

## What You See Isn't Always What You Get:

### *War of the Worlds*

By Carrie Winship

#### Abstract

Anne Bogart describes Naomi Iizuka's *War of the Worlds* as a play "essentially about the American confusion between news and entertainment, our appetite for sensation, and our ability quickly to discard and forget whatever it was we were so excited about." Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart and created by the SITI Company, the play premiered at the Humana Festival in 2000. I have been recently drawn to this disturbing and delightful play as an artist, teacher, and scholar, as it offers a meditation on the fickleness of media narratives, and how they may intersect or diverge to create the image of a monster, or a hero. Donald Trump's love of *Citizen Kane* was touted throughout his 2016 presidential campaign—reporters compared Trump's political bid to that of character Charles Foster Kane—both eccentric tycoons fighting against establishment candidates. I was struck by Trump's fascination with Welles himself; it seemed a cruel joke that this contemporary showman could idolize an artistic giant perhaps best remembered for his own brand of "truthiness." But idolize Welles, he did. In this pastiche of connections, Iizuka's playtext deserves renewed attention. In this essay, I explore the work's potential as a piece challenging essentialist concepts of identity, as it interrogates the phenomenon of celebrity in the United States, as well as offers a critique of visual mediums of storytelling as unstable artifice.

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“The question at the heart of it is: What happens when news becomes entertainment?” offers Anne Bogart, describing SITI company’s production of *War of the Worlds*, which explored the life of theatrical giant Orson Welles (Banner). “Welles was responsible for the first great media hoax. And, he would change his life story, depending on who he was dealing with,” Bogart continues, “he was a manipulator, lying to people, depending on the circumstances. So, we play with truth and falsehood, and ‘How do you know anyone anyway?’” (Banner). The SITI Company had already developed several pieces examining key artistic figures, and Orson Welles had become their newest focus. After staging a reading of his famed *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, the company commissioned Naomi Iizuka to write a piece exploring the myths and contradicting depictions of Welles’ life. What followed, and eventually made its way to a full production at the Humana Festival in March of 2000, is a disturbing and delightful play described by Bogart as “essentially about the American confusion between news and entertainment, our appetite for sensation, and our ability quickly to discard and forget whatever it was we were so excited about” (Bogart 31). *War of the Worlds* grapples with Welles as a distinctly American figure and examines how competing acts of sight shaped audiences’ understanding of and relationship to him as a celebrity, artist, and historical figure.

In this project, I explore how Iizuka’s textual presentation of visual motion-capture technology (in the form of film, as well as embodied and theatrical reference to the medium) challenges concepts of identity that rely on fixity or essentialist notions. In the play, Orson Welles, the famed actor and director who became notorious following his 1938 broadcast of

H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*—arguably an actual incident of “fake news” or at least a notable example of public confusion over reality and fiction—is the subject of a *Citizen Kane*-esque documentary project intended to capture the real man behind the performer. *War of the Worlds* challenges audiences to question the limits of knowing another through the evidence of visual technologies—and in turn the piece illuminates the significance of perspective and narrative, both visual and textual, in the construction of identity.

I was reminded of SITI company's *War of the Worlds* when I began seeing threads of media stories about Donald Trump's love of *Citizen Kane* during his 2016 campaign—how reporters compared Trump's political bid to that of fictional character Charles Foster Kane—both eccentric tycoons fighting against establishment candidates. I was struck by Trump's fascination with Welles himself; it seemed too horribly easy that this contemporary showman could idolize an artistic giant perhaps best remembered for his own brand of “truthiness.” But idolize Welles he did, as a young boy who also dreamed of being a filmmaker: “I loved Orson Welles. He was totally fucked up. He was a total mess. But think of his wives. Think of his hits [...] He became totally impossible. He thought everybody was a moron, everybody was this, everybody was that; if he has a budget he'd exceed it by 20 times and destroy everything. He became impossible. I loved that” (O'Brien xiii). This pastiche of connections led me to wonder how Trump, a man who appears to me as always in performance mode, has been shaped by his experience of film? How have we all? Trump's campaign recalled touts to “Let Reagan be Reagan,” as Trump was applauded by his base and supporters for his willingness to ‘be himself,’ while his detractors looked on horrified as his false statements, misinformation, and outright lies piled up. How do we reconcile these

deeply divided images? And what can the theatre's role be in rendering these questions visible?

