

War of the Worlds -The Radio Play

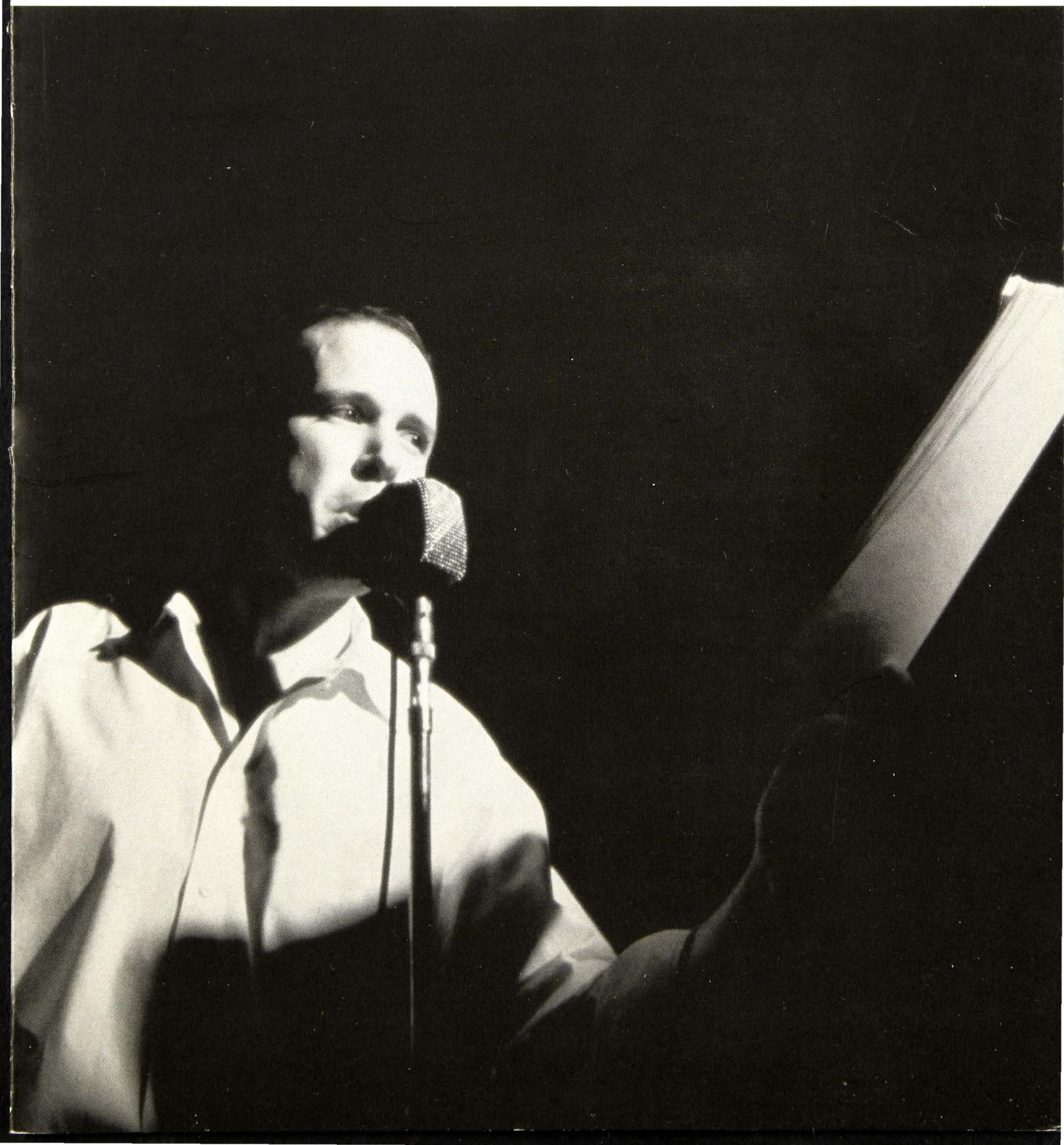
SITI, New York

Friday 25 August 2000



Edinburgh International Festival

Royal Lyceum Theatre



Orson Welles and The War of the Worlds

At the end of the sweaty 1958 thriller *Touch of Evil*, as the bloated body of Orson Welles's Hank Quinlan floats down the river, Marlene Dietrich asks: "What does it matter what you say about people?" The film – a conundrum on character and corruption, justice and the law, worship and betrayal – marked Welles's brief but brilliant return to Hollywood film-making.

