



Orson Welles

Orson Welles is still alive. Will I be accused of phony when I say that he's a remarkable actor? Or will I violate the laws of libel if I say it's difficult for him to tell the truth? The two elements are not necessarily contradictory; they can even complement each other. As time passes Welles is tempted to claim total authorship of anything good he has touched, whether the screenplay of *Citizen Kane* or the radio sensation of "The War of the Worlds," (whose author is actually Howard Koch).

If one trusts what appears in print, Welles wrote not only *Kane* but just about everything halfway good in any picture he ever acted in, and in interviews he's beginning to have directed anything good in them, too.

It could have been the free-wheeling, generous, unstructured interviews that first made Pauline Kael suspicious of some gap between the way *Citizen Kane* was made and the way Orson Welles says it was made. Interviewers and their microphones have an especially intoxicating effect on Welles; he either gets that his words, when printed, can be checked for their veracity, or he counts on his elevated position of artistic authority to dispose of the "fiddlers" — it's his word against their petty objections.

In a London interview given to *The Observer*, Welles made a startling reference, in passing, to his friendly correspondence with Eisenstein. The interviewer was alert enough to ask where Eisenstein's letters to Welles were. His airy reply: "I threw them away—I get a lot of letters, you know." Was there a correspondence? As Eisenstein was less free with the letters he received, I looked for the end of the exchange on my next visit to the Eisenstein archive: not a trace! I believe it is probable that the "correspondence" could have grown from Welles' mind from a single note (unanswered?) conveying Eisenstein's congratulations after seeing *Citizen Kane*.

Pauline Kael's skepticism has produced an extraordinary book. In search of buried facts, she has made the great but logical leap from criticism to history. Her's is a book that is as good and original in its way as the film it's written about. She has newly examined the film itself, and has reached at some unexpected conclusions. Pauline Kael calls *Kane* "a shallow masterpiece" (that advice must be swelling the lists of her critics), and works in a "comic-strip tragic" style. But she still says the sheer *exuberance* of the film, the bravura execution and performance, the success of his "collection of black-out sketches" arranged in comment on each other.

It is when Miss Kael takes us behind the scenes of *Kane's* birth and production that the adventure of her historical reconstruction begins, exactly. Chance plays a large role, bringing Welles to the film at exactly the right, balanced moment (not too soon, not too late), and giving him amazing independence — in one film:

Welles brought out to Hollywood from New York his own production unit — the Mercury Theatre company, a group of actors and associates he could count on — and, because he was smart and had freedom, he was able to find in Hollywood people who had been waiting all their lives

to try out new ideas. At the arrival of the group in Hollywood in 1939, there was an embarrassing pause while the subject of their first film was sought. The film had to be one in which Welles would have substantial acting opportunity, and the first producer offered him two roles — in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, adapted with John Houseman and Robert Drake, a script very inventive and requiring such technical ingenuity as *Kane*. R.K.O. thought

it would be too expensive, and Welles turned to a political spy thriller, *The Smiler with the Knife*, by Nicholas Blake (C. Day Lewis). This too, was rejected and, as time passed too quickly, Welles grew desperate and tense and quarreled with Houseman, who returned to New York. Before this split of the partnership, Houseman had brought Herman Mankiewicz to Welles.

In her account of Mankiewicz's talent and background Pauline Kael does a splendid brief history of Hollywood films in the 'thirties,' and of the Algonquin-to-Hollywood group of writers. She has, in fact, rescued Herman Mankiewicz from the obscurity that is often the doom of a witty intelligence. Here was the first of the "people who had been waiting all their lives to try out new ideas." He proposed to Welles that they make a "prismatic" film of a man's life as seen from changing viewpoints, but his first suggestions did not strike fire — Dillinger, Aimee Semple McPherson, Dumas père. His next was Hearst and "Welles leaped at it." Miss Kael guesses that Hearst was in Mankiewicz's mind from the first—he had long wanted to treat that dramatic life; he had become the embittered jester of Hearst's court at San Simeon, and—the clincher—he quietly noticed certain parallels in the personalities of Hearst and Welles.

The Citizen Kane Book does an enormous service in printing the original shooting script of *Citizen Kane*, following which is the cutting continuity. The script is the film—the ideas, the form, the ironic attitude—everything fundamental in the film was prepared in the shooting script. The cutting continuity shows little more change than the polish of realization. So it becomes of more than passing interest that Welles was somewhere else when the script was written by Herman Mankiewicz, helped by John Houseman (whom Welles had brought back from New York for "one last service"). The clearest statement of this situation was given by Houseman in an interview of 1962:

Having goaded each studio in turn into dismissing him, (Mankiewicz) had sunk to working on some of our radio shows...After several conferences, at which Mankiewicz (who had recently broken his leg under tragic-comic circumstances) continued to develop his ideas, we moved him—nurse, plaster cast and all—up to a place in the mountains called Victorville, about a hundred miles from Los Angeles. There we installed ourselves on a guest ranch. Mankiewicz wrote (actually dictated to a secretary), I mostly edited and the nurse was bored. Orson drove out once

for dinner. At the end of three months we returned to Los Angeles with the 220 page script of *Kane*...This is a delicate subject: I think Welles has always sincerely felt that he, single-handed, wrote *Kane* and everything else he has directed—except, possibly the plays of Shakespeare.