As Naomi Iizuka is a playwright lauded for her use of postmodern aesthetics, it is unsurprising that postmodernism stylistically dominates the form of the play. Iizuka and Bogart, through this piece, examine the phenomenon of celebrity in the United States, as well as offer a critique of the theatre as artifice—primarily through juxtaposition of Welles's life as caught on camera and told through the medium of the stage. Bogart suggests the relationship between film and live performance was key to her desire to develop this work: "I chose him (as a dramatic subject) because he's a great American artist whose works are too little known. We've been influenced by Welles' films. I wanted to translate his film techniques to the stage, and make it more human and more visually exciting" (Bennet). Like the apocryphal stories surrounding Welles' 1938 broadcast, the play engenders an examination of the concept of "realism" in American theatre and film. As reviewer Judith Newmark writes, *War of the Worlds* raises the question: "What sense does it make to think about realism at all? Why insist that theater succeeds best when it's indistinguishable from everyday life?" (Newmark). What Newmark points to here is a discourse concerning the portrayal of, and often blurry line between, theatrical performance and "reality." Whether or not Welles' 1938 broadcast factually resulted in mass panic, the popularity of the story may be viewed as a parable: when the lines between theatricality and reality are dissolved there may be dangerous consequences. This sense of danger is directly explored in this "intellectually and physically flexible biography" that paints a picture of Welles as a man who struggled due to the media's sensationalist coverage of his life (Newmark).

In *War of the Worlds*, Iizuka challenges the concept of a fixed binary between fact and fiction, ultimately offering an anti-essentialist critique by

demonstrating the inability to distinguish between the “real” Orson Welles and the mythologies generated about his life and work. I use anti-essentialist here as a broad concept to suggest a view of identity as unstable and one that does not locate or privilege a single perspective: his films, the media’s view of Welles, his colleagues’ experiences with him, his collection of non-filmic work, and his own image of self altogether constitute at least a version of the identity of the famed performer. His positionality as a white, educated, cis-gendered, heterosexual, man living and working primarily in the United States are also intersecting aspects of his life that undoubtedly—but not singularly—describe his experiences or life. As scholar Trina Grillo offers, an anti-essentialist perspective rejects the assumption that an individual can be reduced to an essence of experience that has “a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts” (19). Critic John Istel has noted that the play is about how “identity and media culture create each other,” but I suggest that Iizuka’s work is also investigating the muddiness around this theoretical feedback loop—and the text ultimately posits that there is no distinction of validity between the many arcs of evidence that people may use to read Welles’ identity for themselves (Istel). In a culture highly motivated by visual evidence, this work offers audiences an opportunity to reflect on our public desire to witness—and interrogate how individuals, and communities, link acts of witness to knowledge construction.

*War of the Worlds* loosely mirrors the plot of Orson Welles’ best-known film, *Citizen Kane*. The play begins, as does the film, with the death of the central character, in this case Welles, and follows the journey of a young writer, called (as in the film) Thompson, as he attempts to piece together what Welles was “really” like to appease and impress his powerful, film executive bosses, who are producing a documentary of

