies. It's important to note that the term 'Comedies' means that rather than necessarily being full of jokes, what characterises these plays is that they are NOT tragedies. They don't culminate in the death of the protagonist (the fulfilment of 'Tragedy') but end with a resolution and restoration of a state in which life can move forward positively, however dark and complex the action has been.

Comedies

1592	The Comedy of Errors	1600	The Merry Wives of Windsor
1593	The Taming of the Shrew	1601	Troilus and Cressida
1594	Loves Labours Lost	1602	All's Well That Ends Well
1594	Two Gentlemen of Verona	1604	Measure for Measure
1595	A Midsummer Night's Dream	1608	Pericles
1596	The Merchant of Venice	1609	Cymbeline
1598	Much Ado About Nothing	1610	A Winter's Tale
1599	As You Like It	1611	The Tempest
1599	Twelfth Night		

Histories

1590	Henry VI Pt 2	1596	King John
1590	Henry VI Pt 3	1597	Henry IV Pt 1
1591	Henry VI Pt 1	1597	Henry IV Pt 2
1592	Richard III	1598	Henry V
1595	Richard II	1612	Henry VIII

Tragedies

1593	Titus Andronicus	1605	King Lear
1594	Romeo and Juliet	1605	Macbeth
1599	Julius Caesar	1606	Antony and Cleopatra
1600	Hamlet	1607	Coriolanus
1604	Othello	1607	Timon of Athens

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Publishing the plays

Publishing practices were very different in the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. Editorial work on textual authenticity was not common and plays were often published in 'unauthorised' versions. Books were printed in 'octavo', 'quarto' or 'folio' form – these terms relating to the number of pages that were printed on a single large sheet of paper before being bound. Eighteen of Shakespeare's plays were published in some form during his lifetime, mainly in 'quartos', some unauthorised and some corrected. All these editions differ from each other in length. In 1623 the plays were brought together and published as 'Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies'. The editors, John Heminge and Henry Condell used manuscripts, prompt copies, and the various and the often contradictory published editions of the plays to produce this First Folio edition. A second Folio edition was published in 1632 and a third in 1663 which included 'Pericles' for the first time and various other texts thought then to be by Shakespeare but since rejected.

The three published versions of 'Hamlet' demonstrate the problems faced by Heminge and Condell. The First Quarto edition, published in 1603 is now known as the 'Bad' Quarto because it is likely to have been written by one of the actors in the company from memory and is 1370 lines shorter than the version published in 1623. The Second Quarto, published in 1605 is 230 lines longer. These discrepancies exist for several reasons:

- There were very few complete texts – actors were only given their own parts with their cues to speak and not the full text of the play. This was to save paper, which was very expensive.
- Plays were written down from memory after being seen by people anxious to make money by their publication.



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Welles' Caesar

The character of Orson Welles dominates the film, *Me and Orson Welles*. Welles was a young artistic genius. Actor, stage director, film director and radio star. By the age of thirty he had achieved fame and notoriety in the media world of 1930s New York and Hollywood. Always experimental, always pushing his chosen medium in new directions, Welles exemplifies the artistic experimentation associated with the inter-war years.

Welles' production of *Julius Caesar* at the Mercury Theatre in New York in 1937 caused a sensation when it opened. *Me and Orson Welles* shows the process of putting on the play, from rehearsals, stage design and the overall vision that Welles had for his production, through rehearsals and on to the first night. This process is not without its problems and disputes and the film gives an insight into this process of direction – at least of one director's process.

Orson Welles' 1937 production of *Julius Caesar* was groundbreaking because it took an Elizabethan play and, through its production values, made it relevant to the time in which it was performed. Welles' setting of the play in a totalitarian state must have had tremendous resonance in a world where the rise of fascism was propelling the world towards war. Welles, one could say, adapted the play to suit his own vision, cutting the text, reordering scenes in order to achieve his purpose in exploring the nature of dictatorship.

Orson Welles' 1937 Production of *Julius Caesar*

The changing role of the director

Theatres have been producing Shakespeare in different styles and funded by different means since Shakespeare was writing. There has always been a creative impulse to bring actors together under the visionary leadership of an actor-manager or artistic director, to develop the performance of Shakespeare and generate new audiences for his plays through new interpretations and through the availability of performance, whether by touring or programming. The term 'ensemble' might suggest a democratic and egalitarian creative process, but Orson Welles was in the tradition of the great actor-managers in that collaboration with a group of talented and sympathetic actors was the means to an end – the successful achievement of an interpretation of Shakespeare that was entirely his own.

