

Welles (Continued)

while the other cast and crewmembers sat in oblivion and stewed. In the second part, Welles sits with MacLiammóir and MacLiammóir's partner, Hilton Edwards, who had a smaller part in the film. The two men had originally given Welles his start at their theater in Dublin. They talk about shooting the film, but dovetail rather quickly into the nature of the play itself, particularly a long and spellbinding passage about jealousy and envy. The third part is another monolog by Welles, this one an analysis of the play, and also incorporating a lengthy clip from an exceptionally intelligent Q&A with Welles after a screening of the film. Even in its simplicity of structure and subject, it is a wonderful and stimulating movie, and you essentially find new revelations every time you watch it. What seems most profound at the moment, however, is how much the material draws attention to the pure 'evil' of Iago's character, that he 'hates' both Othello and Cassio for no real reason other than a sense of inadequacy in himself, and how much this mirrors the fearful and growing hatred that is engulfing our society today.

Also featured is the marvelous *Return to Glennascaul*, a fantasy short that was completed in 1953 and made during the shooting of *Othello* by Edwards and MacLiammóir, with Welles' participation. Nominated for an Oscar, the 28-minute black-and-white program, which was also included on the LD, opens with a well-composed introduction by Bogdanovich. Welles, whose presence is magnetic, provides narration throughout and is in two opening bookends that frame the actual tale, which plays very much like a Japanese ghost story, in which a traveler gives two women a ride on a dark night.

Also featured is a superb 21-minute analysis of the blackface tradition associated with the play (see below), explaining what a revelation it was when black actors first began performing it, and pointing out how Welles actually removes a lot of the play's racial references to aid his appearance in the part. "*Othello* is this, like, incredibly dynamic text. It changes over history. It's not the same thing in the Seventeenth Century as it is in the Twenty-first Century. And it's impossible for it to be the same thing. There's been too much history in between—a history of trans-Atlantic slavery, a history of minstrelsy, a history of abolition, a history of Black Power. All of these things change the way that we react to this play, and nonetheless, the words can remain exactly the same."

An extensive two-part (the first half in French and the second half in English) 49-minute interview with Cloutier, shot in 1994, includes clips from the film that, along with the clips in *Filming Othello*, provide a good example of what the movie used to look like. Cloutier's memory is vivid and exhaustive, and her comments are insightful, covering not just the making of the film, but her entire experience with Welles and his later career. She points out that *Othello* was the last time Welles performed a role in a film as the central protagonist, and gives her reasoning behind it.

Welles biographer Simon Callow supplies an excellent 22-minute history of the film's on-and-off production and a number of related events, including the gradually widening rift that occurred between Welles and MacLiammóir, while another Welles biographer, Joseph McBride, presents a fascinating and peripatetic 33-minute rumination about the film, ranging from his perspective on how the film was shot and what Welles was thinking as he shot it (he suggests that Welles' performance is hurt from both the distraction of the production problems and a timidity about embracing the racial component wholeheartedly) to the intriguing suggestion that Welles saw John Houseman as his own Iago.

A more complete presentation of the play, produced in 1965, *Othello*, is available from Warner Home Video (UPC#08539112105, \$25). Shot on a soundstage and drawing its cast from a London stage production, the movie, directed by Stuart Burge, has a limited number of sets, but was filmed in CinemaScope and color by Geoffrey Unsworth, and is consistently involving. Frank Finlay is Iago, Derek Jacobi is Casio and Maggie Smith is Desdemona (Michael Gambon is somewhere in the crowd of extras, too), but of course, the central focus and the beacon of the film is an amazing and ghastly performance by Laurence Olivier in the title role. Welles' blackface performance is still relatively acceptable by modern standards. The black-and-white cinematography subdues the effects of the makeup, and he seems to have more of a dark tan than a different birthright. It works for the film and the play perfectly well, especially with the acknowledgement that it was shot in different times and under different standards than are expected today. But in the same way that films with Al Jolson are no longer deemed presentable, Olivier will make today's viewers cringe. He does not just play the character, he plays black. Somehow, and this is the amazing part, he modifies his voice to create a deeper timbre. But he clearly spent time observing African men (Jamaican, according to the featurette on the Welles *Othello*), and imitates not only the manner of their speaking, but their expressions and body language, as well. He's good at it, but it is still embarrassing as all get out.