Welles' life and work. In the second scene of the play, Stratten, one of Thompson's powerful bosses, shouts, "Get in touch with everybody that ever worked for him—whoever loved him, whoever hated his guts!" (Iizuka 22). Following this charge, Thompson tracks down several characters that "knew" Welles and interviews them. As characters describe Welles, their narratives are layered upon other dramatic portrayals of him. Woven throughout the play are clips of Orson Welles' most notable films, choreographed images of the memories that characters share, flashbacks to events that are portrayed through scenes, and moments where Welles addresses the audience directly to describe his own version of the story. All these presentations are underscored by major shifts in visual perspective (which was suggested by the Humana Festival production through the use of projections and several large picture frames placed onstage that literally demarcated different scenes). All these transitions are uniquely communicated in the playtext through Iizuka's signature use of tonal stage directions, which communicate the essence and magic of this constantly shifting theatrical world. An early example of this is seen in Iizuka's initial description of Welles as he enters the playing space. She writes, "*Orson Welles enters the frame. He is larger than life [...] He is droll and dapper and almost imperceptibly, unwell. He speaks to an audience, seen and unseen*" (Iizuka 119). The notion of an audience that is both present and invisible to Welles is potent—and points to the insidiousness of the media and public observation he would encounter throughout his life. In this early moment Iizuka implicates the audience of the production by locating it within a lineage of public viewings of Welles.

Following his first monologue, Iizuka indicates that he "*pulls a tiny box out of thin air;*" within this box is contained a scene of a woman, Welles' mother, as she sits listening to piano music playing on the radio

“almost a century ago” (Iizuka). This initial moment is important for two reasons: it introduces the reader of the text to Iizuka’s penchant for using stage directions that seem to ask the impossible and establishes Welles’ connection to sleight-of-hand magic. At several times within the narrative, Iizuka utilizes this convention of Welles performing a magic trick—a particularly rich metaphor for a man who consistently avowed his power as an artist to control an audience’s focus and gaze. The SITI company’s approach to Iizuka’s stage directions also appears to be theatrically rich, as the company known for its physically vibrant performances executed her theatrical challenges through simple and efficient use of bodies and properties. One reviewer of the production as performed in 2000 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City (one of two transfers the production would undertake following its initial success at Humana) writes that the “actors dash from scene to scene as easily as bodies in celluloid, making the transitions with little more than a wheel-on dolly or the addition of chair” (Renner). Other descriptions of the production focus on the energy the actors employ moving from moment to moment, which allowed the filmic nature of Iizuka’s stage imaginings to translate nicely to live performance.

Iizuka’s structure also echoes filmic aesthetics as the audience follows Thompson’s quest through fragments and glimpses of a man who was an ingenious storyteller, but a man haunted by his early career successes, his attraction to beautiful and challenging women, his struggles with hedonistic habits, and most importantly, the media’s continual need to investigate and portray all of Welles’ private struggles. An example of these diverse perspectives colliding in Iizuka’s text can be found in scene 14:

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #2: RKO pulls plug on *It’s All Time*.

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #1: Back home, *Citizen Kane* shut out at

Oscars.

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #2: *Magnificent Ambersons*: Box Office Flop

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #1: Boy Wonder turned has-been almost overnight.

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #2: Item: Saw Bad Boy Welles the other day at Harry Cohn's. He was sporting a moustache and twenty extra pounds. What're you going to do, Orson, now that you're out of a job?

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER #1: Item: Director, Actor, Radio Personality Mr. Orson Welles marries "it" girl Rita Hayworth, in a small, private ceremony in Santa Monica, California. Our best wishes go out to the happy newlyweds. May you two love-birds live happily ever after.

*A Hollywood ending. Credits. The actors disperse. Welles exits. Lap Dissolve. (136)*

In this passage, we see members of a fictional media's capricious attitude towards Welles, as we watch its quick shift from criticizing Welles as his career falters to celebrating him after his highly publicized marriage. This passage also demonstrates Lizuka's smooth intertextual and metatheatrical writing style, as she converts factual references into fictional news reports, focuses on how the media was invested in blending Welles' private life with his public one, and references his artistic work through the insertion of the "Lap Dissolve" direction, a filmic strategy for transitioning scenes using fades and the overlapping of images to craft the filmic illusion that one scene picture is dissolving into another. Gregg Toland, the cinematographer who worked with Welles on *Citizen Kane* has reported that most of the transitions in the film are lap dissolves, chosen