Until the late nineteenth century, the director was not an important figure in the theatre. Plays were not interpreted or investigated in the way that we now expect and acting styles were very different. We can only imagine what the acting styles of the nineteenth century were like, although photographs and early recordings from the end of the century convey some of what created a 'great' performance. Before that, there is only the written testimony of audience members. The poet Coleridge famously described the actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833):

'To see him act is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning.'

- and the essayist William Hazlitt (1778-1830) said that 'the general fault' in Kean's acting was ***'...that it is always energetic or nothing. He is always on full stretch – never relaxed.'***

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'He fought like one drunk with wounds: and the attitude in which he stands with his hands stretched out, after his sword is taken from him, had a preternatural and terrific grandeur, as if his will could not be disarmed, and the very phantoms of his despair had a withering power.'

Theatres were very large and lighting was not sophisticated enough to help the actor in subtle effects. We know that David Garrick used a special wig in his performances as 'Hamlet' so that his hair would lift and 'stand on end' when he saw the ghost of his father – a famous and very popular effect. There were undoubtedly actors of great skill and brilliance who did 'interpret' the character (though we would find their style of acting impossible to relate to now) but plays were 'spectacles' and today, we would find them unsubtle and lacking in interpretive depth. The director (often the actor-manager in charge of the company) would choose the plays to be performed, and stage the play, making decisions about settings and costumes (based on what was in the store – there was no tradition of design informing the meaning of the play) and then choreographing the movement of people on the stage.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a huge shift began towards the development of the director's role as the unifying force in the creation of an artistically coherent production in which sets, costumes, settings and context, and acting styles would together create a 'view' of the play which would be unique to that production. The most significant figure in this development in Europe is Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), the actor-manager and first artistic director of the Moscow Arts Theatre, which he founded in 1897. His work there revolutionised theatre and its influence dominates to this day. The Stanislavskian theory and philosophy of acting and production, which investigated emotional and psychological impulses in characters rather than demonstrating their effects, allowed much deeper examination of the motives and relationships within the play and as this impacted on acting styles, the emphasis on production values shifted from visually elaborate settings and multiple set changes to a more integrated and supportive staging in which these new discoveries could be best explored.



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Stanislavsky's work with the actors of the Moscow Arts Theatre is the template for the 'ensemble' theatre companies that flourished in the early years of the twentieth century in Britain, Europe and the United States. Under his artistic directorship, the Moscow Arts Theatre became the pre-eminent 'naturalistic' theatre and Stanislavski worked with, taught and directed a company of actors, many of whom remained with the company for decades. Under the Soviet regime when the theatre was heavily subsidised, rehearsal periods would last for months, creating a depth of interpretation reflected in the equally careful and thoughtful design. The company premiered the plays of Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky and toured Europe and the United States in the early 1920s where they had a profound impact on theatre practice.

In Britain, Shakespeare's plays were re-examined in the light of these new and exciting developments in theatre practice. The Royal Shakespeare Company and the Old Vic in London produced seasons of Shakespeare's plays with an ensemble of actors who would be in two or three of the plays in the repertoire. Young actors would be expected to play small parts, graduating to larger roles as their craft developed. Directors like Tyrone Guthrie (1900-1971), who was heavily influenced by Stanislavsky, directed radical interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedies. Guthrie directed a production of 'Othello' at the Old Vic in 1937 (starring a mis-cast Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier) in which he explored a Freudian interpretation of the relationship between Othello and his nemesis, Iago. Productions like these enabled a fresh look at aspects of Shakespeare as a dramatist that had previously been overshadowed by the poetic and declamatory style of performance popular in the nineteenth century.



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Theatre companies in the United States

In the United States, where theatre had emulated that of Europe, there was an established tradition of Shakespearean performance, and the development of the railways enabled companies to tour to the new centres of population. However, there were few 'serious' writers for the stage. Theatres were dominated by melodramas and musical shows that were the beginnings of the musical theatre that would eventually become the great Broadway musical.

