Winner of one Academy Award in 1942 for Best Writing, Original Screenplay for Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles. *Citizen Kane* also received seven 1942 Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Orson Welles), Best Director (Orson Welles), Best Cinematography, Black-and-White (Gregg Toland), Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Black-and-White (Perry Ferguson, Van Nest Polglase, A. Roland Fields, Darrell Silvera), Best Sound, Recording (John Aalberg, RKO Radio SSD) and Best Film Editing (Robert Wise). In 1941 the film won both National Board of Review for Best Film and New York Film Critics Circle Awards for Best Film.

National Film Registry—1989

Directed by Orson Welles  
Written by Herman J. Mankiewicz & Orson Welles ... (original screenplay), John Houseman (contributing writer) (uncredited)  
Produced by Orson Welles  
Music by Bernard Herrmann  
Cinematography by Gregg Toland  
Film Editing by Robert Wise

Cast  
Orson Welles ... Kane  
Joseph Cotten ... Jedediah Leland  
Dorothy Comingore ... Susan Alexander Kane  
Agnes Moorehead ... Mary Kane  
Ruth Warrick ... Emily Monroe Norton Kane  
Ray Collins ... James W. Gettys  
Everett Sloane ... Mr. Bernstein  
William Alland ... Jerry Thompson  
Paul Stewart ... Raymond  
George Coulouris ... Walter Parks Thatcher


He also has 53 writer's credits, among them 1970 The Deep, 1965 Chimes at Midnight, 1962 The Trial (written by), 1958 Touch of Evil (screenplay), 1955 Confidential Report (screenplay) / (story), The War of the Worlds (1955, uncredited), 1952 Othello (uncredited), 1949 The Third Man (uncredited), 1948 Macbeth (adaptation - uncredited), 1947 The Lady from Shanghai (screenplay), 1946 The Stranger (uncredited), 1942 The Magnificent Ambersons (script writer), 1941 Citizen Kane (original screenplay), 1938 Too Much Johnson (writer).

Herman J. Mankiewicz (writer) (b. November, 7, 1897 in New York City, NY—d. March 5, 1953 at the age of 55 from uremic poisoning in Hollywood, CA) won one Academy Award in 1942, which he shared with Orson Welles, for Best Writing, Original Screenplay for Citizen Kane (1941). Mankiewicz was also nominated in 1943 with Jo Swerling for Best Writing, Screenplay for The Pride of the Yankees (1942). He has written for 93 films including, 1952 The Pride of St. Louis (screenplay), 1942 The Pride of the Yankees (screenplay), 1941 Citizen Kane (original screenplay), 1941 The Wild Man of Borneo (based on the play), 1932 Dancers in the Dark, 1931 Ladies' Man, 1930 The Vagabond King (screenplay, story), 1929 The Man I Love (story), 1928 Abie's Irish Rose (titles), 1926 The Road to Mandalay.


Gregg Toland (cinematography) (b. May 29, 1904, Charleston, Illinois—d. September 26, 1948, age 44, in Hollywood, California) won one Academy Award in 1940 for Best Cinematography, Black-and-White for Wuthering Heights (1939). He was nominated for five Academy Awards including 1942’s Best Cinematography, Black-and-White for Citizen Kane (1941), 1941’s Best Cinematography, Black-and-White for The Long Voyage Home (1940), 1940’s Best Cinematography, Black-and-White for Intermezzo: A Love Story (1939), 1938’s Best Cinematography for Dead End (1937) and 1936’s Best Cinematography Les Misérables (1935). Toland was cinematographer for 66 films, some of which were 1948 Enchantment, 1948 A Song Is Born 1947 The Bishop's Wife, 1946 The Best Years of Our Lives, 1946 Song of the South, 1946 The Kid from Brooklyn, 1943 December 7th, 1943 The Outlaw, 1941 The Little Foxes, 1941 Citizen Kane,


Dorothy Comingore...Susan Alexander Kane (b. Margaret Louise Comingore on August 24, 1913 in Lost Angeles, CA—d. December 30, 1971, age 58, in Stonington, CT) acted in 28 films and TV shows among them, 1952 The Doctor (TV Series), 1951 The Big Night, 1949 Any Number Can Play, 1944 The Hairy Ape, 1941 Citizen Kane, 1940 Convicted Woman, 1940 Cafe Hostess, 1939 Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, 1939 Golden Boy, 1939 Five Little Peppers and How They Grew, 1939 Coast Guard, 1939 Good Girls Go to Paris, 1939 North of the Yukon, 1939 Blondie Meets the Boss, 1938 Prison Train.


From my mother I inherited a real and lasting love of music and the spoken word."

Welles was the second and youngest child. (His brother Richard, ten years his senior, is said to have been a quietly eccentric character. At one point he joined a monastery in California from which he was later ejected.) Orson Welles was treated virtually as a nadult from infancy. Tales of his precocity have passed into legend. At two, he spoke “fluent and considered English” and rejected Lamb’s Tales From Shakespeare, which his mother was reading to him, demanding “the real thing.” At three, he was reading Shakespeare for himself, starting with Midsummer’s Night’s Dream. He made his public stage debut the same year in Madame Butterfly, as the heroine’s infant son. At four, he was writing, designing, and presenting his own stage plays in a miniature theatre given him by Dr. Maurice Bernstein, a Kenosha physician and family friend who was fascinated by his prodigious talents. At eight, Welles said “I was a Wunderkind of music. I played the violin, piano, and I conducted.” He could also draw, paint, and perform conjuring tricks with professional facility, and had written a well-researched paper on “The Universal History of the Drama.”