over more traditional approaches to scene cuts as a way to meet Orson Welles' demand that all the films scenes "should flow together smoothly and imperceptibly" and render the "mechanical details imperceptible" (Toland 75-76). Here, Iizuka seems to be working in the opposite direction—employing the use of the filmic technique to highlight the metatheatricality of the moment onstage—where Welles' marriage is twisted into a visual joke and fiction. The sarcasm in the "Hollywood ending" stage direction is palpable, considering the audience already knows this marriage ends in divorce, and that this contented ending eluded Orson Welles in his own life. Ultimately, by the end of the play, the audience and Thompson learn that despite the fame of works like *Citizen Kane*, Welles died unsatisfied, believing he failed to find the success in life he had always dreamed of.

*War of the Worlds* is better understood as an exploration of the human inability to distinguish fantasy from reality, or perhaps an attempt to disrupt assumptions that there is a distinguishable difference between the two. The play engenders a consideration of the questions: What is real? And how is one to know? Iizuka's troubling of these categories, her interrogation of what constitutes realness, is most easily seen in the play through Thompson's journey. He constantly circles around the "real" Welles but is only able to capture a multiplicity of perspectives that perhaps coagulate into a true human being. Theatre critic Pamela Renner writes that in the 2000 BAM production "the human core" of Welles "is intentionally off-limits" (Renner). This purposeful obfuscation of Welles is central to Iizuka's text, as the play leads the audience on an ultimately unfulfilled journey.

The nature of celebrity and its impact on theatrical audience reception has been theorized by many scholars eager to define the phenomenon of actor/character duality. In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin

Carlson explores how audiences' collective memories of theatrical experience haunt all theatrical reception, a process he labels ghosting. Ghosting is not only limited to a viewer's specific previous play-going experience, but rather stems from onlookers' knowledge of theatrical convention in general and illuminates the always present duality of an actor's position as both character and not-character. Carlson identifies the appearance of celebrities as a particularly potent example of ghosting:

The most familiar example of this phenomenon is the appearance of an actor, remembered from previous roles, in a new characterization. The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles . . . a phenomenon that often colours and indeed may dominate the reception process. (8)

Carlson describes this unavoidable déjà vu as an inescapable reality for celebrity performers, arguing that "even when an actor strives to vary his roles, he is, especially as his reputation grows, entrapped by the memories of his public, so that each new appearance requires a renegotiation with those memories" (9). Throughout *War of the Worlds* the character Welles finds himself embroiled in this "renegotiation" as he is constantly hounded by reminders of his past work. In a particularly bombastic moment, Welles overturns a restaurant table spread with dining pieces and food after becoming frustrated by a reporter's continual mentioning of *Citizen Kane*. Having been under the assumption that he would be discussing his recent movie, *The Stranger*, Welles explodes when the reporter suggests that "after *Kane*" Welles has become a has-been. Welles shouts, "I don't want to talk about Kane, I don't want to talk about Kane, I don't want to talk about Kane" (144). This moment emphasizes Welles' inability to escape his entrapment by the "ghosts" of his previous work—which Iizuka highlights through the embodied act of the table flip, which ironically echoes *Citizen*

*Kane's* famed climactic bedroom trashing scene—where indeed, a table is flipped. While the character of Welles endeavors to continue creating, his early work consistently serves as the symbol and image of his career. This moment is also shaped by the historical Welles' relationship to *Citizen Kane*, as he was continually identified with Kane —critics, film reviewers, and scholars often discuss the autobiographical elements of the film—and Welles played the titular character of Charles Foster Kane in the film itself. As recently as 2011, this discussion was revived when *Citizen Kane* was screened at MoMA as a part of its *An Auteurist History of Film* cycle. Timed to celebrate the 96<sup>th</sup> birthday of the filmmaker, the autobiographical nature of the film is highlighted in both the marketing materials for the event, and in scholarly notes accompanying the screenings. Written by film scholar Charles Silver, the notes declare that “*Citizen Kane* [...] can be justly seen as an autobiographical expression of Welles’s” and queries, “What 25-year-old was ever so ambitious and innately talented?” (Silver). In the table-flipping scene, Lizuka dramatizes Welles' outrage at being identified with Kane, while simultaneously evoking his persona as Kane by visually referencing the film and Kane's notorious character, who is known for violent outbursts. By doing this, Lizuka renders the connection between Welles and his famed character even more visible in the audience's mind and underscores our inability to conceive of Welles (the historical figure) without these connections. This moment also seems to suggest a cynicism that a project to identify Welles as a figure separate from his artistic products and performances is worthwhile. This moment begs the question of whether Welles was shaped by the characters he generated? And in the case of Kane, where is the line between Welles and the character? This famed table-flipping moment in the film is also discussed in scene eight of the play, by a fictional film scholar that Thompson interviews about the work. Describing the scene where Kane destroys Susan Alexander's

