

## ***Too Much Johnson* in Context**

by Scott Simmon

The rediscovered footage for the Mercury Theatre's production of *Too Much Johnson* makes for fascinating but challenging viewing. Never finished and long presumed lost, the film survives as 10 reels of an abandoned, partially edited 35mm nitrate work print created in the summer of 1938 by the 23-year-old Orson Welles. The footage was most fully edited by Welles in its opening reel—the first seven minutes here—but most is a rough assemblage, and all of it lacks the intertitles he planned to write. The 66-minute print went unseen publicly until its rediscovery in a warehouse in Pordenone, Italy, and its preservation in 2013 through an international collaboration among the National Film Preservation Foundation, George Eastman House, the Cineteca del Friuli, and Cinemazero.

The main challenge now to appreciating *Too Much Johnson* is putting it in its original context. For the Mercury Theatre's inventive 1938 stage production, William Gillette's 1894 marital farce was intended to become a breakneck multimedia comedy, each of its three acts to be prefaced by a silent movie.<sup>1</sup>

Gillette's creaky play must have seemed an unlikely project for the Mercury troupe when John Houseman and Orson Welles listed it in the company's inaugural announcement of August 1937. Born a decade before the Civil War, Gillette had only died earlier in 1937 and was remembered for his *Sherlock Holmes* stage adaptation, in which he played Sherlock some 1,300 times. For *Too Much Johnson* he had drawn closely from an 1891 French farce, *La Plantation Thomassin*, with perhaps an assist from a British adaptation of the same year, *The Planter*. (Although the origins of "Johnson" as phallic slang are uncertain—uses can be found as early as the 18th century—it's likely that Gillette's title slyly comments on the farce's sexual shenanigans.) Welles, always at home with the past, loved revitalizing old warhorses, and one can also see the appeal to him of the play's central character, Billings—the part Gillette created for himself—an unflappable philanderer who lies to his mistress that his name is

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1. The original 1894 play is [available online](#) through its 1912 publication. No complete version of the final Mercury Theatre script for *Too Much Johnson* seems to survive, but it can be reconstructed through surviving drafts. The Lilly Library at Indiana University Bloomington holds four versions, most missing at least a few pages. The first version is closest to the Gillette original, somewhat shortened but not otherwise revised. The second version has many handwritten changes (in Welles's hand and others'). These changes are incorporated in the typescript of the third version, and likewise the handwritten changes on the third version are incorporated in the fourth version. A typescript for the fourth version survives only for Act 1, but that version simply incorporates the manuscript changes on the third version, and thus it's possible to put together what is essentially a final version of the full play, drawing Acts 2 and 3 from the manuscript revisions on the third version (which is complete for those acts). It is this reconstructed fourth revision that I cite here. As he had before—notably with *Julius Caesar* in 1937—Welles tried the patience of his cast by continuing to cut and revise extensively during rehearsals.

Johnson, who never lets dull facts stand in the way of a good story, and who misdirects the lives of others with cheerful abandon. In 1936 Welles had directed on Broadway *Horse Eats Hat*, an adaptation of another elaborately plotted French marital farce, *An Italian Straw Hat*. There too Welles had staged a backstory only implied in the original play: the horse eating the hat. Perhaps he remembered the scene from René Clair's 1928 film adaptation.

As Simon Callow has detailed in the first volume of his Orson Welles biography, *The Road to Xanadu*, Welles felt adrift directing plays until he arrived at a "concept"—his [black-cast \*Macbeth\*](#) set in 19th-century Haiti and the modern-dress, fascist-inspired *Julius Caesar* having already proved famously successful. For *Too Much Johnson*, the concept seems to have originated with envisioning Gillette's play along the lines of a film—part slapstick, part screwball. It's evident from the Mercury play scripts that the combination pushed both the specifics and the overall tone of the adaptation. Even as he rewrote the script, Welles was thinking ahead to the three short films: Draft pages include his doodles, including the palm trees that helped convert a Hudson River quarry into the location for Cuba in the short films to precede Acts 2 and 3.