His parents separated when he was six, and he went to live with his mother, mainly in Chicago. Two years later Beatrice Welles died, and the boy passed from a world of international high culture into one that involved (according to John Houseman) “long, wild nights...with his father, in the red-light districts of the Mediterranean, Hong Kong and Singapore.” Welles seems to have found both environments equally stimulating. A term at the Washington School in Madison, Wisconsin when he was nine, was not a success; a year later, at the suggestion of Dr. Bernstein, he was sent to Roger Hill’s progressive Todd School for Boys at Woodstock, Illinois. Among the school’s assets was a well-equipped theatre, where Welles promptly staged Androcles and the Lion, not only directing but playing both title roles. During his five years at Todd he mounted some thirty productions, including a widely acclaimed Julius Caesar in which he played Antony, Cassius, and the Soothsayer. He also coauthored with Roger Hill a popular textbook entitled Everybody’s Shakespeare, which sold twenty thousand copies.

During his vacations Welles continued globetrotting with his father. Richard Welles took his son to most of the great cities of Europe and the Far East and made him at ease in a world of actors, circus folk, and conjurers. “My father loved magic; that’s what bound us together.” In 1928 Richard Welles killed himself in a Chicago hotel, flat broke. His son became the ward of Dr. Bernstein, of whom he later said, “I have never known a person of more real kindness, nor with a greater capacity for love and friendship.”

Welles left Todd in 1930 and studied for a time at the Chicago Art Institute. At sixteen he was supposed to enter Harvard. Instead he took off to Ireland, where he bought a donkey and cart and traveled round the country painting. By the time he reached Dublin, his money had run out. “I guess I could have gotten an honest job, as a dishwasher or gardener, but I became an actor.”...

Back in America in 1933, he was hired by Katherine Cornell, on the recommendation of Thornton Wilder and Alexander Woollcott, to join her national repertory company of Candida and Romeo and Juliet. ...Around this time Welles directed his first film. The Hearts of Age (1934) was a four-minute surrealist spoof, satirizing such avant-garde works as Cocteau’s Le Sang d’un poète.... Filmmaking, at this stage in Welles’ career, was


Born—to his lasting chagrin—in Kenosha, Wisconsin. (Having been conceived in Paris and named in Rio de Janeiro, he felt that Kenosha lacked, as a birthplace, a certain éclat.) Wisconsin happened to be where his father, Richard Head Welles, who hailed from Virginia, owned two factories. A dilettante engineer and idiosyncratic inventor, sixty-four years old when Orson Welles was born, his preferred occupations were travel and gambling; “a wandering bon viveur” was his son’s description. Welles’ mother, Beatrice Ives Welles, was an accomplished concert pianist whose acquaintances included Ravel and Stravinsky; she was also exceptionally beautiful, a crack rifle shot, and a political radical who had once been imprisoned as a suffragist. Welles adored both his parents. “[My father] was a gentle, sensitive soul....To him I owe the advantage of not having had a formal education until I was ten years old. From him I inherited the love of travel which has become ingrained within me.

a lighthearted diversion. The theatre was where he planned to make his mark. He first did so in the spring of 1936, when he and John Houseman staged their all-black “Voodoo Macbeth” for the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem. It was the sensation of the season....In 1937 he and Houseman formed their own company, the Mercury Theatre, which rapidly became one of the most influential companies in the history of Broadway....

Much of the funding for Mercury productions was provided by Welles’ prolific radio work. His rich, commanding baritone voice, once described by Kenneth Tynan as “bottled thunder,” suited him ideally for the medium, and while producing and acting on stage he was also providing voices for, among others, The Shadow (“Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men” The Shadow knows...”), Emperor Haile Selassie, and a chocolate pudding. Starting in July 1938, he persuaded CBS to employ the Mercury Company in a weekly dramatization of a literary classic, initially under the title of First Person Singular, and later as The Mercury Theatre of the Air. On the evening of October 30,1938. The chosen work was H.G. Welles’ The War of the Worlds.

Accounts of mass hysteria, fleeing multitudes, packed congregations weeping in churches, panic calls to police and army, and even suicides were undoubtedly exaggerated by a gloating press. Nonetheless, an astounding number of people, hoodwinked by Welles’ narrative method of simulated newsflashes, evidently did believe that Martians had landed at Grovers Mill, New Jersey, intent on annihilating the human race. By the next morning a highbrow radio show had become the most famous program in broadcasting history. Editorials thundered of a Mayer, Zukor, or Cohn, the studio had veered from prestige ventures to cut over forty times....It was a full year after his arrival in Hollywood that Welles began shooting his first feature film.

