

Literature Criticism

Critical Essay by David Robinson

For the online version of BookRags' Critical Essay by David Robinson - Critical Essay by David Robinson, including complete copyright information, please visit:

<http://www.bookrags.com/criticism/welles-george-orson-1915/9/>

Copyright Information

© 2000-2014 BookRags, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Critical Essay by David Robinson

Critical Essay by David Robinson

Any schoolboy Shakespearean or home movie-maker can fault this *Othello* ... in a dozen ways. Its narrative goes by such fits and starts that it is often hard to follow the story. The cutting of the text seems often merely perverse: key scenes are excised and minor ones inflated disproportionately. Identifications and explanations are forgotten; raw edges abound. The poetry of this most poetic play seems deliberately obscured, while the rough post-synching and the variable quality of the sound make the clearest voices at times unintelligible.

It is so easy to see these things. It is too easy to rejoice in our own fine discrimination in catching so considerable an artist as Welles tripping, to dismiss the film so hastily that we overlook the splendours of an exciting, frustrating interpretation of the tragedy.

It is frustrating because we see by flashes just how marvellous it might all have been.... Constantly the visual and physical disposition of the characters reflects and emphasises their intellectual placing in the drama. The technique of the bed-time quarrel in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for example, is perfectly suited to the counter-questions and cross-purposes of the last scene of *Othello*.

Visually the film is superb.... Only rarely the search for the picturesque gets out of hand, as it does, for instance, in the absurd Harry Lime chase of Roderigo and Cassio through the sewers.

The severe abridgement of the play destroys the fine narrative of the original, and--perversely as it seems--several of the finest, and dramatically most important, scenes are omitted.... The effect of this version is to throw into strong relief the two main figures, to concentrate on Othello and Iago almost to the exclusion of the other characters. Welles' own Othello is magnificent in the grandeur and simplicity with which it is conceived.... It is his magnificent simplicity, his freedom from any intellectual subtleties which gives complete conviction to his gullibility and complete tragic pathos to his fearful anger and murderous crime.

Iago, on the other hand, has been refined into a figure of impenetrable mystery. (p. 196)

Welles brings to *Othello* all his own rich visual invention and his fertile intelligence--unrestrained by too nice formalities of taste--to suggest, even in flashes, the rich potential of the cinema for interpreting the great tragedies. This flawed and faulty film is infinitely more vital, stirring, invigorating, than half-a-dozen more reverent, pedantically impeccable attempts. (p. 197)

David Robinson, "Othello," in Sight and Sound (copyright © 1956 by The British Film Institute), Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring, 1956, pp. 196-97.