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THEATER REVIEW | 'Orson's Shadow'

## Acting in 'Shadow'

Performances sell 'what if?' play about Orson Welles and other film legends.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL  
The Kansas City Star



Jennifer Hack | The Kansas City Star

"Orson's Shadow" imagines Orson Welles (Jim Birdsall) directing a play with other legends of stage and screen.

Artists travel a lonely road.

That idea emerges with startling clarity in "Orson's Shadow," a sophisticated comedy that depicts its historical characters with wit and empathy.

Playwright Austin Pendleton imagines a lively encounter between several legends of stage and screen in this absorbing piece of theater. The time is 1960 and the critic Kenneth Tynan has convinced Laurence Olivier to hire Orson Welles to direct him in the English-language version of "Rhinoceros," Ionesco's absurdist play about fascism.

This is at a time when Olivier wants desperately to re-invent himself as a force in British theater. He's also struggling — not very successfully — to free himself from the unhinged Vivien Leigh, having already begun a romantic relationship with his future wife, the much younger actress Joan Plowright.

The well-cast Unicorn Theatre production, directed by Mark Robbins, makes the most of this material, capturing surprisingly powerful performances from a veteran cast.

Jim Birdsall is an ideal choice for Welles, and the actor successfully negotiates the script's nuanced depiction of the great auteur. He's not just a blowhard. He's a man haunted by the thought that his greatest achievement may have been the monumental film he made when he was 26 ("Citizen Kane").

At first glance Jim Korinke is an odd choice to play Olivier. Indeed, for most of the show I flashed less on Sir Laurence than on Alec Guinness. Nonetheless, Korinke delivers an exceptional performance, showing audiences how skilled he really is. I've watched Korinke for years, often in one-note comedies or musical revues, but here he's required to act at a level that's rarely demanded of him.

The play is haunted by the presence of Leigh, here embodied by Melinda McCrary. McCrary's idiosyncratic personality and quirky sense of humor allow her to tap into the character with vivid results. The performance is as funny as it is disturbing, leading to an aching, poignant portrait of the impossible but deeply passionate love between Leigh and Olivier.

As Plowright, Cinnamon Schultz delivers a quietly controlled, economical performance that allows the character to emerge as the anchor Olivier so badly needs. The excellent Bruce Roach makes an appealing Tynan, the show's eloquent, chain-smoking narrator, and Doogin Brown delivers a nicely realized supporting performance as the fictional Sean, Welles' young Irish assistant.

This is a must-see for aficionados of theater lore and film trivia. For others, it's an opportunity to see actors working near the top of their game.

## Acting in 'Shadow'

### *'Orson's Shadow'*

- **When:** Oct. 20 (runs through Nov. 12)
- **Where:** Unicorn Theatre
- **Attendance:** 150 (approx.)
- **Tickets:** \$20 to \$28 depending on day of show. (816) 531-7529; [unicorntheatre.org](http://unicorntheatre.org)

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