

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Chimes at midnight</b>
Author(s)	Gordon Gow
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Chimes at midnight, Welles, Orson, 1966

## CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT

### Gordon Gow at Welles' lament for the passing of Merrie England . . .

Directed by Orson Welles. Screenplay by Orson Welles, from plays by William Shakespeare. Director of photography, Edmond Richard. Art director, Mariano Erdorza. Music by Angelo Lavagnino. Spanish. Distributed by Planet. Cert U. 115 mins. *Falstaff*, ORSON WELLES; *Hal*, KEITH BAXTER; *Henry IV*, JOHN GIELGUD; *Doll Tearsheet*, JEANNE MOREAU; *Hotspur*, NORMAN RODWAY; *Mistress Quickly*, MARGARET RUTHERFORD; *Poins*, TONY BECKLEY; *Shallow*, ALAN WEBB; *Silence*, WALTER CHIARI; *Pistol*, MICHAEL ALDRIDGE.

Well disposed as I am toward the Orson Welles *Macbeth* and *Othello*, I feel bound to call his *Chimes at Midnight* the most mature of his Shakespearean excursions, and to hope at the same time that my use of the word 'mature' will not be taken amiss. This film is not only cinematic but also profound. To his own performance as Falstaff, Welles brings a quiet relish and a manifest sadness. The gross, great-hearted and roguish Elizabethan knight, with traces of a persecution complex, is arguably his most notable piece of acting since Kane. There is a reminiscent twinkle as he casts his mind back to younger days of wenching and frivolity, when he always 'heard the chimes at midnight' well before he went to sleep. But a sadness that communicates itself very strongly is never far beneath the surface.

Chiefly, though, it is Welles as *cinéaste*, rather than just actor, that the film places in a true perspective. At the time of *Citizen Kane* I was sure, and then over the years I doubted slightly, but now I am certain again that no greater man of the cinema has ever lived. *Chimes at Midnight* is a masterpiece.

Welles has adapted it primarily from two of the history plays, *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, with a snatch of the reference to Falstaff's death from *Henry V*. It was filmed in economic Spain in locations that serve well for the battlefield at Shrewsbury and the English countryside under a mantle of snow. It more than lives up to the definition Welles himself has applied: 'A lament for the passing of Merrie England.'

His Falstaff is an image of folly that cannot be sustained. The drunken, amiable friendship with Prince Hal is waning, as the future king becomes almost priggishly aware of his potential importance. Yet this is an understandable fault in him, caught as he is between guilty considerations of duty and the elemental urges of youth. Hal is the pivot of the film, and in Keith Baxter's interpretation he is given a psychological depth that owes something to modernity but never gets in the way of the historical context. We see Hal carousing with Falstaff and the tavern wenches

(among them, fleetingly, Jeanne Moreau as Doll Tearsheet), and then conferring with his ill and anxious father in a castle where the stone walls, solid and chill, contrast strongly to the sensuality of the inn. If the compositions are less extravagant than is the norm in a Welles film, they are never less than pertinent, and among them there is a striking one that sets Henry IV and Hal in a great shaft of light from a window of the castle, when, seen from a distance, enclosed by the austere stone walls, the image suggests the isolation of kingship more eloquently than words . . . even Shakespeare's.

John Gielgud's performance as Henry IV is imbued with a harsh moral attitude against his son's debaucheries, which is palpably heightened by the king's own sense of insecurity. In addition to his failing health, the man is conceivably uneasy in his mind about the manner in which he came to the throne, and certainly unnerved by the threatened rebellion. Again a modern psychological influence comes into it; again it is contained to perfection within the framework of history.

Hal, torn two ways, is disorientated, uncertain and consequently vicious, even waspish. His taunting of Falstaff seen at close range, is far beyond a joke; while the banter goes on as a matter of form, a close-up of Welles discloses the old knight's apprehension and misery. Such things, there already in the plays, are more potent in cinema.

On a broader scale, the battle that is waged when the rebels take arms against the crown brings a stronger complexity with it. Boldly, Welles has combined a richness of low comedy with the stark and inhuman aspect of war. Men in armour are hoisted on to their horses by a contraption of ropes and pulleys, and the fat Falstaff, hauled aloft in heavy trappings, proves too weighty for the rope, which gives way. He falls out of frame; there is a tremendous crash; and we find him sitting encumbered on the ground as the fighting begins. Then, amid the clash of battle, the smoke and the confusion, we see in savage close-up a face streaming with blood, and we also see the preposterous fat knight stomping through it all like some inadequately animated robot. Encompassing the realistic and the absurd, and relating the one to the other, Welles has also maintained the essential sadness of an elegy . . . a lament for pleasure that cannot continue.

When Hal is crowned king, Falstaff ventures into the Abbey to be present and to be recognised. His pathetic greeting to a former companion in folly is met by a cold and totally heartless rejection. Hal has cut clean from the past. The scalpel has been unmercifully sharp. The chimes at midnight are silenced.