Shot to resemble a nightscape by Kafka, it plays havoc with moral ambiguities as a self-righteous Mexican cop (Charlton Heston in the best performance of his career) goes up against Welles's monumental Quinlan, the old-time detective of vast and wearied experience who goes by instinct, gets it right, but fabricates evidence to make his case. It is almost the story of Welles's own life, although if we echo Dietrich's question, the answer is: "Not a lot." Anything you can say about Orson Welles can be gainsaid by a myriad other accounts, as the critic Quentin Curtis has so astutely pointed out.

"I don't think one word can sum up a man's life," concluded the reporter in *Citizen Kane*, although when you consider Welles – the magician, hoaxer, trickster and liar so admired by another great fabulist, Jorge Luis Borges – it is always the myths, usually of his own making, that survive. There is nothing mythical, though, about the 23-year-old Welles's conquering of the medium of radio and his dramatic unhinging of America in 1938 with the New York-based Mercury Theatre's thrilling adaptation of H G Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which is the starting point for SIT1's film noirish play. Although the production takes its title from the infamous broadcast that panicked the nation, its net – in director Anne Bogart's words – is cast much wider.

Nevertheless, it was *The War of the Worlds* sensation that made the young Welles a figure of national importance. The triumphantly audacious perpetrator of the "news broadcast" graced the cover of Time magazine – "made up to look like God Almighty," according to his biographer Simon Callow, author of the magnificently magisterial *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (Jonathan Cape) – and Hollywood moguls beat a path to his door. Yet all through rehearsals for the radio production Welles had railed at the text, cursing the writers, and at the whole idea of presenting so silly a show.

"Focusing on the device of an interrupted programme, he dared to attempt a verisimilitude that had rarely been essayed before," writes Callow. "The apparent breakdowns in transmission, the desperate irruptions of dance music, the sadly tinkling piano were all held longer than would be thought possible. The actors too were galvanised into startlingly real and precisely observed performances." The vividness of the dramatisation stemmed from its imitation of the daily newscasts whose bulletins so frequently concerned the ominously gathering storm cloud of events in Europe.

No one could have predicted, though, that anyone might believe that an actual invasion from Mars was being reported. Listeners were told they were hearing a dramatisation

of a novel and the programme was clearly framed as a broadcast within a broadcast. The panic, according to Welles's collaborator John Houseman, was precipitated when at 8.12pm, listeners to the massively popular *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show* (bizarrely featuring a ventriloquist and his anarchic dummy on radio) started twiddling their dials for a few moments' relief from the hapless vocalist who had begun warbling. They found themselves listening, appalled, to a news report of an invasion, by now well under way, by Martians.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed a message that came in from Grover's Mill by telephone. Just a moment. At least 40 people, including six state troopers, lie dead in a field east of the village of Grover's Mill, their bodies burned and distorted beyond all recognition." Music was played, experts interviewed and then a reporter described the scene: "Good heavens, something's wriggling out of the shadows like a grey snake. Now it's another one and another. They look like tentacles to me. There, I can see the thing's body. It's large as a bear and glistens like black leather. But that face ... it's indescribable ... I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent!" There was more in a similar vein, then he promised to be back in a minute and the microphone was heard to fall to the ground, followed by dead silence. There were further announcements in the excitable, stentorian tones familiar from newsreels.

By now a small but significant proportion of the audience – with a heavy concentration in the New Jersey area – was in a state of high hysteria. An estimated six million people were listening, so before the programme was halfway through, the CBS switchboard was jammed with demands for verification, as were switchboards all over the country. When asked whether the world was coming to an end, one operator very properly replied: "I'm sorry, we don't have that information here." The nation went into a collective panic attack.