Theatrical dynasties flourished on the East Coast – the Barrymores being one of the most famous – and steam ships across the Atlantic brought visiting companies such as the Moscow Arts Theatre. During the great depression of the 1930s President Franklin D Roosevelt set up the Federal Theatre Project as part of the New Deal to give employment to thousands of unemployed actors, writers and directors. Although this scheme was cancelled in 1939, it was a unique moment in American theatre history, with large subsidies from the government allowing the opportunity for experimentation and risk-taking and the production of radical and political work. It was also the meeting point of many of the actors, directors and writers who would go on to build the serious American theatre of the mid-twentieth century, among them Arthur Miller (1915–2005), Elia Kazan (1909–2003) and Orson Welles (1915–1985). In this atmosphere of creative possibility and collaboration, Welles made his first ventures into 'ensemble' theatre, directing a production of 'The Cradle will Rock' (1937), a musical heavily influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht in Germany, which was cancelled when the FTP withdrew funding. A now legendary performance of the piece took place in another theatre, with no orchestra, set or costumes and members of the cast playing their roles from the auditorium as Union rules forbade them being on stage. It was as a result of this experience that Welles formed the Mercury Theatre Company in 1937.

Directing Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar is the first tragedy written by William Shakespeare and was probably written in 1599. It deals with a famous event in classical history – the assassination of the Roman General and Consul Julius Caesar in 45BCE by conspirators who believed his personal ambitions to become an autocratic leader would overthrow the Republic of Rome and its government. The issues examined in the play – democracy, ambition, loyalty (both personal and public) and the complexities of political allegiances in civil war, resonate as powerfully today as they would have done to an Elizabethan audience, ruled by an autocratic monarch who was old, had no heir, and was the last of the Tudor dynasty.

During the twentieth century, as the political ideologies of fascism and communism competed with democracy to become the dominant form of 'world government', the play's exploration of the effects of ideological struggle and the cult of leadership seemed even more pertinent and achieved a stunning realisation in Orson Welles' famous 1937 production of the play.

Directors have always been drawn to plays which offer an opportunity to explore ideas that interest them, and also understood the unique power of drama to give space to ideas and views that might be controversial. It is unlikely that Orson Welles decided to direct Julius Caesar and then came up with a production concept. He would have been drawn to the play because its subject matter enabled the kind of examination of contemporary political ideologies he sought to exploit artistically.

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The play's setting in ancient Rome would have had a powerful resonance for a contemporary audience aware of the extent to which the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was manipulating ancient Roman myth to support his new 'empire'. Fears that there would be another 'world' war and questions about what part the US would have to play were already beginning to be voiced and Welles' decision to emphasise similarities between Julius Caesar in the play and Mussolini (particularly physically) was a conscious provocation to the audience to take sides and have a view.

Beginning the process

The cast list of Julius Caesar lists 41 different characters, and in addition, 5 'Plebeians', 3 Soldiers in the army of Brutus and 3 in the army of Antony. There are also 'Commoners, Soldiers and others'. Some of these characters only speak once and it would have been common practice even in Shakespeare's time for actors to 'double' roles, playing more than one part and also taking part in crowd scenes. Even with actors doubling, it is still a dauntingly large cast.

Julius Caesar is a big play in scale of setting. There are domestic scenes, but much of the action takes place in public environments like the streets of Rome. In Shakespeare's time, there was no set as we understand the term, but as theatre technology became more sophisticated and it was possible to incorporate scene changes, productions became more elaborate and more literal. In modern times, the fashion for the single-set production meant that the set became much more significant, requiring a visual style that would convey the play's essential subject, whilst remaining flexible enough to convey the particulars of a scene's setting. Large-scale productions survived but it was in cinema that the full visual life of the play could be most effectively and realistically achieved. Joseph Mankiewicz's 1953 film, starring Marlon Brando, James Mason and John Gielgud makes full use of all the panoramic visual excitement and variety the play contains.

Practicalities

There are three significant practicalities to be addressed by the director when beginning to work on a theatrical production:

Venue – where the production will take place

The venue will define:

- Scale of production – is it a studio? Is it a large theatre?
- Design possibilities – is the space a conventional proscenium arch theatre? Is it 'in the round'?
- Does it have a thrust stage?

