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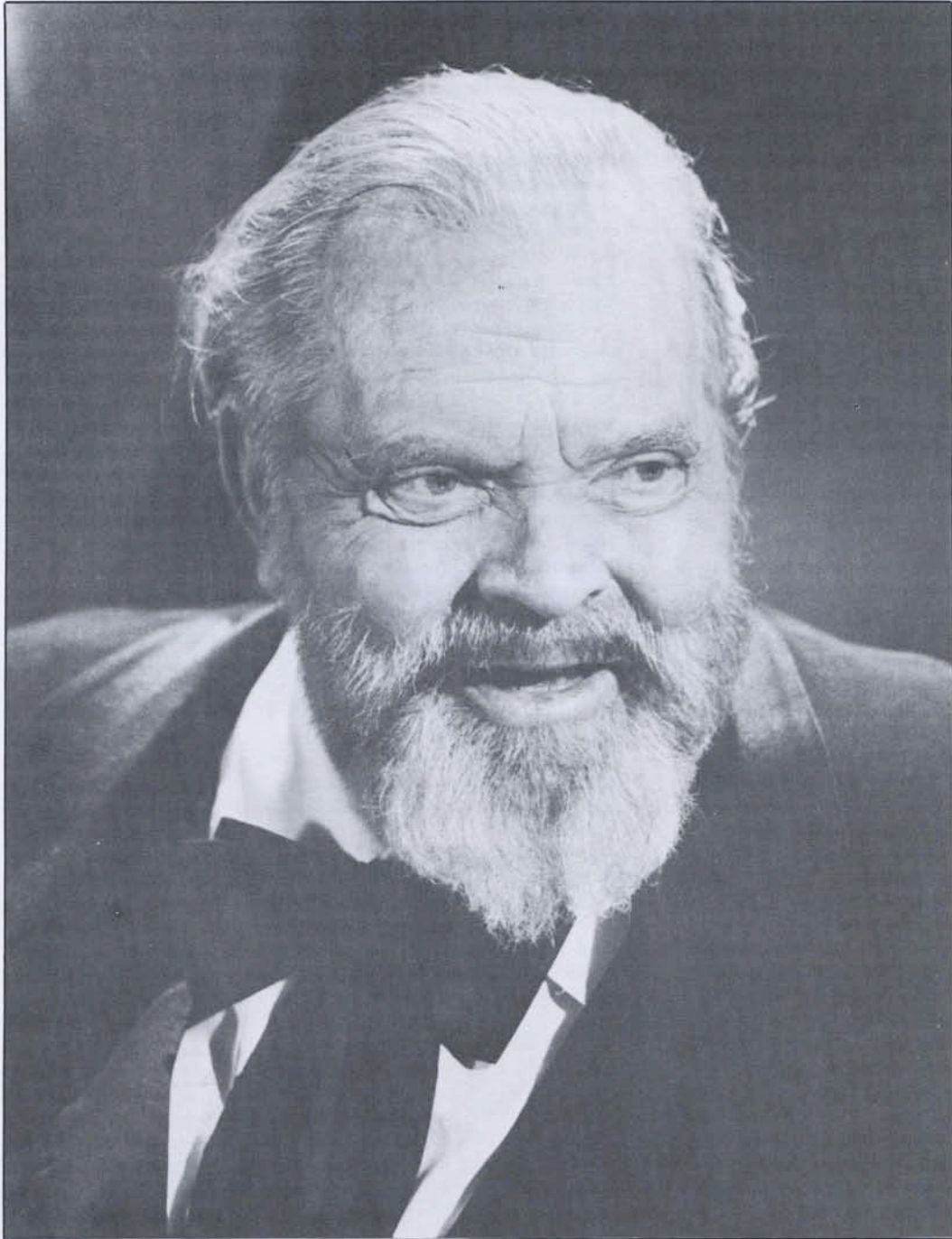
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Looking For Orson Welles

Joseph Liggera



NBC photo courtesy of the Boston Herald

This is my second article about the death of Orson Welles and the meaning of his life and work. The first I junked because I had fallen into the trap of chasing each flash and flicker of Welles' career, then trying to pull them together into a coherent image of the man. Welles is and was so many bits and pieces, brilliance and bunkum, that he remains as he wished to be, ever elusive. I am so teased by the contradictions of the man that understanding him sometimes is more intriguing than understanding myself.

It is tempting to start by calling him a genius, and to ask the inevitable question: "Who is Orson Welles?" Welles is devious, the various aspects of his personality splintered and dispersed. Any critic of Welles' must not only examine the man but himself as well; a critic must ask the fundamental question -- "Who am I?" -- and, "Who am I in relation to Orson Welles?"