Running 166 minutes, there is an Intermission at the 91-minute

point, which is, as you will recall from above, the total running time of the 1955 Welles version. This presentation does indeed give you the full flow of Shakespeare's poetry. Finlay is terrific and Jacobi is great, too. Smith, for all of her skills as an actress, is never as affecting or as vulnerable as Cloutier, and feels miscast for a number of reasons. Nevertheless, if one can get past Olivier's white-toothed grins and not cringe at his most flagrant moments of racial imitation, it is a worthy and rewarding rendition of the play, and puts into perspective how more expressive and shorthand-like Welles' version is. Unsworth's cinematography is superbly composed, with compelling close-ups at key moments and longer shots that use the full rectangular screen to show the emotional divide between the characters. As a document of how the play has been performed since the day Shakespeare wrote it, the film, with its visual beauty and competent staging, is a valuable and unique work, but unlike Welles' enduring classic, it is a relic of a time that has permanently passed in the human experience or, at least, we certainly hope it is.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color is a touch faded and grainy in the movie's opening moments, but thereafter it is solid and fresh, and the fleshtones on Finlay, Jacobi and Smith are accurate. The image is so clear and sharp you can see Olivier's makeup smear on Smith's cheek when he embraces her. The monophonic sound is fine. There are optional English and French subtitles, a 4-minute production featurette narrated by Olivier and billed as a trailer, and a 5-minute featurette also narrated by Olivier (with some overlap of material, and one quite amusing aside). What is fascinating about the trailers, and about lame advertising art that is replicated on the DVD's jacket cover, is how much it attempts to get around the still taboo subject of miscegenation by emphasizing the program's impeccable cultural credentials.

Fellini's dreamscape

It is unmistakably a Fellini movie. Several decades after Federico Fellini's final film, *The Voice of the Moon* (*La voce della luna*), was completed in 1990, it has finally achieved general distribution in America, having been issued on a DVD & Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#7601-37056782, \$40). Roberto Benigni stars, seen first at night in an empty field near a well. As he turns one way, he sees some men eagerly making their way across a field, and he follows them to a house, where they are peeping through a window at a woman doing a striptease. From there, he meets other people and interacts with them, traversing to different buildings and even from night to daylight and a crowded town square. Some of the people he meets tell him stories, and those stories take over the film briefly, but the movie always returns to him as he moves along, like in a dream, to his next experience. Paolo Villaggio co-stars as an older and more concerned citizen who wants to warn his community about the threats against them. Running 121 minutes, the film culminates in an elaborate and crowded beauty contest, which is upset, in part, by the impulsiveness of Benigni's character, segueing to a more fantastical sequence where several farmers have 'captured the moon.' There is an aura of madness hanging about the primary characters, which seeps into the film's landscape.

Although the film is a celebration of characters, it does not achieve the emotion or coherent psychological development of Fellini's best movies, and Benigni's mugging gets a bit obvious when he is reacting to other contrivances. But the 121-minute film is still very precious. Its tone, its rhythm (not just the editing, but the dialog recitations, the way the actors move and turn their heads, and so on) and its atmosphere were constructed by most of the same craftsman who labored on all of Fellini's films, and even in the instances where a change in personnel was necessary, such as the music, it echoes without reservation what had been done in the past. *The Voice of the Moon* was the final full expression of Fellini's artistry, and is a fresh, enduring display of his humor and his sensibilities. Like so many of his films, it shows his love for Italy, the land and the people that gave him life, and it will disseminate that love to the rest of the globe for generations to come.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The color transfer looks beautiful, and the images are continually enrapturing. The

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delivered, and like most of his movies, the Italian dialog is post-synchronized, with optional English subtitles. Along with a montage of promotional materials that runs about 8 minutes, there is a 58-minute production featurette that contains lots of behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with everyone except the maestro himself. (About halfway through it, the screen goes black, and then leader appears for the second reel.) The program follows a make-believe female reporter who is trying to do a story about the film, but this contrivance gives the piece an impish feel that makes it an ideal aperitif to the feature.