Budget

The amount of money available for the production will dictate the:

- number of actors who can be employed
- length of rehearsal period
- scale of costume and set design
- technical scale of sound and lighting
- composition of original music

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Creative Choices

Creative decisions about the production concept and style will be crucial to the outcome of the production and will involve a creative team:

- set designer
- costume designer (usually, but not always, the same person who designs the set)
- lighting designer
- sound designer
- musical director/composer (if there is music, either recorded or live, this is a different responsibility from sound design)
- assistant director
- casting director (who works in collaboration with the director, introducing them to actors whose work they may not know and coming up with lists of names of actors who are suitable for each part)

The director's job is to work in collaboration with all these different areas of production to develop a coherent concept of the play, which will then inform the rehearsal process. A good director will have some knowledge of all the creative elements of a production so they can make the most of the creative expertise available to them. All those involved will have a large creative input but the director will make the final decisions.

The director's view

A good director will have a very thorough knowledge of the text, reading background and studying in minute detail all the nuances and challenges of the text. The director's view of the play and their ability to communicate it to others is essential to the success of the production.



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How does a director take a view?

The relationship between the director and the text is as intimate as that of the actor and the text. The difference between the two is that while, for the actor the most important issue is how they develop their characterisation and come to know the person they are playing, the director must always have an OVERVIEW of the play, which allows for the right balance of themes and details in order that the ideas of the play can be most fully realised. Issues of interpretation have become very important as great plays like Julius Caesar are re-examined in different social and political times and the director will always be looking for new discoveries in meaning and relevance to a modern audience.

The director must first of all understand what the play means to them – which of the ideas in the play seem to them to be most important and what the world of the production needs to convey to emphasise and illuminate those ideas. It is important to remember that in theatre anything is possible and the scope of technical possibilities, which now includes video and film, are endless. The huge number of the creative possibilities offered by Shakespeare's plays are made significantly greater by the fact that he wrote for a theatre with no set. ALL the scene setting happens in the text and a director can interpret that text imaginatively to create visual environments as they choose.

Some questions for the director:

- When is this production set?
- Does the director want to do a 'historically accurate' production set in Ancient Rome?
- Does the director want to place the play in another historical context?
- Does the director want to place the play in a contemporary setting?
- Where is this production set?
- Is the play taking place in a realistic world, with walls and doors etc.?
- Is the play happening in an unrealistic world, where scenes happen in undefined spaces and there are more symbolic renderings of place?

Good directors are able to communicate their view of the play to their colleagues and inspire confidence and belief in their creative judgement, and achieve the commitment of everyone involved to following their creative vision. If you couldn't see any connection between 'Julius Caesar' and fascism, if you believed that Shakespeare shouldn't ever be cut, if you didn't like the idea of 'modern' dress, you probably wouldn't have a great time working on Orson Welles' production! And he probably wouldn't have a great time working with you!

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Playing with Shakespeare – Orson Welles & Julius Caesar

Settings 1

Orson Welles' decision to make his 1937 Mercury Theatre production of Julius Caesar a study of fascism – a response to the dramatic political developments in Europe – was considered a bold one in 1937, but theatre-goers are far more used nowadays to productions that attempt to re-locate Shakespeare in different times and periods. The same is true of film versions of Shakespeare. In the last twenty years we have screen versions of *As you Like It* set in nineteenth century Japan; *Hamlet* set in a contemporary New York and numerous interpretations of *Macbeth* including one set on a modern estate and another in the world of 1930s Chicago gangsters. Whether on stage or film, these choices will be made by a director to emphasise elements in the play he/she thinks are important. In Welles' case, the play's subject seemed suited to an investigation of a political ideology which was impacting on millions of lives. As we'll see, this involved making some drastic changes.

One of the most radical and exciting things about Orson Welles' production of Julius Caesar was its staging, designed by Samuel Leve and Jean Rosenthal and reproduced exactly in the film, *Me and Orson Welles*.



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



Ben Chaplin ('George Coulouris') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

The designs derived from the very precise instructions of Welles himself:

'Welles dictated very clearly and exactly the kind of look he wanted the production to have, a very simple look based on the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg. The patterns implied in the Nuremberg 'festivals' were in terms of platforms, which were the basis of the scenery, and light which went up or down. The uplift (derived from two-rows of 500-watt-up-lights sunk into the stage) was really taken from the effect the Nazi's achieved.'