An out-of-town tryout was something new for Mercury, and this production opened—and as it turned out, closed—at the Stony Creek Theater, outside New Haven, Connecticut, in August 1938. The cast was drawn from the Mercury Theatre's first-season regulars (Joseph Cotten as Billings; Ruth Ford as his wife; George Duthie as the purser on the ship to Cuba; Edgar Barrier as the wronged French husband, Dathis; and Erskine Sanford as Frederick, Johnson's man in Cuba) as well as from the Mercury company's radio actors (Eustace Wyatt as Faddish and Howard L. Smith as the Cuban planter Johnson, to whom Faddish is bringing his daughter as an unwilling mail-order bride). Added were Welles's wife Virginia as Faddish's daughter, Leonore (Leonora in the original); Guy Kingsley as her lovestruck sweetheart Mackintosh; and the comedic actress Mary Wickes, also a Mercury investor, as Billings's mother-in-law, Mrs. Batterson. In the first film only was stage and radio actress Arlene Francis, as Dathis's wife (and Billings's mistress), who is at the center of Gillette's play without appearing in it.

In comparing the 1894 play script to the Mercury version what is most immediately striking is the much reduced length—down to not much more than an hour of stage time—as well as a shift in the action to give Act 1's shipboard confusion as much stage time as the Cuban misadventures of Acts 2 and 3. (Mercury's Act 1 is only a couple of pages shorter than its other two acts combined. In the Gillette original all three acts are about the same length.) Mercury's version also moves the action ahead some two decades to around 1910. Billings's Cuban plantation-owner friend Billy Lounsberry is said in this version to have "gone down there in '03." (Billings expects Lounsberry to cover for him in Cuba, but in the 1894 original Lounsberry "sold out to Mr. Johnson"; the Mercury version simply kills him off—"The angels they got lonesome

for Mr. Lounsberry,” says Frederick—leading to the scene at Lounsberry’s grave in the film preceding act 2.) The films show their circa-1910 setting from the start via costumes and the traffic mix of automobiles with horse-drawn carriages.

As was customary with his adaptations (notably of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* in 1937), Welles cut and rearranged, adding relatively few new lines but nevertheless arriving at an entirely different type of play. One can get a sense of the fresh approach right from *Too Much Johnson*’s opening lines. Mercury’s additions help link the first film’s end, when everyone on board waves good-bye, with the play’s start. (The ship is the *Tropic Queen* in the Gillette; the S.S. *Munificence* in the Mercury. I’ve removed most of the stage directions.)

***Opening of the Gillette play:***

FADDISH. Excuse me—I—ha, ha!—I’m looking for someone.

DATHIS. I am also looking for someone.

FADDISH. Yes, yes.

DATHIS. Wait, if you please. You will kindly tell me your name.

FADDISH. Faddish, sir.

DATHIS. Fad-deesh.

FADDISH. Yes, yes.

DATHIS. One moment—Mr. Fad-deesh. [*Looks at photo.*] It is not heem! But he shall not escape me! I will search from one end to the other.

FADDISH. He must be a detective. I’m glad I wasn’t the man he wanted! Where can Leonora be—and that young Mackintosh? I shall complain to my sister about that boy! He’s made me more trouble—but when the ship starts I shall be rid of him—Dear me, I must—perhaps they’re—yes—I’ll look on this side. [*Exits.*]

***Opening of the Mercury version*** (side-by-side lines are spoken over each other):

BOYS. Yoo hoo!

GIRLS. You hoo!

ALL. Goodbye!

PURSER. All ashore that’s going ashore.

BOY. All ashore that’s going ashore.      MESSENGER. Special delivery for Mr. Johnson.

PURSER. All ashore that’s going ashore.

BOY. All ashore that’s going ashore.

PURSER. All ashore that’s going ashore.

BOY. All ashore that’s going ashore.

PURSER. All ashore that's going ashore.

BOY. All ashore that's going ashore.

FADDISH. Mackintosh! Excuse me. Mackintosh.