More has been written about Citizen Kane (1941) than about any other film ever made. Acclaimed on its release as a work of striking originality, it has since attained an unassailable position as a landmark in American filmmaking and the most influential film in the history of the cinema. “Less by imitation than by inspiration,” wrote Arthur Knight in Action (May-June 1969). “Citizen Kane has altered the look not only of American films, but of films the world over.” Since it is, as François Truffaut pointed out, “the only first film made by a man who was already famous,” Welles therefore “felt constrained to make a movie which would sum up everything that had come before in cinema, and would prefigure everything to come.”

Citizen Kane recounts, by means of a complex and ingenious flashback structure, the life of a great American press tycoon, Charles Foster Kane—despite Welles’ subsequent disclaimers—is modeled fairly closely on William Randolph Hearst. Kane’s mistress Susan Alexander, a talentless singer whom he tries to mold into a diva, is an unjust caricature of Hearst’s mistress Marion Davies, whose career as a movie actress was backed by Hearst and his newspaper empire. Kane’s mansion Xanadu was obviously inspired by Hearst’s San Simeon.

The film starts with Kane’s death, then cuts with jarring abruptness to the blare of a fake newsreel—a perfect imitation of the March of Time series—recounting the late tycoon’s life and exploits. The newsreel editor, though, is dissatisfied, and—rather implausibly—assigns one of his reporters to find out not just what Kane did, but “who he was,” and why he died with the word “rosebud” on his lips. The rest of the film follows the reporter as he sifts the recollections of five people who knew Kane well. Trying to arrive at the truth, he fails, but the camera (as well as audience) discovers at least part of the answer. At the very end we watch the casual destruction of Kane’s “junk,” including the sled he had used as a boy in the Midwest. The sled is thrown into the furnace and the camera catches for a moment the word painted on its side: “Rosebud.” There is a dissolve to the exterior of Xanadu—and the sign we had seen at the beginning of the film: “No trespassing”...
been used together with such exuberance, style, and ferocious narrative intensity, Welles’ inexperience worked for him: unaware of the “right way” to make a film, he created from the first a style completely his own, one that David Thomson characterized as “simultaneously baroque and precise, overwhelmingly emotional and deeply founded in reality.” Perhaps no other director’s work is so immediately recognizable; “his signature,” as Ronald Gottesman wrote, “is unmistakably inscribed in virtually every frame."

In a contemporary review (The Clipper, May 1941), Cedric Belfrage noted that “of all the delectable flavours that linger on the palate after seeing Kane, the use of sound is the strongest.” Though Welles was a novice—albeit a staggeringly gifted one—at filmmaking, he could bring to bear more knowledge of radio techniques than anyone else in Hollywood. The soundtrack of Kane—as of his other American films, Macbeth excepted—is of a complexity and subtlety unprecedented at the time. Dialogue overlaps, cuts across spatial and temporal dissolves; sounds are dislocated, distorted, deployed non-naturalistically to comment on or counterpoint the visuals; voices alter in timbre according to distance, placing or physical surroundings; music and sound are used across transitions, to effect narrative ellipses....

By the time Macbeth was released, Welles had quit Hollywood in disgust, setting out on the restless, peripatetic career he followed to the end of his life. Increasingly, acting in other people’s films began to occupy his time, to the exclusion of directing his own; though he always insisted that he only acted in order to finance his own films....

Touch of Evil (1958), freely adapted from a pulp novel by Whit Masterson, was Welles’ finest film since The Magnificent Ambersons—even, in the opinion of some critics, since Kane. Set in a squallid, peeling township straddling the US-Mexican border (for which the sleazy California resort town of Venice stood in admirably), it centers around the clash between an upright Mexican narcotics investigator, Mike Vargas (Heston) and a bloated, corrupt American cop, Quinlan (a sweaty and mountainously padded Welles). When a local magnate is killed by a bomb, Quinlan follows usual practices, plants evidence on the likeliest suspect. To prevent Vargas exposing him, he then arranges to have the Mexican’s young American wife framed in compromising circumstances, Vargas manages to convince Quinlan’s deputy, Menzies, of his boss’ crooked methods, and Menzies helps to trick Quinlan into a taped confession.

Welles was a lifelong sufferer from insomnia, and many of his films suggest an insomniac’s vision of the world—shadowed and ominous, shot through with a heightened, unreal clarity. In Touch of Evil, wrote Terry Comito (Film Comment, Summer 1971), “any place a character may for an instant inhabit is only the edge of the depth that opens dizzily behind him.... Menace lurches suddenly forward, and chases disappear down long perspectives....By opening the vertiginous ambiguities of space [Welles denies us] the safety of the frame of reference through which we habitually contemplate the world.” Frequent use of an anamorphic lens exacerbates this sense of a distorted, nightmare universe where spatial dimensions cannot be trusted. Touch of Evil generates a miasma of total instability, both moral and physical—anything may give. Corruption oozes from walls and furniture like a palpable presence; the very buildings become emanations of Quinlan’s bulbous, looming person. When, in the film’s final moments, his vast cadaver sinks slowly into a canal turgid with oil-slicked garbage, it seems an inevitable symbiosis, a reabsorption into the constituent elements.

