

Me and Orson Welles: Newcomer Overshadows (of course)

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A Review by
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It had only a limited run, and you really had to seek it out if you wanted to see it, but you had to be moved if you happened to catch “Me and Orson Welles.” The film is set at the beginnings of the famed Mercury Theatre, started by Welles and John Houseman in 1937. Their first production was Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” and the film’s story centers on a fictitious character, Richard Samuels (played by Zac Efron). In this movie, Efron parts from his traditional role as teen heartthrob (most famous in his role in Disney’s “High School Musical”). Samuels is a teen who gets his first big break from Welles (portrayed by newcomer Christian McKay) in the role of Lucius in the Mercury Theatre production.

Believe it or not, Efron does a good job, but it is McKay who gives the performance of a lifetime. Truly, McKay overshadows the film in his interpretation of Welles, which is something the famous Director/Actor would have done in real life. Each line is delivered succinctly and masterfully. The story moves with an ease and authenticity that provides substantive entertainment, but it is McKay who commands the show. Clearly a nomination for Best Supporting Actor should be given to McKay. Welles has been portrayed by more than a dozen actors over time, including Vincent D’Orofrío who plays Robert Gormen on “Law and Order: Criminal Intent.” But clearly it is the McKay portrayal of Welles that will be the most accurate and moving.

Some criticize the film for playing fast and loose with the facts, which caused one of Welles’ daughters to refuse to see the film. But if you can put that aside and enjoy McKay’s performance, this film is engaging. It is also a commentary on theater life, the historic Mercury Theatre, and the start of Welles’ struggling career. In the film, Welles’ is delighted with how well his production of “Julius Caesar” is received by the public, and he asks a colleague, “How can I top this?” Of course, he would over the next few years produce his radio classic adaptation of “War of the Worlds” as well as two masterpieces, “Citizen Kane” and “The Magnificent Ambersons.”

If Hollywood is pushing films that are fun and (let’s face it) pandering, such as “It’s Complicated” and “Sherlock Holmes”, then the least it could do is offer up something as entertaining as this film.