MACKINTOSH. Hoove.

BOY. Hoove.

DATHIS. Wait!

FADDISH. Where is that confounded young squirt?

BILLINGS. Hoove.

PURSER. Heaving.

FADDISH. I am looking for some one.

DATHIS. I also am looking for some one.

FADDISH. Yes, yes.

DATHIS. Wait.

PURSER. All ashore.

BOY. All ashore.

BILLINGS. Hoving away.

DATHIS. Will you kindly tell me your name.

FADDISH. Faddish, sir.

LEONORE. Goodbye.

DATHIS. Faddish?

MACKINTOSH. Yoo hoo!

DATHIS. Not Johnson?

LEONORE. Yoo hoo!

FADDISH. My name, sir, is Faddish!

DATHIS. One moment!

BILLINGS. Hoove.

DATHIS. Mr. Faddish.

ALL. Hoove!

DATHIS. [*Looks at photo.*] It is not him.

ALL. Goodbye!

DATHIS. But I shall search for this Johnson, and when I find him he shall not escape me!

MESSANGER. Special delivery for Mr. Johnson.                      FADDISH. Mackintosh!

ALL. Goodbye!

FADDISH. Mackintosh.

ALL. Goodbye!

FADDISH. Mackintosh!

ALL. Goodbye!

FADDISH. Leonore.

DATHIS. I shall search for this Johnson—I shall search the ship from one end to the other.

FADDISH. He must be a detective. Mackintosh! [*Exits.*]

The little exchange between the two preoccupied men—Dathis obsessed with his wife's lover, Faddish seeking his daughter's boyfriend—has the Mercury action already spinning a vortex of chaos, and its characters will be too harried for ruminations of the sort with which Faddish exits in the original. Throughout, the Mercury version replaces precise explanation with rat-a-tat exchanges. As Welles did earlier in 1938 with his adaptation of Thomas Dekker's 1599 *Shoemaker's Holiday*, speeches are broken into dialogue, with stress on comic speed.

There's an evident philosophy behind the Mercury revisions of *Too Much Johnson*. One goal seemed to be to alter the play to mesh with the spirit of the films. Of course, the films are silent—indeed inspired by silent-film comedians of the 1910s and 1920s—while the play is bantering dialogue. The attempt was apparently to have the characters introduced in the first film arrive onstage into something like screwball comedy—that greatest invention of American film of the 1930s—which, although reliant on rapid dialogue, reaches its heights by combining high verbal with low physical comedy. Mercury's *Too Much Johnson* alternates slapstick film and screwball stage segments. The apparent lengths of the planned film pieces (at least two reels before act 1 and a short single reel before each of the others) parallel the revised lengths of the three stage acts.

*Too Much Johnson* is distilled to its essence in distinctive ways. Most of the dialogue exchanges are retained, but because relatively little remains of each individual line, there's an altered spirit. No one since the 18th century was quite as gleeful in cutting Shakespeare as was Welles, and cutting Gillette's play wouldn't have intimidated him. The result is an early example of the way he typically "rewrote"—with a heavy red pencil but few additions—which is one reason his screenwriting credits have been so controversial. He knew what to salvage from long-winded originals.

Only the first two drafts of the Mercury revision of *Too Much Johnson* contain stage directions, but they hint that the production envisioned Billings as an island of calculating calm amid the accelerating confusion: There are notations telling Joseph Cotten when to puff his cigar. (For instance, Billings explains to the ship's purser how he scheduled romantic trysts when the husband was away on business: "Every time he went West [*Puff*]*—we stayed East.*") With screwball verve, Faddish, the thwarted father, is given a series of malaprops. "You was perfectly free to accept or recline," he informs his daughter about her arranged marriage, and Faddish further tangles the name confusion by misintroducing himself: "I'm Yiddish."

Sometimes whole pages are cut, or with just a line or two remaining, but exchanges that already held relatively quick, multicharacter banter are retained, with the Mercury version simply tightening the original. In act 1 of the Gillette play, for instance, Faddish hears a (false) report of his daughter's intended husband this way:

MRS. BATTERSON. Why, Mr. Johnson is his overseer!