Yet, as Truffaut observed, “we are brought somehow to shed real tears over the corpse of the magnificent monster.” At one point Quinlan encounters the local madam, Tanya (Marlene Dietrich); she first fails to recognize him, then comments laconically, “You’re a mess, honey. You better lay off those candy bars.” Quinlan grunts disconsolately, surveying his own decrepit bulk; the moment conveys unexpected pathos. Even this truculent, crooked cop, we realize, has a lost innocence to look back on. Welles always acknowledged, in regard to Quinlan, Kane, Arkadin and the rest of his overreaching villains, a feeling of “human sympathy for these different characters that I have created, though morally I find them detestable.” Around his own central performance Welles deploys a vivid range of supporting roles: “Uncle” Joe Gandi, the local gang boss (Akim Tamiroff at his most grizzly repellent); Mercedes McCambridge as a butch hoodlum in black leather; Dennis Weaver’s twitching, giggling motel clerk, described by Welles as “the complete Shakespearean clown...a real Pierrot Lunaire: and Dietrich’s Sternbergian Tanya, left to speak Quinlan’s off-hand epitaph, “He was some kind of a man....What does it matter what you say about people?”

The unbroken three-minute take that opens Touch of Evil has become deservedly famous. Starting on a close-up of a hand placing a time bomb in a car, the camera pulls back to show a dark figure vanishing round a corner as a couple enter, get in the car, and drive off; then cranes up, over a building, and down to follow the couple as they drive slowly along a busy street alongside another couple on foot (Vargas and his wife), stop at the border post to swap casual banter with the customs officer, and drive on into the desert; finally holds on Vargas and his wife kissing in close-up as, deep-focus in the background, the car explodes in a sheet of flame. Even the producer’s inane decision to run the credits over this shot could do little to detract from its masterly buildup of tension.

Universal, who had intended a run-of-the-mill thriller, were bewildered to find an offbeat masterpiece on their hands—not that Touch of Evil (“What a silly title,” said Welles) was acknowledged as such at the time, except in France. Inevitably, the studio tampered with the film, calling in a hack director (Harry Keller) for additional scenes to “explain” the action. The essence of Welles’ conception nevertheless survived intact. His temporary return to Hollywood was received by most American reviewers with contempt or indifference (“Pure Orson Welles and impure balderdash, which may be the same thing,” sneered Gerald Weales in the Reporter) and flopped at the box office. Europe, as usual, proved rather more receptive; the film was praised at Cannes, won...
an award at Brussels, and played for months to packed houses in Paris.

From Orson Welles Interviews, Ed Mark W. Estrin, U Miss., Jackson, 2002

“Most people aren’t afraid of death when it comes,” Welles said to L’Avant-Scène Cinéma interviewers in 1982. “They fear pain, age solitude, being abandoned. Death is only real for a few poets in the world. For the others, it isn’t real. Because if death really meant something to human sensibility, we wouldn’t have the atomic bomb, because the bomb is, quite simply, death.”

W: Really for me, Montaigne is the greatest writer of any time, anywhere. I literally read him every week like some people read the Bible, not very much at a time; I open my Montaigne, I read a page or two, at least once a week, just because I like it so much. There is nothing I like more.

—in French, or

W: In French, for the pleasure of his company. Not so much for what he says, but it’s a bit like meeting a friend, you know. It’s something very dear to me, something marvellous. Montaigne is a friend for whom I have a great affection. And he has some things in common with Shakespeare, too. Not the violence of course.

—So you’re a self-made cameraman, if one can put it like that?

W: I’ve only been influenced by somebody once: prior to making Citizen Kane I saw Stagecoach forty times. I didn’t need to learn from somebody who had something to say, but from somebody who would show me how to say what I had in mind; and John Ford is perfect for that. I took Gregg Toland as cameraman because he came and said he would like to work with me. In the first ten days I did the lighting myself, because I thought the directors should do everything, even the lights. Gregg Toland said nothing but discreetly put things right behind my back. I finally realized, and apologized. At the time, apart from John Ford, I admired Eisenstein—but not the other Russians—and Griffith, Chaplin, Clair, and Pagnol, especially La Femme du Boulanger. Today I admire the Japanese cinema, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, Ugetsu Monogatori and Living. I liked the cinema better before I began to do it. Now I can’t stop myself hearing the clappers at the beginning of each shot; all the magic is destroyed. This is how I’d classify the arts, in order of the pleasure they gave me: literature first, then music, then painting, then the theatre. In the theatre there is an unpleasant impression that one gets; the people are looking at you, and for two hours you’re a prisoner of the stage. But I am going to tell you a more terrible confidence; I don’t like the cinema except when I’m shooting; then you have to know how not to be afraid of the camera, force it to deliver everything it has to give, because it’s nothing but a machine. It’s the poetry that counts.

—The thing that I noticed. . .which I don’t think has been digested at all, is the notion of making a film with a team of actors who’ve been brought from one theatre.

W: It’s very interesting you should say that, because nobody’s ever pointed it out as far as I know. The whole cast of that play, the entire cast, were a team from a theatre; we worked together for years. There was nobody who didn’t belong to it except the second girl and the wife, but I mean the great body of the people were, and all of them were new to films—nobody had ever been in front of a camera before in the entire picture.

from “Realism for Citizen Kane,” Gregg Toland, ASC, American Cinematographer (February, 1941)

Citizen Kane is by no means a conventional, run-of-the-mill movie. Its keynote is realism. As we worked together over the script and the final, pre-production planning, both Welles and I felt this, and felt that if it was possible, the picture should be brought to the screen in such a way that the audience would feel it was looking at reality, rather than merely a movie.

