



Chimes at Midnight

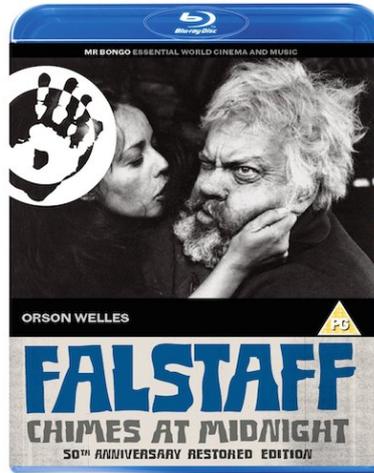
Brian McClinton

FOR many decades, *Citizen Kane* was regarded as Orson Welles's masterpiece, and many critics placed it at the top of their list of the ten greatest movies. In recent years, however, it has slipped down many lists, and arguably it is not even Welles's best film. That accolade surely goes to *Chimes at Midnight*, originally released in 1966 but not widely distributed and for many years seen only on a rather blurry Spanish DVD. Now, however, on its 50th anniversary, a restored print has been issued by Mr Bongo, a Brighton based company specialising in world cinema and music.

The film was originally panned by several reviewers. In March 1967, Bosley Crowther, the film critic for the *New York Times*, described it as 'a confusing patchwork of scenes and characters'. It was, he wrote, 'a big, squashy, tatterdemalion show'. He thought that it had no business 'intruding so brashly in the serious Shakespearean affairs of the Lancasters, the Percies and the Mortimers'. But this is to miss the whole point of the contrast which Shakespeare makes between the antithetical characters of Henry IV (John Gielgud) and Falstaff and what each represents. Henry is the king of rule and Falstaff is the king of misrule. One stands for law and order throughout the land, the other is a subversive leader of the common people. One is a petty thief, while the other stole the crown.

Welles himself regarded *Chimes at Midnight* as his favourite. "If I wanted to get into heaven on the basis of one movie, that's the one I would offer up. I think it's because it is, to me, the least flawed... I succeeded more completely, in my view, with that than with anything else", he said.

Chimes at Midnight is largely based on two Shakespeare plays, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, but also includes lines from *Richard II*, *Henry V*, *The*



Merry Wives of Windsor, and bits from Holinshed's *Chronicles* read by Ralph Richardson. The tragicomedy focuses on Falstaff and his friendship with Prince 'Hal' (Keith Baxter), later Henry V. Welles plays Falstaff – a liar, braggard and coward whose main indulgences are eating, drinking and fornication.

At a deeper level, Henry IV represents reason, order, discipline and honour, while Falstaff symbolises the free spirit, anarchy, imagination, joy and pleasure. Prince Hal is initially attracted to the latter but eventually realises that, as leader of the country, he must abandon his youthful hedonism and put the interests of the whole people before his own. In the end he must betray Falstaff and what he represents: "I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers", he tells him when he turns up after the coronation expecting that Hal will 'make him great'.

Harold Bloom has called Falstaff the Socrates of Eastcheap, and several critics have noted the similarities between the ancient Greek philosopher and 'plump Jack'. Hal calls him 'that villainous abominable misleader of youth', which is exactly the same charge levelled against Socrates. Both drink a lot and both die with their going cold and numb from the feet upwards. Crucially, Falstaff adopts the Socratic method of *elenchos*, or question, answer and

self-refutation; for example, what is honour? I would suggest, though, that Falstaff is more a parody of Socrates and indeed a parody of Shakespeare. He is not the shaker of the spear of wisdom but carries a false staff, despite his wit, vitality and imaginativeness. He is the epitome of the morally reprehensible but loveable rogue.

Chimes at Midnight, like Welles's *Macbeth*, is a Shakespearean *film noir*, shot in black and white, which blends comedy with violence, betrayal and loss. The title refers to Falstaff's reminiscence of the heady days of his youth. Welles includes it at the beginning, as he and his friend Justice Shallow trudge through the snow in a scene that looks straight out of a Bruegel painting. "Jesus, the days that we have seen", intones Alan Webb as Shallow in a high-pitched voice. "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow", says Falstaff ruefully.

Despite its technical imperfections, the film is a triumph of acting, atmosphere and contrast. The Boar's Head is presented as a funhouse of constant activity, whereas Henry's throne room is like a dark dungeon. Real power is a lonely, serious business. The Battle of Shrewsbury in which the King's army defeats the rebel forces led by Harry 'Hotspur' is quite magnificent. Amid all the mud, confusion and brutal horror show, the heavily armoured Falstaff is seen lumbering from tree to tree, hiding from the fight. The stark contrast of farce and medieval butchery lives in the memory as one of cinema's greatest scenes.

Chimes at Midnight has a great cast to carry it off. Welles, Baxter and Gielgud are supported by Margaret Rutherford as Mistress Quickly, Jeanne Moreau as Doll Tearsheet, Michael Aldridge as Pistol and Norman Rodway as Hotspur. Buy the DVD and enjoy the cinematic genius of Welles serving the literary, philosophical and psychological genius of Shakespeare. □