bedroom, the scholar proclaims “Welles destroyed the place [...] it doesn’t feel like acting. It feels real” (Iizuka 128). Iizuka continues to trouble this relationship between actor, character, and persona throughout the play.

Iizuka’s playtext, which presents Welles as a public figure alongside images of him as an actor and director, also provokes a discussion of how Carlson’s concept of “ghosting” may operate when audiences’ interpretations of artistic products are informed by their public knowledge of an individual. While the notion of celebrity is not limited to our contemporary moment—Carlson cites as evidence the common 19<sup>th</sup> century practice of actors appearing in *propria persona* perhaps best exemplified by William F. Cody who appeared in numerous stage and filmed reenactments of his experiences as a scout under the moniker “Buffalo Bill”—the increased interest in celebrities’ human-ness, and the subsequent inundation of the public with reports of celebrity life, make the play particularly relevant (Carlson 88).

Pointedly, *War of the Worlds* suggests that the media’s portrayal of Welles during his life impacted audience reception of his work. In essence, public coverage of Welles’ life synthesized to suggest a knowable character persona that ghosted his entire career. The argument that Welles’ public representation operated as a character in Carlson’s model may be augmented by considering scholar David Graver’s work examining the reception of celebrities in performance. Graver has created a system for classifying actor presence and argues there are seven corporeal presences read by audiences defining the “ontological complexity” of a body onstage. Most applicable to Iizuka’s play is Graver’s concept of a performer “personage,” which Graver defines as “an aura generated by the public circulation of stories about the actor” (Graver 222). The multiple individuals that Thompson encounters and interviews throughout the play clearly establish this “aura” around Welles. This concept of personage

importantly points to ethical questions about the media's invasion into celebrity life and the way that audiences imbue the concept of "personage" with essential truth. If audiences are using these circulated narratives as evidence of a knowable, or known, celebrity, this is problematic or perhaps even dangerous, as demonstrated by Orson Welles's deterioration. The play dramatizes the conflation of "personage" with a "true identity" through the main plot of Thompson's quest to find the "real Welles." As Thompson tracks down a number of individuals who had personal relationships with Welles, he simultaneously generates new stories through the interviews he conducts, which in turn contribute to the creation of Welles' personage. Furthermore, Graver's concept does not differentiate between stories circulated about an actor's *work*, and stories circulated about an actor's personal life. *War of the Worlds* acts as an impetus for furthering this conversation, as Lizuka suggests that the world's belief in a true and knowable George Orson Welles was primarily derived from the media's coverage of his private life, including his alcoholism, turbulent romantic relationships, and financial struggles. The play presents a Welles who was severely impacted by this type of media coverage, which contributed to his continued struggles as an artist and human. In a brief fragment Lizuka portrays this interest in Welles' private life in a scene where Thompson interviews Webber about Welles' intimate relationships:

THOMPSON: Was he ever in love?

WEBBER: Love? Why, I think what he did, everything he ever did, he did for love. I think that's why he made movies. And why he couldn't stop making them.

THOMPSON: How about that actress?