Closely interrelated with this concept were two perplexing cinetechical problems. In the first place, the settings for this production were designed to play a definite role in the picture—one as vital as any player’s characterization. They were more than mere backgrounds: they helped trace the rise and fall of the central character.

Secondly—but by no means of secondary importance—was Welles’ concept of the visual flow of the picture. He instinctively grasped a point which many other far more experienced directors and producers never comprehend: that the scenes and sequences should flow together so smoothly that the audience should not be conscious of the mechanics of picture-making. And in spite of the fact that his previous experience had been in directing for the stage and for radio, he had a full realization of the great power of the camera in conveying dramatic ideas without recourse to words.

Therefore, from the moment the production began to take shape in script form, everything was planned with reference to what the camera could bring to the eyes of the audience. Direct cuts, we felt, were something that should be avoided whenever possible. Instead, we tried to plan action so that the camera could pan or dolly from one angle to another whenever this type of treatment was desirable. In other scenes, we preplanned our angles and compositions so that action which ordinarily would be shown in direct cuts would be shown in a single longer scene—often one in which important action might take place simultaneously in widely separated points in the extreme foreground and background . . .

In passing, it may be mentioned that this technique of using completely ceilinged sets so extensively gave us another advantage: it eliminated that perpetual bane of the cinematographer—microphone shadows. The ceilings were made of muslin, so the engineers found no difficulty at all placing their mikes just above this acoustically porous roof. In this position they were always completely out of camera range, and as there was no overhead lighting, they couldn’t cast any shadows. Yet the ceilings were so low that the mike was almost always in a favorable position sound pickup. I must admit, however, that working this way for 18 or 19 weeks tends to spoil one for working under more
conventional conditions, where one must always be on the lookout lest the mike or its shadow get into the picture!

The next problem was to obtain the definition and depth necessary to Welles’ conception of the picture. While the human eye is not literally a universal-focus optical instrument, its depth of field is so great and its focus change so completely automatic that for all practical purposes it is a perfect universal-focus lens.

In a motion picture, on the other hand, especially in interior scenes filmed at the large apertures commonly employed, there are inevitable limitations. Even with the 24mm lenses used for extreme wide-angle effects, the depth of field—especially at the focal settings most frequently used in studio work (on the average picture, between 8 and 10 feet for the great majority of shots)—is very small. Of course, audiences have become accustomed to seeing things this way on the screen, with a single point of perfect focus, and everything falling off with greater or less rapidity in front of and behind this particular point. But it is a little note of conventionalized artificiality which bespeaks the mechanics and limitations of photography. And we wished to eliminate these suggestions wherever possible.

It was therefore possible to work at apertures infinitely smaller than anything that has been used for conventional interior cinematography in many years. While in conventional practice, even with coated lenses, most normal interior scenes are filmed at maximum aperture or close to it—say within the range between f:2.3 and f:2.8, with an occasional drop to an aperture of f:3.5 sufficiently out of the ordinary to cause comment—we photographed nearly all of our interior scenes at apertures not greater than f:8—and often smaller. Some scenes were filmed at f:11, and one even at f:16!

How completely this solved our depth of field problem may easily be imagined. Even the standard 50mm and 47mm objectives conventionally used have tremendous depth of field when stopped down to such apertures. Wide-angle lenses such as the 35mm, 28mm and 24mm objectives, when stopped down to f:11 or f:16, become for all intents and purposes universal-focus lenses.

But we needed every bit of depth we could possibly obtain. Some of the larger sets extended the full length of two stages at the RKO-Pathe Studio, and necessitated holding an acceptably sharp focus over a depth of nearly 200 feet. In other shots, the composition might include two people talking in the immediate foreground—say two or three feet from the lens—and framing between them equally important action taking place in the background of the set, 30 or 40 feet away. Yet both the people in the immediate foreground and the action in the distance had to be kept sharp!

A further innovation in this picture will be seen in the transitions, many of which are lap-dissolves in which the background dissolves from one scene to another a short but measurable interval before the players in the foreground dissolve. This is done quite simply, by having the lighting on the set and people rigged through separate dimmers. Then all that is necessary is to commence the dissolve by dimming the background lights, effectually fading out on it, and then dimming the lights on the people, to produce the fade on them. The fade-in is made the same way, fading in the lighting on the set first, and then the lighting on the players.


Fifty years ago, on May 1, 1941, RKO Radio unleashed its much-publicized and very controversial *Citizen Kane* on an expectant show world. It was the first feature film produced by a multi-talented young man from radio and stage, Orson Welles, who celebrated his 26th birthday five days after the New York premiere. Most of the critics loved it, some panned it. The Hearst newspapers pointedly ignored it, then attacked it because of the widely held opinion that it was based on the life of William Randolph Hearst.

