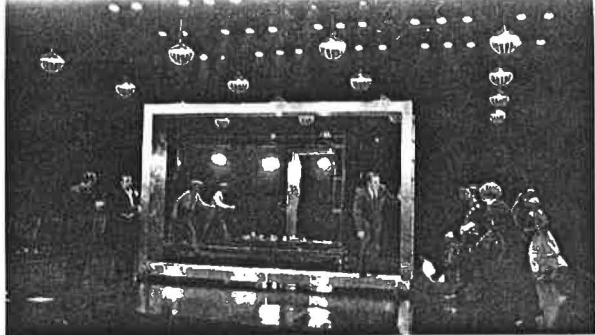


THE SITI
COMPANY
DISSECTS
ORSON WELLES
THROUGH THE
FRAMEWORK OF
CITIZEN KANE

Every Rosebud

BY JANE HOGAN & DAVID JOHNSON

Five members of The SITI Company known for their physical prowess and agile moves (left) stand in a circle on stage. In the center, a man in a white shirt and dark pants (Orson Welles) stands in a circle on stage. In the background, a large screen displays a black and white image of a man in a white shirt and dark pants (Orson Welles) standing in a circle on stage. The stage is lit with warm, yellow light.



The *War of the Worlds* has nothing to do with Orson Welles' radio broadcast of the H. G. Wells classic; it's more a biography of the legendary artist, except that it isn't really a biography in the true sense, since so much of it is conjecture and speculation—in fact, it's really structured like Welles' film *Citizen Kane*, except that it's onstage, not on film, and it actually covers most of Welles' films, not just his first and most famous.

Are you still there? Those of you at all familiar with Anne Bogart's SITI Company should have no trouble following the thought process at work here. As with most projects by this highly inventive troupe (*Cabin Pressure*, *BOB*, *Culture of Desire*), *War of the Worlds* started as a question that occurred to Bogart, the company's artistic director: When did news become entertainment? She concluded that the answer was Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. That same thought process took her to the subject Welles himself, who by the end of his life was known more as a portly spokesman for Paul Masson wines than as a director of at least one of the greatest films ever made. Who was this person? Since Welles loved magic and was something of a stretcher of the truth all his life, the challenge to the SITI Company was to create a theatrical portrait of this elusive man that occasionally played as fast and loose with the facts as his thinly veiled portrait of William Randolph Hearst in *Citizen Kane*.

The company used that seminal film as the structure for *War of the Worlds*, as a journalist attempts to uncover "the secret" behind Welles' last word: Thorne. Thorne was the name of the room in which he spent time as a youth at the Art Institute of Chicago, according to this production, written by Naomi Iizuka; whether it was actually Welles' last word is as dubious as his use of "Rosebud" as Hearst's *Kane*'s (especially since Hearst wasn't even dead at the time). For the SITI design team—set designer Neil Patel, lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin, sound designer Daron J. West, and costume designer James Schuette—it was the Welles oeuvre that served as the starting point for the project.

"It's all about the frame," says the Welles character early on in the production. He's referring, of course, to the rectangular frame of the silver screen, the space that served as a canvas for his work as a film director. For Patel, the idea of the frame became the central element for the spare design of the production. "In the first version of the set, there was a kind of literal Thorne room onstage, but it all got very complicated. In rehearsals it eventually came down to the idea of the frame, how we'd see different images through it," explains Patel. "And then it became about how to create a theatrical metaphor for the cinematic techniques that Welles talks about without imitating them literally, like how you would describe a zoom onstage, or his use of angle, or his famous use of light and shadow."

"So what we came up with was a silver frame with wheels that would track and spin onstage," he continues, "and you'd either see it as an object floating through space, or as an actual frame for a series of symbolic panels. The white screen, of course, is the screen, but it also serves as a mirror, to represent Welles the magician as well as the scene from *The Lady from Shanghai*. There is a room, which has a window and is very natural looking, which serves as both Welles' mother's room as well as the Thorne room. And then there is a hand, which is also the idea of the magician."

The size and movement of the frame varied throughout both the rehearsal process and the production's several incarnations (*War of the Worlds* had its world premiere at the Humana Theatre Festival in Louisville, KY, then was presented at the Edinburgh Theatre in Scotland, and BAM's Next Wave Festival in Brooklyn). "One version of the frame traveled all over the place, and we decided to limit it and put it on a track, so that it would always be centered but could spin," says Patel. "And then when we figured out what the movement and the choreography would be, we wanted one person to be able to spin it while having it stay on the center point and also track up and down, so that its movement was very fluid."

In addition to the frame and varying canvases, the other main fixtures of the set are 5K lights on stands meant to represent film lights, which surround the stage at various moments in the production. "There's an image of Welles in his movie *F for Fake*, where he's wearing a cape in a forest," says Patel. "And we liked the idea of him being surrounded by a forest of these lights and cables as he walks out in the beginning and introduces himself."

