

## ***Too Much Johnson*—About the Mercury Theatre Production**

by Scott Simmon

One challenge to appreciating the rediscovered, unfinished films for *Too Much Johnson*—and we might best think of them as three short films—is putting them in their intended theatrical context. For the Mercury Theatre’s wildly inventive 1938 stage production, William Gillette’s 1894 plot-heavy marital farce became a breakneck-paced, multi-media comedy, each act prefaced by a silent movie.<sup>1</sup>

Gillette’s creaky play must have initially seemed an unlikely project for the Mercury troupe when John Houseman and 22-year-old Orson Welles listed it in the company’s inaugural announcement of August 1937. Born a decade before the Civil War, Gillette had died only four months earlier 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 an earlier British adaptation, *The Planter*. 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, an unflappable philandering husband 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 nineteenth-century Haiti and the modern-dress, fascist-inspired *Julius Caesar* having already proven famously successful. For *Too Much Johnson*, the concept seems to have originated with envisioning Gillette’s play as a film—part slapstick, part screwball. It’s evident from the Mercury play scripts that the combination pushed both the specifics and the overall

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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 into the typescript of the third version, and likewise the handwritten changes on the third version are incorporated into the fourth version. A typescript for the fourth version survives only for Act I, but that version simply incorporates the manuscript changes on the third version, and thus it’s possible to put together a final version of the full play, drawing Acts II and III from the manuscript revisions on the third version (which is complete for those acts). As he had before—notably with *Julius Caesar*—Welles tried the patience of his cast by continuing to cut and revise extensively during rehearsals.

tone of the adaptation. Even as he rewrote the script, Welles was thinking cinematically: Draft pages include his sketches, with the palm trees that helped convert a Hudson River quarry into the film location for Cuba.

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 (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 from the Mercury company’s radio actors (Eustace Wyatt as Faddish; Howard L. Smith as the Cuban planter Johnson, to whom Faddish is bringing his daughter as an unwilling mail-order bride). Added was 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, who was also a Mercury investor, as Billings’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Batterson. William Alland played a messenger, a role he also took offstage.

In comparing Gillette’s play to the Mercury version what is most immediately striking is the much reduced length—down to perhaps an hour of stage time—as well as a shift in the action to give Act I’s shipboard confusion as much stage time as the Cuban complications of Acts II and III. (Mercury’s Act I 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 original play Lounsberry “sold out to Mr. Johnson and went back to N’Orleans”; the Mercury version simply kills him off—“The angels they got lonesome for Mr. Lounsberry,” says Johnson’s man Frederick—allowing for the scene at Lounsberry’s grave in the film preface to Act II.) The circa 1910 setting is introduced in the film preceding Act I via costume and in the intermingling of automobiles with horse-drawn carriages.

As customary with his adaptations (notably with 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 here help link the play’s start with the first film’s end, with everyone on board waving goodbye. (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!  
MESSENGER. 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-tat exchanges. As Welles had done 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*. The goal seemed to be to use the play to extend 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 to enter immediately into something like screwball comedy—that greatest invention of American film in 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 intended lengths of the film pieces (about two reels before Act I and one 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 eighteenth century was quite as gleeful in cutting Shakespeare as was Welles, and 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 relatively few additions—which is one reason his screenwriting credits have been so controversial. He knew what to salvage from longwinded 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 calm amidst the otherwise 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 prearranged 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, multi-character banter are retained, with the Mercury version simply tightening the original. In Act I 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, Johnson's 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 III, with some lines moved to earlier acts and the setting moved from the interior of Johnson's ranchhouse to just outside of it. Cuts were evidently made in expectation of the third film preface, which features a (slapstick) 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 “in a violent temper” to 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 to:

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...” Billings would have begun the third act. The final version expects the actors and 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 they returned to earlier versions of the play script, to help make up for the loss of the films, but that can only have further reduced the polish of the performance. When previews were suspended after a week, 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 evidently came so close? Later explanations were never terribly convincing. It’s been said that the Mercury company learned that the film 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. It’s 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 theatre was built as a moviehouse (in 1903, as the Lyric Theater), so would have had such a booth, and even if it had 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 the scheduled previews began on August 16—and then that

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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 the web.

the revised play was a confusing failure without the films. Only one month had been allowed for pulling together the entire production, including the three films. Shooting itself reportedly lasted ten days. All this might conceivably have been manageable had not Welles and the Mercury company also just started an ambitious radio commitment that was a full-time project on its own. 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 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 room.

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). The play 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 on a knife's edge between stunning innovation and total disaster. Over the years *Too Much Johnson* had become 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. Indeed, there's no reason not to hope for a premiere of the original films and staging—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" (NYU Ph.D. dissertation, 1987), Simon Callow's *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (Viking Press, 1995), and to David Frasier and Craig Simpson at the Lilly Library. Special thanks also to Richard Abel and Gregory Waller for preliminary research—SS.]

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