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### Citizen Pain

The Unicorn gives us Orson Welles in his not-so-great days.

By Alan Scherstuhl

After realizing your every ambition, what is left? Shame can haunt the great artist's post-great years. Think of Hemingway faking potency in Key West. Or Prince scribbling "Slave" on his face. Or Orson Welles after *Citizen Kane*, a ruin of a man sabotaged by self and by studios, his work always just one final cut away from its early magnificence.

Welles' greatness even in failure sparks Austin Pendleton's *Orson's Shadow*, a fitfully en-grossing backstage comedy that, I'm sorry to say, won't be dogging its author's future. In it, Pendleton stalks Welles, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, all of whom are embodied by a stellar cast in this Unicorn production, but he never really stalks great art itself. His consideration of artists in decline has the potential for greatness but ultimately — like Welles himself — settles for entertainment.

First, what works. In telling the implausible (but true-ish) story of how, in 1960, theater critic Kenneth Tynan talked Olivier and Welles into collaborating on a London production of Eugene Ionesco's absurdist fable *Rhinoceros*, Pendleton draws on his own real-life collisions with planet-sized egos. The playwright worked on the underappreciated *What's Up Doc?* with Peter Bogdanovich and Barbara Streisand; with Jackie Gleason in Otto Preminger's LSD disaster *Skidoo*; and even with Welles himself on Mike Nichols' wretched stab at *Catch 22*. He knows the outsized and the wounded, and he captures for us what work it is to steer these personalities through doubt. His Olivier and Welles come off like Macy's Thanksgiving parade floats, kept aloft only through the labors of many smaller people, and his Vivien Leigh serves as a frightening example of what happens when one crashes to earth.

Of course, deflation ensues. Olivier is leaving the troubled Leigh for the young Joan Plowright. Welles is hiding out from the idiot studio executives who are butchering his *Touch of Evil*. And Tynan is a chain-smoking nelly with one of those stage coughs that always foreshadows third-act misfortune. Worse still, they care little for *Rhinoceros* and less for one another.

Director Mark Robbins guides his ersatz stars to good work. Jim Birdsall purrs with weary authority as Welles, swishing each line over his palate, relishing the dregs of his kingliness. Sadness dims the edges of his performance, which shows elements of impersonation (less, though, than in the real Welles' own TV appearances late in his life). As an uncertain Olivier in a changing world, Jim Korinke sometimes comes on too strong and lacks the fey grace of the original — what we hear dismissed as "all that faggoty technique" — but he otherwise accomplishes the most that we can ask for from an actor: He transfers feeling from a character's soul right into ours.

Melinda McCrary also manages this, but because the soul of her Vivien Leigh is so horrifically troubled, we're thankful we only get her for two scenes. We first meet her splayed across a divan, lovely but fragile, speaking airily to Olivier, who is by now more a caretaker than a lover. She rises, ghostlike, tremors barely held in check, her body folded in on itself. She jokes about being crazy, and we believe her. Also strong are Cinnamon Schulz, who sketches a full-bodied Plowright with just a few lines, and Bruce Roach as Tynan, our phlegmatic narrator.

These virtues are ample, but flaws in Pendleton's script prevent *Orson's Shadow* — like this *Rhinoceros* — from being entirely worth its cast. Overlong and sometimes flat, the show abuses our familiarity with the celebrities in question, taking it for granted that we're interested enough to allow, say, Olivier to dither endlessly about his romantic problems.

Worst of all, Pendleton cuts his smart stargazing with some unbelievable nonsense. Olivier and Plowright bicker about their affair right in front of a theater critic they've known for 10 minutes; stranger still, Olivier then hits up Tynan for advice on leaving Leigh and even allows him to sit in on a wrenching phone call to her. Other baffling moments stink of sitcoms. Confounded by Ionesco, Olivier becomes a galoot in rehearsal, a stiff and serious man capering about like Don Knotts. Much ado about the dangers of saying "Macbeth" in a theater results see-it-coming gags that require Birdsall and Korinke to mug for the rafters. And one weeps for this exchange between Welles and Tynan in an empty theater where Welles has just wrapped up *Chimes of Midnight*:

Welles: "When and how did you hear the rumor that I was playing to empty houses?"

Tynan: "I heard it tonight. From the other member of the audience."



Melinda McCrary dials Vivien Leigh.

### Details

#### Who / What:

Orson's Shadow

#### Details:

Through November 12, 816-531-7529 ext.10.

#### Where:

At the Unicorn Theatre, 3828 Main

To believe this, we must suppose that Welles, who is aware that Tynan caught that evening's performance, is too obtuse to realize that nobody else was there. Or that Welles believes he can bully Tynan, the theater critic for the goddamned *New Yorker*, into denying the obvious. Or that Welles — a man whose self-regard, if loosened and set airborne, could eclipse the sun — would serve as straight man to Tynan for gags at his own expense.

Or that, a full 15 years before those wine commercials, Welles would countenance such dialogue.

Or maybe that, in tribute to Welles, Pendleton decided that *something* has to keep this show from greatness.