Jean Rosenthal (Lighting Designer)

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TASK

Carry out some research of your own, investigating what Nazi rallies actually looked like. Inputting 'Nuremberg Rallies' into Google images will provide a wealth of shots and there is also the extraordinary (and frighteningly compelling) 1934 film by Leni Riefenstahl documenting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg called *Triumph of the Will*, which is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHs2coAzLJ8>

Use your discoveries to sketch a simple stage design likely to evoke associations with these events. You will see that the Nazis were very skilled in their use of lighting to create a dramatic atmosphere and sense of massive architectural scale. How did they do this? If you can think of a way to create the same effects as are suggested by the images you find, then add this element into your sketch. A good scene to provide a sketch for might be Act III Scene II – the famous 'Forum' scene in which first Brutus and then Mark Antony mount 'a pulpit' and make their respective speeches about Caesar's death. Interpret 'pulpit' as you will – how would such a place need to be transformed to fit staging reminiscent of a Nazi rally? You will be able to check your version against the stage design for the same scene in *Me and Orson Welles*.

Settings 2

Welles' minimalist production needs also to be understood in the context of other forms of staging that had gone before. In some ways his return to a bare stage was in keeping with their first appearances of the play on Shakespeare's playhouse stage, where much of the information about who people were, where they were and even what time of day or night it was had to be listened for in people's speeches. But even more radical was his decision to emphasise a sense of immediacy and contemporary relevance by giving the audience clear visual signs – in both lighting and costume – that this play was about something they were seeing happening in newsreels at the cinema, the spread of fascism and the questions it raised about a response.

Activity - Changing fashions in production

This activity is also an exercise in stage design. Follow the links to two images of Shakespeare plays on the stage:

[David Garrick as Romeo, George Anne Bellamy as Juliet in David Garrick's adaptation of Romeo and Juliet in 1748. Painting by Benjamin Wilson](#)

[Henry Irving and Ellen Terry as Hamlet and Ophelia in the famous production of 'Hamlet' at the Lyceum Theatre, London in 1878. Lithograph of painting by Edward H Bell](#)

List what you notice about them – including the way in which the actors are dressed and the scene is decorated. What differences do you notice between these visions of the play and the kind of design that Welles was aiming to achieve with his *Julius Caesar*? A good way to get to grips with this is to imagine how an image of the same scene – Act III Scene II might have appeared in the Garrick and the Irving productions.

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The following brief notes may help:

'The image shows various improbabilities in Garrick's production that were mocked at the time: the fact that Romeo has taken trouble to change into black between this and the previous scene, and that the tomb is already lit by the lamp before Romeo breaks into it... The image provides a rare insight into stage scenery (of the mid-eighteenth century). The shutters – painted flat screens – have been slid across in their grooves so that they meet in the middle. The double-doors of the Capulet tomb have been in some way built onto these shutters with a graveyard painted around them. The doors open on the remaining depth of the stage, making the inside of the tomb. In many ways this is a survival of the 'inner stage' of Shakespeare's day.'

(Desmond Shawe-Taylor)

'A set of scenes would normally include wing shutters placed on either side of the stage and large flats that 'closed' the scene towards the back. The shutters were supported in grooves set upon the stage and in corresponding grooves suspended above. Scenes were changed by sliding the wing shutters and large black shutters off the stage in order to reveal new shutters behind. 'Sets' of scenes were painted, often by visiting Italian artists who were considered specialists in such work, and became the stock of the theatre. They were used time and again, as the repertoire required, until they were too over-painted to serve.'

(Christopher Baugh)

'(The) harsh brilliance of electric lighting overexposed the delicate scenic language of painting and painted shadows. The starkly lit reality of the three-dimensional actors threw the painted artificiality of stage scenery into jarring contrast. Stage managers responded by using ever more real and built-up details, but inevitably, fuelled by new technologies, the 250-year-old scenic tradition began to collapse beneath the sheer weight of its own scenery. Heavy, three-dimensionally constructed scenery could not easily be manoeuvred within the elegant simplicity of the sliding groove and shutter system. Scene changes became longer and longer (Henry Irving's meticulously stage-managed Macbeth in 1888 had five intervals totalling forty-six minutes...) and to meet the final trains and omnibuses to carry the audiences home, the plays were rearranged, cut and further adapted, until they became little more than accompaniments to spectacular tableaux vivants.'

(Christopher Baugh)

Now look at this photograph [of Herbert Beerbohm Tree in Julius Caesar at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1898 with costumes and sets by the famous painter Lawrence Alma Tadema:](#)

Imagine how long it would take to get all the people in the photograph on and off stage!

