

Stephen Webber as
Orson Welles



Review

The Real Worlds

In 1938, Orson Welles turned H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* into a series of realistic news-flash interruptions over the radio. Though it was announced a number of times that the program was a gimmick, many missed those disclaimers and panicked, thinking Earth was under siege by alien invaders.

Welles was a magician, explains SITI Company co-founder Anne Bogart. He wove together a classic novel and the urgent tenor of radio technology to cook up an event that forced people to reconsider the gullibility of the general public and the dubious nature of news itself. Shortly thereafter, he created *Citizen Kane*, a great tale based to some degree on the life of newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst, himself no stranger to the art of manipulation. *Kane* was another expert blend of fact and fiction, again begging the questions: Where is the division between news and entertainment? Truth and art? And whom are we supposed to trust, anyway?

In the spirit of melding fact and fiction, director Bogart, writer Naomi Iizuka and colleagues from their New York-based troupe crafted a genre-tweaking piece that melds Welles' *Worlds* hoax with a series of vignettes intended to peel back the layers of magic and make us ponder Welles' giant personality, the nature of myth and the limits to truly understanding what lies at our core.

Bogart, who is also the head of the graduate directing program at Columbia University, once penned a noteworthy essay titled "Terror, Disorientation and Diffi-

culty" exploring her view that transformative theater involves a kind of verbal/visual perturbation of the audience comprising surprise, shock, fear and confusion. These impressions have the capacity to deepen the journey for the audience, she proposes.

Bogart's experimental ideas have been borne out in vital works conceived and staged by SITI, including *The Medium*, an ambitious exploration of the theories of Marshall McLuhan, in which, one critic reported, "the company ... acted out television news casts, catty talk shows and old Western movies, but instead of the typical dialogue associated with those productions, the actors recited McLuhan's ideas." The action was rent with bizarre interruptions symbolizing the real-life strokes that ironically twisted the communicative abilities of the communication theorist near the end of his life.

In *War of the Worlds*, the action moves through time and place in surreal fashion as striking visuals and black, white and gray costumes emulate Old Hollywood. An arguably deranged Welles stalks across the stage in the midst of his historic radio broadcast. He is a showman, a con artist and a troubled soul. Perhaps it is not really Hearst whom the great director has transformed into Charles Foster Kane but Welles himself — a powerful magician unknowable to anyone, including himself.

If you don't plan on heading to New York anytime soon and you can afford the ticket price, check out this play. *War of the Worlds* is a high-concept, *avant-garde*, intellectual experience that delivers. — Kerman

The Ovation! Series presents the SITI Company performance of *War of the Worlds* at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, April 20 and 21, and 2 p.m. April 22 at the Edison Theatre, on the Washington University campus. Call 314-534-1111 for tickets, priced at \$25.