LEONORA. Overseer.

MACKINTOSH. Overseer.

FADDISH. Overseer.

BILLINGS. Not at all—Couldn't be the one, Johnsons everywhere, woods full of them!

MRS. BATTERSON. Do you know anything about the place where he is?

FADDISH. It is a mile from the city—they call it the Columbia.

MRS. BATTERSON. That's it.

MRS. BILLINGS. The very one.

BILLINGS. [*Aside*] Damned if Billy hasn't got a Johnson on his place.

FADDISH. But I understood he was the owner of the estate.

MRS. BATTERSON. The owner! I should say not.

FADDISH. Can you tell me—e—what sort of man he is, sir?

BILLINGS. Oh—Johnson? Trifle lively, of course—that's the way it is in Cuba—but he's a jolly good fellow—and—

MRS. BATTERSON. Mr. Billings!

MRS. BILLINGS. Oh, mama! It's cruel to tell them.

FADDISH. I fear from your manner, ladies, that there is something wrong. I beg you to let me know—before it is too late.

MRS. BATTERSON. Wrong! Mr. Faddish, he is simply the most abandoned—

MRS. BILLINGS. Mama!

BILLINGS. See here—Needn't disturb yourself—at all, he's really a nice, decent sort of a—

The only slightly revised Mercury version runs this way:

MRS. BATTERSON. Why, Mr. Johnson is his overseer!

FADDISH. Overseer?      MACKINTOSH. His overseer?      LEONORE. What overseer?

BILLINGS. Couldn't be the one, Johnsons everywhere. Swamps full of them.

MRS. BATTERSON. Do you know anything about the place where he is?

FADDISH. It is a mile from the city—they call it the Columbia.

MRS. BATTERSON                      BILLINGS                                      MRS. BILLINGS  
 That's it. The very one.      Oh Columbia, the gem of the Ocean.      Yes, the very one.  
 BILLINGS. [*Aside*] Damned if Billy hasn't got a Johnson on his place. Hello, mother.  
 FADDISH. Can you tell me—a—what sort of a man he is?  
 BILLINGS. Oh—Johnson? Trifle lively, of course—that's the way it is in Cuba—but he's a  
 jolly good fellow—and—  
 MRS. BATTERSON. Mr. Faddish, I feel I should tell you that he is simply the most  
 abandoned—  
 MRS. BILLINGS. Mama!  
 BILLINGS. See here—needn't disturb yourself—at all, he's really a nice, decent sort of a—

Most fully revised is act 3, with some lines moved to earlier acts and the setting moved from the interior of Johnson's ranch house to just outside it. Cuts were evidently made in expectation of the third film, which would open with a sword duel demanded by Dathis of Johnson, on the mistaken assumption that the plantation owner is the seducer of his wife, while Billings does his best to keep them from killing each other. In the original play, Dathis returns from the duel—unseen between acts—to rant at Mrs. Billings:

DATHIS. I have been *deceived*! All was ready! I win ze toss for choice of arms—I choose ze sword—Ze rapiers were raised so—The word to come! En garde, monsieur! Your husband—called to desist—He would see ze photograph. We look. Zis man Johnson was not ze same. But he said it was nossing. He would be ze same. I said ver well—eff you wish. En garde, monsieur! Your husband! zen ask zis man when he was in New York ze last time. He said not at all—at any time! Zhen your husband said it could not be ze man. But zis man Johnson is a liar—yes—for he zen would make eet out zat he was in New York at whatevair time we please to say. But zhe doctor said no he was here at zhat time—zhe fight could not go on. Very well! It seems I have come to zhis place for nossing.

The Mercury version boils this down:

DATHIS. [*Enters carrying his dueling swords.*] It is not him. [*Turns to ladies.*] I have come to this place for nothing. Dieu de Dieu de Dieu.