Laughing with Wanda

The marvelous, cartoony romantic crime comedy, A Fish Called Wanda, has been released on Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137044086, \$40). The picture transfer is not that much different from the old MGM transfer (May 99). Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, hues are a touch light at times and there is a slight grain in some darker sequences, but the image is still fully acceptable. The monophonic sound is crisp, and there is a remastered 5.1-channel DTS track that brings a basic dimensionality to the music. There are optional English subtitles and a subtitle track that contains trivia about the film and the cast.

Often forgotten amid the 1988 film's funniest moments, it is a sweet romance on top of everything else. Kevin Kline, Michael Palin, Jamie Lee Curtis and Tom Georgeson pull off a smooth diamond heist, but through their own betrayals, they lose access to the diamonds, and must target an unsuspecting lawyer, played by John Cleese, to get the diamonds back. Kline's over-the-top performance suits the film perfectly and is riotously funny. Some viewers may find Palin's performance discomfiting, as it hinges on a very bad stutter, but the movie is so unrelenting about it, your defenses eventually wear down, and it is very necessary to keep the plot complications bubbling over. Curtis and Cleese provide the heart of the picture. The legendary British director Charles Crichton managed the film's pacing superbly, with Cleese's input going well beyond simply writing the script, but along with everything else, the film is a collaborative joy, and it is that spirit that takes the pain out of the slapstick while leaving the humor fully appreciable.

The greatest advantage of the new Blu-ray, however, is its multitude of special features, particularly the 30 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes, although the funniest deleted scene of all appears in a very good 2003 retrospective featurette. Running 31 minutes, the featurette goes into detail about the challenges the cast and crew faced, and how they worked through those challenges to find solutions that benefited the film. It also contains a very amusing sequence with Palin and Kline, in which the two ransack a room in vain for writing instruments, in order to communicate a vital piece of information.

A good 48-minute production featurette, framed as a profile of Cleese, has lots of behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with the cast and crew. Cleese even opens up about his private life. There is a nice 8-minute interview with production designer Roger Murray-Leach, who explains how various aspects of the film were conceived and staged; an interesting 17-minute piece that presents a more objective view of how the film was gestated and why it came together as it did; a 17-minute visit to the film's locations; a jokey 5-minute Cleese introduction ("Hi, my name is Meryl Streep..."); and a trailer.

Finally, Cleese supplies a very rewarding commentary track, going over details on every aspect of the production, and also talking about filmmaking strategies ("The great thing about romantic comedy is that at least until consummation there's a kind of tension between the characters, the audience wondering, 'Will they? Won't they?'" and it enables you to stop the jokes for a bit, take the pace down without losing a little bit of tension on the screen, without the audience losing interest. And I think that's why romantic comedy is such an attractive genre, because you can have very, very funny sequences, but you can also have these low key sequences that enable the pace to come down, which somehow make the comedy funnier once you get back to it.") and how comedy works ("Sometimes when you get a funny idea, you can make a mistake and try to get too many laughs out of it. Every funny idea has only so many laughs in it, and that's the number you should go for.")

He also goes into great detail about his collaboration with his three primary co-stars:

"One of the things I was able to do with Kevin was to stop for 10 days before we actually got anywhere near shooting the movie and just go through the movie with him with all of the scenes, and just see what he came up with. And he came up with some wonderful lines, and also there's some wonderful physical stuff, like sniffing under the armpit, and all that came because we were very loose, very relaxed. We had lots of time. We were just able to play.

"One of the things that I started with when I was trying to work up Michael's character is I simply had the idea of the scene at the end of the

movie. In fact, I think it was the very first idea I had for the whole movie, of someone with a stutter trying to get information out, and not being able to, although they're really trying to. And the reason I knew that would be beautifully played by Michael is that his father had quite a stutter, and he was able throughout his childhood to observe it. There's a very obvious way of doing a stutter, which I guess, frankly, most actors would do, which wouldn't be right and wouldn't be funny. And it's the little sort of subterfuges, the little tactics that people with a stutter or a stammer use to try and hide it that Michael knew about and was able to incorporate in his performance.