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Costume

The critics were divided about the decision to place the play in modern dress. Most felt it, and the overall contemporary setting, were liberating and exciting.

Task

Your task is to choose one or more characters from the play and decide how you might dress them if you were the costume designer. For example, how would you dress Cinna – the street poet? You could attempt your own drawings or you could look for images in magazines to suggest the style you are looking for.

In contrast to the elaborate and sumptuous sets and costumes associated with nineteenth century and Edwardian Shakespeare productions, Welles' *Julius Caesar* was a breath of fresh air – though he certainly was not the first to restore the idea of a bare stage in the inter-war years. What was perhaps novel was what has been described as Welles' 'cinematic' style. What do you think is meant by this description? How did Welles achieve this?

Consider:

- Length of scenes
- Simplification of the narrative
- Naturalistic ways of delivering lines with lines overlapping
- Costumes and lighting effects
- Number of scene changes involving moving furniture/sets

Cutting the Play

It is not only the character Julius Caesar who got cut up in Orson Welles' version of the play! Welles decided it was largely to be a play about Brutus and his misguided and ultimately futile attempts to halt Rome's surrender to dictatorship. Welles' production was just over 90 minutes long – it is reported he was still cutting and re-arranging on the night when the play was reviewed by the press. But was Welles justified in cutting Shakespeare's play into a shape that suited his vision and removed those elements that weren't so helpful? When does a play stop being the play and become merely the inspiration for another original work? How much of his play would Shakespeare have recognised and does it matter if it isn't much? Welles made sure that there was no confusion about what this production was about by subtitling it, 'Death of a Dictator'. It can be argued that Shakespeare's play is about a lot more than that – indeed as always with Shakespeare, the events in the play are opportunities for complex and multi-layered explorations of human experience. Was Welles interested in this aspect of Shakespeare? And does it matter if he wasn't?

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Task

Welles' subtitle is very punchy and specific – a bit like a newspaper headline. In groups, think of subtitles for these other plays by Shakespeare:

- Romeo and Juliet
- Macbeth
- King Lear
- Othello

If you don't know these plays, then you can use some films you know. Which elements in the story have you highlighted? What does that say about the elements you haven't highlighted? How important are they now? Compare the choices you have made with those made by others.

Welles' Cuts

Consider the list of Welles' omissions and alterations in order to decide which you feel is the most seriously damaging to the play.

- Caesar's dictatorial instincts were emphasised while those elements of his character that suggested a more self-doubting or vulnerable individual were downplayed.
- Welles made Brutus the focus of the play – 'the bourgeois intellectual', writes Welles, 'who under a modern dictatorship, would be the first put up against a wall and shot.'
- the relationship between Brutus and Cassius was reduced – a relationship which is now considered by many to be the most important in the play
- Lepidus was removed entirely from the play
- the parts of both Mark Antony and Octavius were heavily cut
- the plebeian characters lost their individuality so that the crowd/mob became merely a chorus to the main action
- the last 20 minutes of the play were heavily cut

It is interesting that although Orson Welles may have made Julius Caesar suit his agenda and his desire to make it a production that 'spoke to the times', in one important way he restored a crucial part of the play that had remained cut for nearly two centuries – the murder of Cinna, the poet.

Taking Liberties

Were Welles' alterations exceptional? Consider these changes to Shakespeare's plays. Which do you feel to be the most extreme and/or clumsy – and note that all of them have been done in productions?

1. Romeo and Juliet:

Removing reference to Rosalind (Romeo's first love) from the text so Romeo being in love with love isn't featured. Having Juliet awake before Romeo is dead so they can be reunited.

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2. King Lear:

Allowing Lear's daughter Cordelia to survive along with her father in contrast to the play's actual conclusion featuring Lear's emotionally fraught death clasping the dead body of his daughter.

3. Macbeth:

Actresses playing Lady Macbeth refusing to perform the fainting scene after the murder of Duncan because they dislike the character's deceitfulness and also because they needed more time off to get into elaborate costumes for the coronation scene.

Adding scenes involving dancing witches and a new character Hecate in order to cater to the late seventeenth century's taste for such spectacle.

4. Othello:

Many of the more obscene descriptions of Othello and Desdemona making love which pepper the deceitful Iago's speeches at the start of the play are removed in line with contemporary sensitivities about such explicitness.

Are these changes like those made by Orson Welles?

Are they made for the same reasons?