WEBBER: Which one? There were so many, I lost count. Orson— well, after a while, let's just say they all began to blend together. (Iizuka 139)

This excerpt of text also underscores the complexity with which Iizuka approaches her critique of the media's invasion of Orson Welles' life. His work was personal to him, making it all the more challenging to distinguish the lines between truth and fiction. Metatheatrically, Iizuka's play itself is also caught up in this discourse, as it attempts to dig deep into Orson Welles' iconography and biography to sort fantasy from non-fiction (and ultimately suggests that it is futile to assume there is a distinction between the two).

Complicating the presentation of "truth" and "fiction" even further, Iizuka's *War of the Worlds* also presents an image of Welles as a creator of the slippage, as he believes he has the power to generate and control his own image. The character of Welles has the agency to comment on and explain his own life as much as other characters throughout the play. He claims, "Everything I do, you see, is a kind of theater, I'm a kind of theater unto myself, I'm always taking on a character, I'm always in character, there's no point where I'm not being someone else. You can call that a lie, if you want, a lie in service of the truth" (Iizuka 152). In his published interview "On the Genealogy of Ethics," Michel Foucault posited, "the principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence" (362). Foucault's anti-essentialist reading of the self as a social construct—a reading that posited subjectification as a constant process requiring daily work—is demonstrated in Iizuka's crafting of Welles as a character constantly trying to control his subjectification. Iizuka is engaging in questions of the futility of searching for a singularly "real" Welles behind

Orson Welles. The character's claim undermines Thompson's entire journey, ultimately mocking the media's idolization of an idea of a fixed truth. By the end of the play, Thompson's bosses decide to cancel the documentary project altogether because Thompson has been unable to succeed at finding the "real" Welles. But, for Iizuka's character of Welles there is no concrete truth or answer, just "how you look at it, point of view"—a perspective particularly apt as the imagined mantra of a man known for his innovative use of camera angles in filming (Iizuka 142).

Furthermore, while the character of Welles may espouse his theories that he controls his "roles" in life, and certainly clings to his position as an auteur film director, this idea is threatened by Iizuka's continual reminder that artistic control of his own work was always in danger, especially as he aged and was haunted by the triumphs of his past. As Leni Zadrov, a fictional longtime colleague and friend in the play, observes, "He made so much, he did so much, but in the end, there was nothing left. Not even his own films. Somebody else always owned the rights" (Iizuka 152). This train of thought comes to an emotional climax towards the end of the play when Iizuka stages a scene of Welles watching one of his earlier films, in turn being secretly watched by Zadrov. In a beautifully written scene, Iizuka layers two acts of witness. In the first, Zadrov and Welles discuss their divergent responses to Welles' 1962 film, *The Trial*. In the film, the protagonist is arrested, tried and convicted for a crime that is never revealed to him. In the *War of the Worlds* scene, Welles argues that the protagonist has a right to feel a sense of guilt, even though he is unaware of any wrongdoing. Zadrov disagrees, and Welles interrupts her stating that "it's totally without meaning whether he's guilty or not. The point is that he feels guilty" (Iizuka 153). Then Zadrov steps forward, and out of the context of the initial scene where she is arguing with Welles, moving into a second context where she is speaking with

Thompson and describing an experience from several years later, one of watching Welles watch *A Touch of Evil*. Although the actor playing Zadrov is now performing in the second scene, the character of Welles continues his dialogue as if Zadrov was still arguing with him. The language of these two separate moments overlaps, and offers a dismal view of Welles' response to his own history:

ZADROV: He was watching one of his old movies with the sound turned down—

WELLES: He felt ashamed—

ZADROV: It was like a dream—

WELLES: His whole life, the man he was, the man he might have been, his legacy, the smallest thing—

ZADROV: And he was crying. I could see the tears. He was an old man. It was a movie he had made a lifetime ago. All the actors had grown old or died. The best parts had been cut, lost forever—

WELLES: It was like some terrible dream— (Iizuka 154)

