

Restoration improves 'Othello'

Among serious film buffs, Orson Welles' "Othello" ranks among those titles that is often discussed, but rarely actually screened. Part of the reason lies in the garbled soundtrack, which was shot over several years and under often slapdash conditions.

A recent restoration and enhancement has now placed the film among the upper echelon of Welles' work, right up there with "Citizen Kane" and "Magnificent Ambersons." You can see for yourself what all the fuss is about when the Detroit Film The-



tickets please
John Monaghan

atre brings the film into town with considerable fanfare this weekend.

What a difference a decade makes. In the early 1940s, Welles was at the top of his profession. By 1948, he proved so difficult to work

with that Hollywood wanted little to do with him except as an actor. "Othello" was shot over a four-year period, primarily using money Welles made by appearing in other people's films.

Indeed, the story of "Othello" behind the scenes could make a good movie script in itself. His cast and crew could be found waiting in train stations and hotel rooms for their boss to arrive from abroad with more money for filming.

A SCENE might have begun filming in one place but ended on a completely different set, maybe in a different country! In post-production, Welles needed to improvise and rely on quick editing and closeups so that audiences wouldn't notice breaks in continuity.

As legend has it, the director was so strapped for cash that he reworked a major scene to avoid costly costumes. The killing of Rodrigo now takes place in a bathroom with the actors adorned in sheets.

The stop-and-start shooting schedule took its toll on the 11 actresses who played Desdemona in various stages of production. Suzanne Cloutier, a stage and sometime film actress, appears solely in the finished film.

Although "Othello" shared best

picture awards at Cannes in 1952, it barely played on American screens. It probably worked much better with subtitles as the film's powerful black-and-white imagery was constantly challenged by the inaudible dialogue.

The screening rights to "Othello" eventually fell into the hands of Beatrice Welles-Smith, daughter of the late director. Perhaps encouraged by the success of the "Citizen Kane" rerelease, she worked with distribution company Castle Hill Films to restore the film and rerelease it across the country.

AT THE center of the film is another brilliant performance by Welles in the title role, which allows an audience to look well beyond the Welles' thick black theatrical makeup that changes noticeably in hue from scene to scene.

In the classic tragedy, jealousy gets the best of the powerful Othello when Iago, one of his aides, plants deadly rumors about the fidelity of the Moor's beautiful wife Desdemona.

"Othello" was not Welles' first or last brush with the great William Shakespeare. His Shakespearean productions with John Houseman and New York's Mercury Theatre are legendary. In 1948, he mounted a production of "Macbeth" on old western lots at Republic Pictures.

The success of "Othello" already has the film community buzzing with more restoration of Welles' European work, most of which is marred by lousy post-production. Next on the list may be "Chimes at Midnight" (1967), where Welles combines no less than three of the Bard's works with himself cast as the roguish Falstaff.



Orson Welles played the title role in his production of "Othello" which took four years to shoot, financed primarily with money he made by appearing in other people's films.

Austin entertains by promoting self

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re-top. He promptly went on to other stunts, one that went away when he tried to pull a riverboat with a harness attached around his waist. He became entangled in the ropes.

Water went into lungs and he began to think he was going to drown. After panicking, a calmness overtook him and he freed himself and still managed to finish.

All exhibitions of physical endurance are well-planned, Austin said. Acts such as enduring a 3,200-pound truck wheel on his chest and anchoring a plane involve specialized breathing techniques, all developed from years of physical fitness training.

In many ways, Austin is ahead of his time. He was one of the first on the roller blade scene, starting an indoor skating at One-on-One Athletic Club in West Bloomfield.

He became known for starting what is called retro-running — in essence running backwards.

"I could not beat people going forward, but I could beat them going backward," he said. "You just have to find out a way to beat them."

Like numerous dares, though, Austin "burned out" on running backward. Now, he's tackling the realm of public relations in full force.

"When someone tells me I can't do something, I take it on for the pure challenge of it," he said. "I love to say 'I told you so.'"

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