The general public hated it, with theater men reporting more walkouts and demands for refunds than they could remember. Some exhibitors declared *Kane* an illustration of why blockbooking by film distributors should be outlawed. (Which it was, years later. RKO at the time would only allow theaters to book programs only in blocks of five features of *RKO’s choice*, plus selected short subjects.)

Within the industry there was a great deal of resentment against the “boy-wonder” producer/director/star/co-author. He was, many complained, too self-assured, too inexperienced and had been given too much power. His chubby, mischievous face reminded everybody of that smartass kid who received all the straight A report cards in high school. The word “genius” took on an ugly connotation. The most popular gag in town was attributed to the hard-drinking and sharp-witted author of the screenplay, Herman J. Mankiewicz. Glancing up as Welles walked past, he is alleged to have remarked, “There, but for the grace of God, goes God.”

It is said that Louis B. Mayer offered RKO president George Schaefer $842,000—the combined negative and production costs—to destroy the negative and all prints. Mayer had done this before on a couple of occasions when he considered a picture to be un-American or anti-Hollywood.

At the 1941 Academy Awards ceremony (February 26, 1942), *Citizen Kane* received nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor (Welles), Best Direction, Original Screenplay (Mankiewicz and Welles), Cinematography (Gregg Toland, ASC), Art Direction (Perry Ferguson and Van Nest Polglase), Interior Decoration (Al Fields and Darrell Silvera), Sound Recording (John Aalberg), Film Editing (Robert Wise), and Music—Scoring of a Dramatic Picture (Bernard Herrmann). Boos from the audience greeted each announcement. Miraculously, *Citizen Kane* did receive an award for its screenplay and also was named Best Picture by both the National Board of Review and the New York Film Critics.

The picture was a boxoffice flop, going some $150,000 into the red, and Welles had become as popular as the pox among the RKO executives.

Deep focus photography had been utilized from time to time, most notably in 1931 by James Wong Howe, ASC in *Transatlantic*; by John Mescall, ASC in the 1935 *Bride of...*
Frankenstein, and by Toland in 1940 in both The Westerner and The Long Voyage Home. After Citizen Kane its use became widespread, especially in the so-called film noir films of the following decade.

The fact that all principal players (however excellent) were strangers to the screen also mitigated against audience acceptance. Today it’s hard to imagine that Welles, Joseph Cotten, Ruth Warrick, Agnes Moorehead, Everett Sloane, Ray Collins, Paul Stewart and Erskine Sanford were completely unknown to moviegoers.

from This is Orson Welles. Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich. Edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum. DaCapo Press

NY 1998

I [Bogdanovich] had told Welles how difficult it was for many of the older directors we both admired to get a job. Not that it was anything new: D.W. Griffith, who practically invented it all, wasn’t allowed to make a film the last seventeen years of his life. Orson himself had written very movingly of his single meeting with Griffith, and a lot of directors’ stories were similar: Josef von Sternberg, Fritz Lang, King Vidor, Jean Renoir, John Ford. Without ever saying so, Orson must have connected himself to that sort of fate and he told me he had been deeply affected by our conversation.

Now, out by the lake, he said: “You told me last night about all these old directors whom people in Hollywood say ‘over the hill,’ and it made me so sick I couldn’t sleep. I started thinking about all those conductors—Klemperer, Beecham, Toscanini—I could name almost a hundred in the last century—who were at the height of their powers after 75. And were conducting at eighty. Who says they’re over the hill! I think it’s just terrible what happens to old people. But the public isn’t interested in that—never has been. That’s why Lear has always been a play people hate.”

Did he think Lear became senile? I asked, and Orson answered: “he became senile by giving power away. The only thing that keeps people alive in their old age is power. . . . Take power away from De Gaulle or Churchill or Tito or Mao or Ho or any of these old men who run the world—in this world that belongs only to young people—and you’ll see a ‘babbling, slippered pantaloon.’ It’s only in your twenties and in your seventies and eighties that you do the greatest work. The enemy of life is middle age. Youth and old age are the great times—and we must treasure old age and give genius the capacity to function in old age—and not send them away.” The very last film Orson Welles would prepare and almost make—the deal for which would fall apart (in France) shortly before his death—was his own very intimate adaptation of King Lear.

Jean Cocteau wrote

Orson Welles is a giant with the face of a child, a tree filled with birds and shadows, a dog who has broken loose from his chains and gone to sleep on the flower bed. He is an active loafer, a wise madman, a solitude surrounded by humanity.

Welles “I want to use the motion picture camera as an instrument of poetry.”

PB: What was your initial reaction to the Hearst blacklist on Citizen Kane?

OW: We expected it before it happened. What we didn’t expect was that the film might be destroyed. And that was nip and tuck; it was very close.

PB: To the negative being burned?

OW: Yes. It was only not burned because I dropped a rosary

PB: What?

OW: There was A SCREENING FOR Joe Breen, who was the head of censorship then, to decide whether it would be burned or not. Because there was tremendous payola on from all the other studios to get it burned.

PB: All because of Hearst’s people?

OW: Yes. Everybody said, “Don’t make trouble, burn it up, who cares? Let them take their losses.” And I got a rosary, put it in my pocket, and when the running was over, in front of Joe Breen, a good Irish Catholic, I stood up and dropped my rosary on the floor and said, “Oh excuse me,” and picked it up and put it in my pocket. If I hadn’t done that, there would be no Citizen Kane.