By overlapping the language here, Iizuka manufactures a moment of confession, suggesting that Welles harbored deep guilt and regret over his life and career. And yet, because these words are presented in different times and spaces, the process of staging is at the forefront. The metatheatricality of the moment, as the audience watches Thompson watch Zadrov watch Welles watch a movie, explodes the concept of a true or fixed reality. Furthermore, all of these characters are played by actors, adding another layer of metatheatrical meaning. In this moment, multiple narratives run together, overlap, and inform one another, and yet are still incapable of providing a concrete image of Welles as a man. As Newmark reported, "We never get a whole story. Once you compress any story into the constraints of time and space that theater imposes, you've put a frame

around it” (Newmark). The process of framing certainly applies to Iizuka’s work on *War of the Worlds* as she has confined her own presentation of Welles into the frame of *Citizen Kane*. By the end of the play Welles has been unable to live up to his own ambitious dreams, and more importantly, the audience has been shown that we can never know the “true” or “real” Welles, or, at least, that this may be many different things to many people. As the character of Welles’ states: “It’s all about the frame” (Iizuka 142).

Iizuka’s *War of the Worlds* reveals the futility of any attempt to find a “true” version of Welles through his representation in the media, his art, or his personal relationships. The play delves more deeply to explore and interrogate why it is that audiences are so drawn into this idea of a fixed truth. What fascinates people about stories based on true events? Why are we drawn to biography as a form? Simultaneously the play offers a critique of this obsession, and yet is complicit in the desire to explore the life of a “real” figure. This perspective is hinted at in the script itself in another interaction between Thompson and the film scholar in scene four. Cynical about Thompson’s interest in Welles’ biographical information, the film scholar flippantly remarks, “Oh, don’t tell me you’re one of those people who thinks the artist’s life has anything to do with anything? Well, have fun figuring it out. His life, I mean. Which part’s real and which part’s fantasy—with Welles, it’s at times hard to tell” (Iizuka 123). Iizuka’s aesthetics force the acknowledgement of these threads of discourse—not allowing the theatre community witnessing the play to dismiss its own culpability in mythologizing Welles, emphasized by their presence at the play. Through her dramatization of these “acts of sight” throughout *War of the Worlds*, Iizuka leads audiences to question such tendencies, a questioning that may encourage us to investigate our own contemporary mythologies of celebrity, identity, fantasy, and truth.

While my impulse for examining this play emerged during the final months of the 2016 election, undeniable new connections materialized amidst Donald Trump's failed re-election bid in 2020, and the continuing media attention around his denial to accept his political failure. A spate of articles and social media posts in the weeks following the November election pointed to *Citizen Kane* (yet again) as tactical inspiration for Trump's media approach: comparing the character Charles Foster Kane's use of his media empire to circulate claims of fraudulent voting in the wake of his lost mayoral election to Trump's doubling down on claims of voter fraud, not backed by credible evidence. As Jeremy W. Peters wrote in a *New York Times* piece in November 2020, "Voter fraud is one of the oldest charges a politician can level in American elections — though no president in modern times has done so with such frequency, and so little evidence, as President Trump. As a news story, it is sensational and often irresistible" (Peters). Within this article, Peters links to a video clip of *Citizen Kane's* famed scene in which, "newspapermen huddle near the printing press on election night as it becomes clear that the results won't be good news for their boss, the publishing mogul Charles Foster Kane. One of them holds up a front page with the headline they had hoped for: 'Kane Elected' He then lowers his head and nods toward the version they have to go with instead. 'Fraud at Polls!' it declares" (Peters).

Iizuka's *War of the Worlds*, conceived by Anne Bogart and created by The SITI company, is a provocative play urgently relevant for today's American audiences, considering the highly mediatized and visually focused social moment within which we are located. The play challenges readers to question what one accepts as proof of authenticity and truth—and dismantle the familiar maxim "seeing is believing." Instead, the play asks audiences to critically question what they see: to consider how any image or narrative was created, how it is framed by context, and how their

subjective experience shapes their own reading. Indeed, the play is perhaps more vital today than when first produced—and is richly deserving of greater attention.

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