In *The Invasion from Mars*, a sociological account of the incident, Hadley Cantril writes that out of the then 32,000,000 families in the United States, 27,500,000 had radios. In some cases, radio was their only source of information about the wider world and they trusted it. Events were being described to them in a familiar manner and that is what made the Martian broadcast so horribly convincing. Some people caught up in this medieval millennial frenzy, reports Simon Callow, just sat down and waited to die; others desperately tried to call relatives, but found all the lines engaged. Some took to the streets, others went to church. In Harlem, a black congregation fell to its knees. In Indianapolis, a woman ran screaming into a church where evening service was being held and shouted: "New York has been destroyed. It's the end of the world. Go home and prepare to die."

A woman gave premature birth, and another fell down a whole flight of stairs. Her husband, apparently, called CBS to thank them for the broadcast. "Geez, it was a wonderful programme!" In Newark, New Jersey, all the occupants of a block of flats left their homes with wet towels round their heads as improvised gas masks. One family leapt into their car – taking the dog and the canary with them – and paused in their headlong flight down the freeway to

ask the latest news from passers-by, who, not having heard the broadcast, could tell them nothing. Desperate for information, they called a cousin in Freehold, NJ, whose farm they knew to be "in the destructive path". "Are the Martians there?" they asked. "No," the cousin replied, "but the Tuttles are, and we are about to sit down to dinner."

Back in CBS's studios, the panic had reached the control room. Welles wound up the broadcast by announcing "out of character", that the programme had "no further significance than the holiday offering it was intended to be. The Mercury Theatre's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying Boo!... so goodbye everybody, and remember, please, for the next day or so, the terrible lesson you have learned tonight. That grinning, glowing, globular invader in your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and there's no one there, that was no Martian... it's Hallowe'en."

When his terrified listeners discovered that they were victims of what seemed to them a malicious hoax, threats of violence were made against Welles and the company, and someone even telephoned and threatened to blow up the CBS building, which was besieged by reporters asking Welles and Houseman how they felt about the many deaths the broadcast had caused.

In Times Square the Moving News sign flashed in neon lights: ORSON WELLES FRIGHTENS THE NATION. In a newsreel interview, Welles – unshaven and boyish – insisted it was all a Hallowe'en joke and promised he would never do anything like it again. Not for the first time, and certainly not the last, wrote Kenneth Tynan, Orson Welles had over-estimated the intelligence of his audience. "Such errors are healthy: what kills art is the assumption that people are stupid," declared Tynan. Legal actions were filed against both CBS and the Mercury; all failed.

The War of the Worlds scandal was an extraordinary event, revealing some remarkable aspects of America in the late 1930s, but it was also one of the most purely fortuitous events of the career of Orson Welles, boy genius, *enfant terrible* of the theatre and Renaissance man reborn. He was praised for having his finger on the pulse of his times, as well as for being the most notorious conman of the century, able to make anybody believe anything. The truth is, writes Callow, he was more surprised than anyone at what had happened, and mightily irritated by it. The day after the broadcast, a Mercury employee who wandered into the auditorium eating a Mars bar was sacked on the spot.

About three years after the Martian broadcast, Welles was reading a Walt Whitman poem on a patriotic Sunday radio programme, when someone ran into the studio and shouted into the mike that Pearl Harbour had been attacked. "Nobody paid any attention," alleged Welles in an interview with Tynan. "They just shrugged and said, 'There he goes again'."

Jackie McGlone

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SITI, New York

War of the Worlds – The Radio Play

by **H G Wells**

adapted for radio by **Howard Koch**

adapted by the **SITI Company**

CAST:

Stephen Webber

Barney O'Hanlon

Will Bond

Tom Nelis

J. Ed Araiza

Ellen Lauren

Akiko Aizawa

All members of the cast perform various roles.

The performance will last approximately
50 minutes. Please note there will be no
interval in this performance.

Royal Lyceum Theatre
Friday 25 August 11.00pm

Royal Lyceum Theatre

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Administration Director **Sadie McKinlay**
Development Director **Clare Simpson**
Head of Production **David Butterworth**
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Theatre Manager **Caroline Brophy**

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If you have enjoyed tonight's live production you may be interested to know about the multi Ivor Novello award winning recording, Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of *The War of the Worlds*, featuring the voices of Richard Burton, Justin Hayward, Phil Lynott, Julie Covington and David Essex.

Available on Columbia Records.

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