SHADOW PLAY

Mimi Jordan Sherin says she used four rolling units (Janiro 10" 5Ks on Mole Richardson film stands), which the actors also manipulate, "to make it as cinematic as possible—as close to Orson Welles as possible—in terms of angles and of light in his movies and in the frames." Budgetary concerns did not allow for the use of actual film lights, so Sherin made do with the 5Ks on film stands.

"It's my story," asserts the Welles character during his introduction, but he is not merely the piece's subject matter; he is also the designers' inspiration. This is particularly true for Sherin, whose lighting, with its clear and white tones, suggests the black-and-white world of the director's cinema. Yet the lighting is by no means colorless throughout. The LD suffuses the stage with a peculiarly unpleasant yellow at times and also accents the white with an elegant lavender.

The yellow, Sherin says, "was the nastiest yellow that I could come up with. It was a combination of two yellows to make it look sickly—and it was intentional—and to wipe the eye. It was a huge statement." Lee 010 (Medium Yellow) and Lee 100 (Spring 100) creates the purposely nauseating color. Yellow is also manipulated for gentler ends, serving to warm up the scenes set in Rio or, as Sherin puts it, "to literally get sun onstage."

She added lavender (Roscolux 355 Pale Violet) to the white light because "it makes white light elegant, especially when you are dealing with black." And then there was the play between the lighting and the metal frame. Says Sherin, "Lavender really makes metal zing." Sherin also commandeers Welles' love of shadow, particularly in the aforementioned magician scene in which shadows change in size with Welles dwarfing the other character and vice versa.

And for a man with an "octopus of an ego" (as one character exclaims), a Lycian 1275 Super Star 1.2kW HMI followspot zeroes in on Welles from the back of the house. Sherin also relied on what she deems "old-fashioned" beam projectors. "I keep saying I am going to retire if they were to stop making them," she says, adding that she relies on their tendency to "focus badly" and to "make beautiful floor patterns." The rest of the equipment is essentially ETC Source Fours for crosslight, PAR 64s, and ARRI Studio Babys, the latter for diagonal frontlight. Sherin placed MK-16 footlights on trunions in front of the stage.

As part of the design, Sherin hung a series of industrial-looking practicals covered with metal cages that featured clear 150W bulbs. As much a part of the scenery as the lighting, these perfectly positioned rows of lights create a symmetry that reveal Sherin's attempt "to unify the space." She notes that "Neil [Patel] added the cages to make them look unusual"—a word that perhaps best sums up both Welles' and the SITI Company's idiosyncratic styles.

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BLACK IS THE NEW BLACK

Welles may have been a complex person, but you could say the SITI Company took a black-and-white approach to this enigmatic figure, at least costumewise. Designer James Schuette, too, took Welles' groundbreaking 1941 film as the model for his designs. He notes, "It [*Citizen Kane*] is a black-and-white film, and since we are using the structure of *Citizen Kane* to tell the story of Welles' life, it was very informative. We wanted to parallel it in certain ways, so we decided to make the clothes in a similar color palette of blacks and whites and grays and silvers and pretty much keep color out of it."

Seven actors portray multiple characters, and, as Schuette points out, though based on a person or persons in Welles' life, characters are often more representative or iconographic than anything else: the lover, the mother, the producer, the friend. The period of *Kane* is reflected in the style of clothing Schuette chose, essentially late 30s and early 40s. The one exception is the white, re-embroidered lawn cotton dress worn by the actress who represents Welles' mother, which evokes an earlier era (the teens). The long dress has an open neck, wide collar, and double-tiered skirt.

For the Leni Zadorov character, a composite of Marlene Dietrich, Marion Davies (William Randolph Hearst's mistress on whom the *Citizen Kane* character Susan Alexander was based), and Rita Hayworth (Welles' wife for a time), Schuette designed a long, black, bias-cut Devore velvet evening gown.

"And then," Schuette laughs, "it was just a lot of men's suits," which is an oversimplification, since the suits range from day to evening wear and even include a carnival man's costume, complete with striped jacket and boater. Welles, whom Schuette says tended to be nattily attired, is dressed in a light gray pin-striped double-breasted suit with a white shirt.

Then there is the character of Stephen Webber, the fictional best friend, based in part on veteran actor John Houseman, who, along with Welles, founded the Mercury Theatre. As if all this wasn't confusing enough, the best friend character is named after the actor portraying Welles (keep in mind that this is a concept piece). But back to the costumes—and even here you get a sense that the SITI Company does not demand an exact rationale as to why a character wears what he or she does. He wears a white tie and

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