PB: After Kane, you once said, “Someday, if Mr. Hearst isn’t frightfully careful, I’m going to make a film that’s really based on his life.”

OW: Well, you know, the real story of Hearst is quite different from Kane’s. And Hearst himself—as a man, I mean—was very different. There’s all that stuff about [Robert] McCormick and the opera. I drew a lot from that, from my Chicago days. And Samuel Insull. As for Marion [Davies], she was an extraordinary woman—nothing like the character Dorothy Comingore played in the movie. I always felt he had a right to be upset about that.

PB: Davies was actually quite a good actress—

OW: And a fine woman. She pawned all her jewels for the old man when he was broke. Or broke enough to need a lot of cash. She gave him everything, stayed by him—just the opposite of Susan. That was the libel. In other words, Kane was better than Hearst, and Marion was much better than Susan—whom people wrongly equated with her.

PB: You once said that Kane would have enjoyed seeing a film based on his life, but not Hearst.

OW: Well, that’s what I said to Hearst.

PB: When!!

OW: I found myself alone with him in an elevator in the Fairmont Hotel on the night Kane was opening in San Francisco. He and my father had been chums, so I introduced myself and asked him if he’d like to come to the opening of the picture. He didn’t answer. And as he was getting off at his floor, I said, “Charles Foster Kane would have accepted.” No reply...And Kane
ANNALS OF HOLLYWOOD About pioneer cinematographer Gregg Toland. In 1936, an ambitious young director, William Wyler, joined forces with producer Samuel Goldwyn. For his first Goldwyn picture, “These Three,” Wyler was paired with a cinematographer he’d never worked with before, the 32-year-old Gregg Toland. Like many other directors of the era, Wyler regarded cinematographers as little more than glorified mechanics. Toland, by the time of his death, in 1948, at the age of 44, had filmed 67 features, ranging from “The Grapes of Wrath” (1940) to “Song of the South” (1946), and he remains essential to the grammar of filmmaking. “He thought like a cutter,” the director Steven Soderbergh said. Cinematographer Harris Savides said of “Intermezzo” (1939), which Toland filmed, “It’s one of the most beautiful movies ever shot...” Many of the techniques that Toland helped pioneer have since become standard practice. Before Toland, most Hollywood fare had actors shot straight on, sitting or moving through naturalistic sets. By the mid-1930s, when Toland began producing his most resonant work, he was shooting actors with an impressionistic flair—filming them from below or positioning them in front of mirrors. He also developed the first lighting cues that could accurately imitate candlelight. And he insisted that photography should serve the narrative. A wispy, laconic man of five feet one, Toland was born in Charleston, Illinois. In 1910, his parents divorced, and his and his mother went to live in L.A. By the time he was 15, Toland was working as an office boy at William Fox Studios. He moved on to become an assistant cameraman. In 1926, he went to work for the pioneering cinematographer George Barnes. Not long after Toland became his assistant, Barnes was hired by Goldwyn, mentions cinematographer Stanley Cortez and film scholar Roger Dale Wallace. In 1929, Toland devised a tool that silenced a movie camera’s grind—a big problem for talking pictures. This was among the first of Toland’s many technical innovations. Goldwyn first became aware of Toland when a dialogue coach named Laura Hope Crews observed him at work in 1929. Toland's first solo credit was for the 1931 musical comedy “Palmy Days.” In the mid-1930s, Toland, who had already been married and divorced, married Helene Barclay, an actress. In 1939, he earned his first Oscar for his work on Wyler's “Wuthering Heights.” His next project was Orson Welles's “Citizen Kane.” Toland's aesthetic contribution to the film was critical. He wrote in American
Cinematographer that he and Welles felt that the film should be “brought to the screen in such a way that the audience would feel it was looking at reality…” They also wanted the camera to reproduce the way we perceive space—with both foreground and background objects in focus. Toland’s technique, which changed filmmaking forever, became known as “deep focus.” For all his bravado, Toland had a soft touch on movie sets. Ralph Hoge described how he coaxed a performance out of Ingrid Berman for David O. Selznick’s “Intermezzo.” Describes Toland’s work on Wyler’s “The Little Foxes,” with Bette Davis. After these films, Toland became the highest-paid cinematographer in Hollywood; he also had supervision over sets, costumes, etc. The only movie he ever directed—with John Ford as co-director—was a documentary about Pearl Harbor, which he made while serving in the Navy during WWII. After the war, he divorced again, and a few months later he married Virginia Thorpe, and they had two sons. On September 28, 1948, Toland died in his sleep, of coronary thrombosis. His legacy was secured by the film theorist Andre Bazin.

_Roger Ebert on Citizen Kane:_

“I don’t think any word can explain a man’s life,” says one of the searches through the warehouse of treasures left behind by Charles Foster Kane. Then we get the famous series of shots leading to the closeup of the word “Rosebud” on a sled that has been tossed into a furnace, its paint curling in the flames. We remember that this was Kane’s childhood sled, taken from him as he was torn from his family and sent east to boarding school.