But the script of *Kane* was essentially Mankiewicz's. The conception and structure were his, all the dramatic Hearstian mythology and the journalistic and political wisdom which he had been carrying around with him for years and which he now poured into the only serious job he ever did in a lifetime of film writing. (Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn, 1962)

And Miss Kael reminds us of a general assumption in 1940:

It was understood that he would take the credit for the script, just as he did for the scripts of the radio plays...He probably accepted the work that others did for him the way modern Presidents accept the work of speech-writers.

But there were too many more urgent matters to discuss credits just then, though the real author prepared himself for the coming crisis. Everyone had to conceal from everyone else that Hearst's

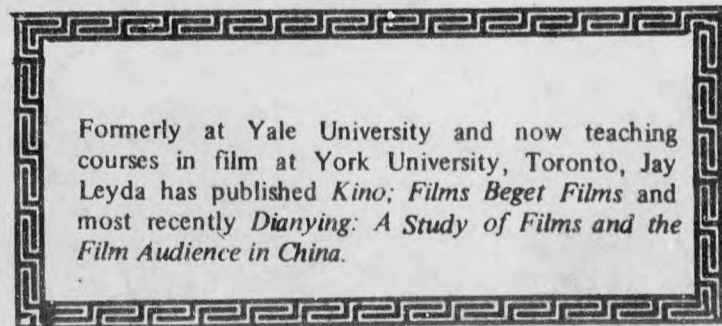
career had any connection with the film. The "new faces" of the Mercury actors had to be put to work before they would accept other jobs that would make them less fresh. The film had to be begun, in spite of R.K.O.'s hesitations, and the shooting of the script was started, disguised as "tests."

Of the greatest importance to the project was the contribution of its cameraman, Gregg Toland, who had volunteered to work for Welles on any film he chose to do. Here was another artist whose "new ideas" were to be revealed by Welles' arrival in Hollywood. Miss Kael's inquisitiveness and labor show Toland's own background as more vital to *Kane's* style-expressionist rather than realist—than has ever before been demonstrated. Her spot-light on the link between *Kane* and German films of the 'twenties' gives us a genuine surprise. We may have sensed this, before; now we can know it.

Hearst as a subject was an inspired idea. They knew they were playing with fire, but this seems to have sharpened everyone who worked on the film. Unfortunately, it sharpened the enemy forces too. By a characteristic, self-destructive stupidity, the Mankiewicz script got to Hearst before the shooting of *Kane* was completed—and the war was on. Miss Kael documents the several attempts, conducted by Hearst and his chain of newspapers, to kill the film and keep it from being released. The most outrageous attempt was Schenck's offer to R.K.O.'s president George Schaefer, of \$842,000 (the money appears to have come from Hearst's rather than M-G-M's pocket) if he would destroy the negative and all prints of this dangerous film. Schaefer refused. The Hearst papers were a convenient blackmail weapon: even the Rockefeller family were threatened (the messenger was Louella Parsons, Hearst's Hollywood columnist) with a double-page expose of the late John D. Rockefeller—and the scheduled premier of *Citizen Kane* at Radio City Music Hall was suddenly cancelled. All Hearst papers refused advertising for *Citizen Kane* (scaring both theatre chains and local exhibitors), and all connected with its making found themselves under steady malicious attack. The price of R.K.O. shares on the market was driven down with rumors of failure. "By mid-1942 Schaefer was finished at R.K.O."

The film was seen by critics, but never by enough of an American audience to recover its production expense. War shut off the European public. Hearst's victory was only partial, but *Kane* has had to wait for a new generation to gain its full reputation. Some of Welles' behavior may have a psychological justification. "Men cheated of their due are notoriously given to claiming more than their due."

Lest any reader feel sorry for a Welles at the mercy of a merciless Kael, please remember that for the efforts that he added to the Mankiewicz script, Orson Welles collects a goodly percentage on this publication of their collaboration. The book prepares us to accept the idea of Mankiewicz as collaborator; we end it, realizing that he was the sole author of the script, without lessening in our minds the credit to Welles, without whom *Citizen Kane* could never have been made.



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