"Jamie was terribly, terribly helpful. What she said was we mustn't rehearse these scenes too much. In comedy, I believe in endless, endless rehearsals, doing it again and again and again and again, because each time a little smoothness creeps in, you discover something else, you find a new rhythm. Well Jamie said to me, 'It isn't like that with the romantic scenes. We don't want to rehearse this,' and she'd catch me sitting in the corner, running the lines, and she'd wave a finger at me and say, 'No!' So for the first time in my life, I suddenly found that acting was not about this strict rhythm that comedy demands. And, it was rather fun, because when you play in comedy normally, the demands of the timing are so great that it sometimes seems to me as though there's some sort of huge metronome at the back of my head just clicking, and I've got to do everything on the click. You know, I've got to do the line, then two clicks, another line, one click, another line, three clicks, turn head on second click. And I get it very, very, very grooved. And I can reproduce almost the exact same performance again and again and again. Surprises people, but I'm a very technical performer. So I found that, going into these scenes with Jamie, not quite knowing how we were going to play them was intensely liberating. I was suddenly released from the metronome and just able to play in the moment. And I suddenly thought this kind of acting is rather fun because, rather like Kevin's performance, I didn't know what I was going to do during the scene. It was like being in a little rowboat, pushing off from the shore, and then throwing the oar away."

Like all movie productions, there were instances of tension, and he acknowledges them, but for the most part, the shoot went smoothly. "It was a very happy production. We did it in 52 days and Charlie was so efficient we used to finish it by six every night. Nobody got too tired and we really all had a rather good time, and I think that that contributes to the good spirit that you see up on the screen."

A ghost

Kristen Stewart and director Oliver Assayas had a terrific hit with the 2014 The Clouds of Sils Maria (Jul 16), in which Stewart delivered a wonderful, captivating performance as the personal assistant to a famous actress. So the two teamed up again with a rather obvious marketing ploy, the 2016 Personal Shopper, a Criterion Blu-ray (UPC#715515205214, \$40), in which Stewart portrays the title character, picking out and picking up clothing and accessories for a wealthy socialite who has no time to do her own shopping. The film is a surprise, however, because it is also a ghost story, as Stewart's character may or may not be haunted by the specter of her deceased twin brother. To give the 105-minute feature more structure, there is also a murder. The film does not have the strong inter-character dynamic that made Clouds of Sils Maria so captivating, but it is an eerie and intriguing tale, combining the marvelous down-to-earth fantasy of life amid the haute couture with more ethereal intrigues that may or may not be real.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is smooth and glossy, enhancing the appeal of the European locations. The DTS sound has a lovely dimensionality, and lots of scary bumps and thumps. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a satisfying, analytical 17-minute talk about the film by Assayas, who explains how he developed the idea for the story, talks about working with Stewart and provides an interesting perspective on horror movies ("When you start dealing with genre filmmaking, you are in an area where I'm not so comfortable, which is like the stereotype of American genre filmmaking. There's this notion that you have 'good' and you have 'evil.' What is visible is good and what is out of view is evil, or the embodiment of evil, which, of course, is very different from my vision of the supernatural. I think that the supernatural is what happens outside the sphere of our senses, but it's pretty real, and eventually it could be a good thing connecting with it."), and a typical 46-minute Cannes press conference where the reporters ask Stewart about acting in the nude and that sort of thing, although it does give Assayas an opportunity to share more insights about the history of spiritualism, as he explains where his inspirations for the film came from. "I went back to a very specific period at the end of the Nineteenth Century when all of a sudden they discovered photography, they discovered X-rays, they discovered the Morse Code—all of a sudden, things that were unthinkable were thinkable, so why [would] communicating with the dead be impossible? It was as weird, as shocking, as transformative as any of those inventions. So there was a very short period in time in the mid-Nineteenth Century to the end of the century where it was something that was real. It was tangible."