For my part, whoever I am, there is not a time that I can remember when I did not "know" who Orson Welles was, so fixed was he in my consciousness, and probably, the consciousness of America. I knew Welles as an actor and a voice first, having been born a year before the release of his film *Citizen Kane*. By the time I was growing up, Welles had already been reduced to the status of a legend. He wished to be known as an active maker of his own films, not for his involvement in other people's films or films for literature. Some time during my teens his image was blown up to the dimensions of an oversized balloon, like those in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. My view of him took on a luminous, romantic glow because, though his best work was well behind him, he was still blustering as if it were still in front of him, if he were given a chance. *War of the Worlds*, the Mercury Theater, Shakespeare in modern dress, classic performances (notably in *Jane Eyre*) -- that was all behind him. But Welles never gave it up. He seemed to be forever young, and nearly every discovery I made about media art proved to me that Welles had been there; if not first, at least flashiest. Then, like Papa Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*, the gargantuan boy genius reached down and produced his long, gruelling masterworking of Kafka's *The Trial*. We all knew then that Welles was no has-been. We, the young art fanciers of

my day, embraced him.

There is the tendency, then, to be sentimental with praise for Welles, to make excuses for him, or to rail at the failure of Hollywood money people to take another chance on a Welles project. Failing such feelings, a more realistic light may begin to shine in the Wellesian darkness. First, it becomes clear that the public maintained a nostalgia about art, high and low, nostalgia for a simpler, slower, more peaceful time than Welles ever seemed to want. There was also a nostalgia for language, for spoken words like those of Shakespeare, Kafka or Tarkington. Welles had a love/hate relationship with his audience, the great beast of the public who he alternately fooled and embraced. Lastly, he was most famous for his multiple expressive virtuoso talent that raised radio, film, even television commercials to something finer than they seemed capable of becoming. Nostalgia, an intimate relationship with his public -- his seers and hearers -- and his histrionic talent -- let us look at these to find Welles.

He made two films that keep popping into everyone's list of the Greatest Films of All Time, the second of which is *The Magnificent Ambersons*, based on a Booth Tarkington novel. It is said that Welles believed the studio had butchered it, and that he, to his dying day, vowed to bring together the remaining living actors and shoot a new ending. For once there is no Welles persona in the film, though he could not resist narrating it. Nevertheless, the film is rife with nostalgia, not only for times past, but for the kind of quick, yet graceful prose, that Tarkington wrote. The opening credits are a joy. Joseph Cotten, swirling through changes of costume, foreshadows the film's celebration of the gay turn-of-the-century life. Snow falls and sleigh bells tinkle. Welles narrates that in those days, they had time for everything. Alas, the whole of that sequence, and the best of what follows, is directly from Tarkington's prose. Welles' secret is out. He loves words. He simply puts pictures to them, brilliantly. By the end of the film, the huge mansion becomes dark and ominous as the family fortunes fall. With them goes nostalgia, and in comes the automobile, running roughshod over most everything and burying what it misses in soot.

Citizen Kane, too, had its roots in nostalgia. The newspaper magnate is done in because his famous sleigh was wrested from him, and he dies clutching a child's crystal ball with a snow scene inside as he utters his last word, recalling the name in the sled, "Rosebud." The little man, Bernstein, arrives to work as editor of a New York city paper with a horse drawn truck loaded with all his belongings. The older reporters close shop at the end of the day, and the whole paper, presses too, sleep peacefully at night -- until young Kane takes over and wakes them up. But he also is from an older era. First he announces he will make *The Enquirer* as important to the people of the city as "the gas in that lamp." (The infant terrible is nostalgic about a gas lamp?) Later Kane cannot understand how his innocent affair is made to look scandalous by other papers, or why he cannot make everyone love him by buying them things. In fact, he thinks like an aging pater familias and is amazed when told that working men are now unionizing and no longer need his benevolence.

Welles' nostalgia is refreshing in that he never joined the despair rampant in his century. Instead, he only came along to play with his toys: the papers, radio, film, television, acting. Nonetheless, every Welles film is heavy at the end and, if Welles stars, as he usually does, we feel his weight, physical and psychic. Then he falters, totters, and finally collapses, seemingly of his own weight, but really for his wanting what has been long gone. Hence Kane dies with his fond memories of the snows of the Middle West from his lost childhood. Welles, asked what he thought of the twentieth century, revealed his nostalgia in his reply that he "could pick a better one out of a hat."

To Welles, the world had become fragmented and corrupt. A better way of life lay buried in some horse and buggy past. He found it impossible to face the stark realities (or evils) of modern life. That is why Welles' greatest artistic sin is that each of his films goes to pieces at the end, heaping images of immense size and blackness on an audience previously charmed by his celebration of form and, seemingly, of life. He has style but no content. Unlike Hemingway, also a great stylist, he does not teach us anything about how to live our lives. Grasping to

recapture innocence, Welles tries mightily to hold back Original Sin, but in the end he suffers the Fall, repeatedly.

As an American artist cut in the image of Whitman, Welles established a relationship with his audience that was intimate and based on his understanding of the common man. At his best, he simply assumed we would think as he did. The momentum of his "song of himself" carried us along.