Several asides added to early Mercury drafts were cut in the final version, notably two Billings speeches in which he essentially summarizes the plotline. “Ladies and gentlemen—Before we

go any further—in case any of you have just come in, it might be just as well for me to clear up a few points here and there...,” he would have begun the third act. The final version expects the actors and the audience to be on their toes.

Is the Mercury version of *Too Much Johnson* an improvement on the original? Who can say, given that it was never performed as intended. The new version of the play was, unsurprisingly, a failure on its own when it had to open for previews without the films—and thus also without the music that Paul Bowles had been writing for the films.<sup>2</sup> There are reports that the cast may have been asked to add lines, or perhaps it returned to earlier versions of the play script to help make up for the absence of the films, but that can only have further reduced the polish of the performance. When previews ended after two weeks, it was announced that the play would delay its Broadway opening to October, but by October the films were no longer mentioned and a further delay to November was attributed to “the recent illness of Orson Welles and Howard Smith.” By November Mercury’s *Too Much Johnson* was reported by the *New York Times* to be “a spring offering at best”—after which nothing more was heard of it.

Why were the films never fully edited and screened, when they came so close? Later explanations were never terribly convincing. It’s been said that the Mercury company learned that the movie rights to *Too Much Johnson* were owned by Paramount (whose 1920 five-reel version, directed by Donald Crisp, is lost), but presumably some financial arrangement could have been reached if that was the major impediment. (Paramount’s legal department made a thorough search of its archives in 2014 without finding any such warning to Mercury.) It has also been said that everyone discovered late that the Stony Creek Theater did not have a fireproof projection booth able to show the flammable nitrate film, but there are at least two problems with this explanation. The theater was built as a nickelodeon (in 1903, as the Lyric Theater), so would have had such a booth, and even had it been removed, it would have been easy enough to strike a film print on nonflammable diacetate stock, as was regularly done to show films in schools, churches, and other such venues.

It seems more likely that Welles and his Mercury colleagues simply left themselves too little time to finish the films before scheduled previews on August 16—and at that point the cut down play was not particularly impressive without the films. Only one month had been allowed for pulling together the entire production, including the three films. Shooting itself reportedly lasted 10 days. All this might conceivably have been manageable had not Welles and the Mercury company also just started an ambitious radio commitment that was itself a full-time project. Weekly hourlong original dramatizations on CBS began on July 11 (with *Dracula*) for a series titled at this time *First Person Singular* and later *Mercury Theatre on the Air*. To top things

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2. Paul Bowles rearranged his accompaniment into a suite, “Music for a Farce,” which premiered in 1939 and is available now on CD and online.

off, Welles, smitten with the new medium, determined to edit *Too Much Johnson* himself and had the footage and editing equipment brought to his Manhattan hotel rooms.

Still, the reputation of the stage performance as an unmitigated calamity must be exaggerated. Among the audience for the Connecticut previews was Katharine Hepburn, who thought enough of Joseph Cotten's performance to have him cast in *The Philadelphia Story* as her character's former and future husband, C.K. Dexter Haven (the part played by Cary Grant in the film version). That stage production opened in March 1939, and Cotten stayed through its yearlong run of 417 performances—after which he was available for the cast of *Citizen Kane*.

Throughout his career, Orson Welles's projects balanced innovative achievements against ambitious disasters. Over the years *Too Much Johnson* became a textbook case of the latter. But now, with the recovery of the films and just a little imagination, it's possible to see the intended Mercury production in the theater of the mind. As a start, I've reimaged the work print in [an edited version here](#). And there's always room to hope for a premiere of the films with the 1938 play script—now that all the pieces have, amazingly enough, resurfaced.

For information and assistance, I'm indebted to Andrea Nouryeh's "The Mercury Theatre: A History" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1987), Simon Callow's *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (Viking, 1995), Frank Brady's "The Lost Film of Orson Welles" (*American Film*, November 1978), and David Frasier and Craig Simpson at the Lilly Library. Special thanks to Richard Abel and Gregory Waller for preliminary research.

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