But underneath, Welles was hard at work trying to educate his audience and bring them up to the level of high art, such as Shakespeare's. Welles once asserted that the key to his work was the word. Where better to turn, then, but to the Bard, whom Welles loved from his childhood. Welles wished to bring words alive for an audience that had been force-fed Shakespeare's plays in high school.

His audience could be found sitting in a movie theater, waiting to be entertained. The trick was to join art and entertainment. Thus, his film of *Macbeth* starts with a preface to explain the dynamics of the play, has a Holy Man to etch the tension of pagan evil versus Christianity, and switches lines among minor characters. These changes are made to promote Shakespeare to a general audience. His *Falstaff* looses the verse as if it were actual speech or, to moviegoers, dialogue. His pyrotechnic film technique is subordinated to words, is used to support words, and still retain the fluidity of the film. These two films, plus his *Othello*, achieve something of the Whitman ideal; if not to see the audience as its own poem, at least to trust it to be led into appreciating someone else's. Welles also invented or found a "little man," a sidekick, in each film in which he acted, whom he loved and abused, reflecting no doubt his ambivalence about an audience he both needed and thought was too dense to appreciate him.

Perhaps Welles' greatest talent is that he was, in many respects, a teacher who taught by doing, by performing in a new way. It was his knack for revealing and re-creating forms, particularly of film, that put him into the central nervous system of the public. What he did in *Kane* was to show that art is a lie that can either lead us closer to the truth than we could otherwise know in

the corrupt world of reality, or that can be used to manipulate us. It depends on the mind behind the form. Welles was clear that there was a mind behind the form, be it Shakespeare's, Welles', or even that of an egoist like Kane. In showing us how he was making *Kane*, in the very act of doing it, Welles was teaching us to analyze form and to see what was being done to us. None of the devices in *Kane* -- the newsreels, deep focus, odd camera angles, aural non-sequiturs -- are real ways of seeing and hearing. Yet, together, they make an artistic "lie" that is the film's truth.

Welles' talent finally was destroyed by the unresolved strain between his real and fantasy worlds, by the contrast between his vision of decadence and the glitter of his private life. One day Welles' crew, filming a documentary in Rio, (Welles was away at the time) saw

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a local hero fall out of a boat and be devoured by a shark. Worse, six days later the shark was caught with the partly digested head and arms of the man still in its stomach. Welles had been on an extended bash at the time, revelling in his new found fame. He was blamed. (This gory episode later informs the overview of his *Lady From Shanghai*. There the Irish lug hero lambastes his wealthy employers for their wasteful lives and for going at each other like "sharks in a frenzy.") In Welles' vision, nostalgia darkens to reality in his depiction of a society which, even among its elite, devours itself.

The last two decades of Welles' life were nearly fruitless as far as film production was concerned. Yet he continued to use his great talent for informing and manipulating the public, turning handstands to maintain his popularity. Welles kept himself afloat via a number of television roles and remained widely known. His reputation, buoyed by the sympathies of many of the best artists and critics -- tens of whom he had worked with over the years -- kept refreshing itself, but also led away from his art and to the man as a personality. Hence the trap

which opened this paper: Welles trying to make us believe he is necessary to us.

Nostalgia, his view of the common man, and his talent -- these are places to look when trying to find Welles. In summing up, then, what are his accomplishments? First, he was able to manipulate forms, particularly media, in a way that simultaneously deceived and delighted his audience. Second, he was a teacher, revealing in the act of creating how form dictates content and, despite its immediacy and suggestion of catching reality in the act, is really spun out of a maker with a singular view of the truth. Third, he was an entertainer par excellence, one of the finest motion picture actors American cinema has yet produced. Fourth, he made literature accessible on film in a way that preserved the word as the essence of its art, and still maintained film form while using it as a medium of translation. Last, he was, as everyone hears, the man who gave film its vocabulary. What this means is that he created a way for film to express its truth in its own voice, freeing it from its origins in other arts.

Why, then, is Welles not one of the luminaries of that century which he joyously influenced and simultaneously abhorred? The answer lies within his failure to face the oldest *leger de main* of all, reality. His refusal to fall from grace, his need to cling to innocence and to continuously express shock at the world's corruption; these leave Welles in a rut of his own making. These failures also prevent him from approaching the greatest artistry of his time, notably Ingmar Bergman and Hemingway whose innovations gave us fresh language while tackling reality head on. Welles' greatest work was collaborative, usually drawing on literature and/or the talents of other creative people, as in the case of *Citizen Kane*. On his own, his opus was mediocre and he was content to play his lamented "legend" to the hilt. He used the legend as an excuse, as another ruse in which, like his broadcast of *War of The Worlds*, he first warned his audience and then went right ahead and deceived them. Perhaps he was cheating his audiences as he felt life, or reality, had cheated him.

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