Rosebud is the emblem of the security, hope and innocence of childhood, which a man can spend his life seeking to regain. It is the green light at the end of Gatsby's pier; the leopard atop Kilimanjaro, seeking nobody knows what; the bone tossed into the air in “2001.” It is that yearning after transience that adults learn to suppress. “Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn’t get, or something he lost,” says Thompson, the reporter assigned to the puzzle of Kane's dying word. “Anyway, it wouldn't have explained anything.” True, it explains nothing, but it is remarkably satisfactory as a demonstration that nothing can be explained. “Citizen Kane” likes playful paradoxes like that. Its surface is as much fun as any movie ever made. Its depths surpass understanding. I have analyzed it a shot at a time with more than 30 groups, and together we have seen, I believe, pretty much everything that is there on the screen. The more clearly I can see its physical manifestation, the more I am stirred by its mystery.

It is one of the miracles of cinema that in 1941 a first-time director; a cynical, hard-drinking writer; an innovative cinematographer, and a group of New York stage and radio actors were given the keys to a studio and total control, and made a masterpiece. “Citizen Kane” is more than a great movie; it is a gathering of all the lessons of the emerging era of sound, just as “Birth of a Nation” assembled everything learned at the summit of the silent era, and “2001” pointed the way beyond narrative. These peaks stand above all the others.

The origins of “Citizen Kane” are well known. Orson Welles, the boy wonder of radio and stage, was given freedom by RKO Radio Pictures to make any picture he wished. Herman Mankiewicz, an experienced screenwriter, collaborated with him on a screenplay originally called “The American.” Its inspiration was the life of William Randolph Hearst, who had put together an empire of newspapers, radio stations, magazines and news services, and then built to himself the flamboyant monument of San Simeon, a castle furnished by rummaging the remains of nations. Hearst was Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch and Bill Gates rolled up into an enigma.

Arriving in Hollywood at age 25, Welles brought a subtle knowledge of sound and dialogue along with him; on his Mercury Theater of the Air, he’d experimented with audio styles more lithe and suggestive than those usually heard in the movies. As his cinematographer he hired Gregg Toland, who on John Ford’s “The Long Voyage Home” (1940) had experimented with deep focus photography—with shots where everything was in focus, from the front to the back, so that composition and movement determined where the eye looked first. For his cast Welles assembled his New York colleagues, including Joseph Cotten as Jed Leland, the hero’s best friend; Dorothy Comingore as Susan Alexander, the young woman Kane thought he could make into an opera star; Everett Sloane as Mr. Bernstein, the mogul's business wizard; Ray Collins as Getty’s, the corrupt political boss, and Agnes Moorehead as the boy’s forbidding mother. Welles himself played Kane from age 25 until his deathbed, using makeup and body language to trace the progress of a man increasingly captive inside his needs. “All he really wanted out of life was love,” Leland says. “That's Charlie’s story--how he lost it.”
The structure of “Citizen Kane” is circular, adding more depth every time it passes over the life. The movie opens with newsreel obituary footage that briefs us on the life and times of Charles Foster Kane; this footage, with its portentous narration, is Welles’ bemused nod in the direction of the “March of Time” newreels then being produced by another media mogul, Henry Luce. They provide a map of Kane’s trajectory, and it will keep us orientated as the screenplay skips around in time, piecing together the memories of those who knew him.

Curious about Kane’s dying word, “rosebud,” the newsreel editor assigns Thompson, a reporter, to find out what it meant. Thompson is played by William Alland in a thankless performance; he triggers every flashback, yet his face is never seen. He questions Kane’s alcoholic mistress, his ailing old friend, his rich associate and the other witnesses, while the movie loops through time. As often as I’ve seen “Citizen Kane,” I’ve never been able to firmly fix the order of the scenes in my mind. I look at a scene and tease myself with what will come next. But it remains elusive: By flashing back through the eyes of many witnesses, Welles and Mankiewicz created an emotional chronology set free from time.

The movie is filled with bravura visual moments: the towers of Xanadu; candidate Kane addressing a political rally; the doorway of his mistress dissolving into a front-page photo in a rival newspaper; the camera swooping down through a skylight toward the pathetic Susan in a nightclub; the many Kanes reflected through parallel mirrors; the boy playing in the snow as his parents determine his future; the great shot as the camera rises straight up from Susan’s opera debut to a stagehand holding his nose, and the subsequent shot of Kane, his face hidden in shadow, defiantly applauding in the silent hall.

Along with the personal story is the history of a period. “Citizen Kane” covers the rise of the penny press (here Joseph Pulitzer is the model), the Hearst-supported Spanish-American War, the birth of radio, the power of political machines, the rise of fascism, the growth of celebrity journalism. A newreel subtitle reads: “1895 to 1941. All of these years he covered, many of these he was.” The screenplay by Mankiewicz and Welles (which got an Oscar, the only one Welles ever won) is densely constructed and covers an amazing amount of ground, including a sequence showing Kane inventing the popular press; a record of his marriage, from early bliss to the famous montage of increasingly chilly breakfasts; the story of his courtship of Susan Alexander and her disastrous opera career, and his decline into the remote master of Xanadu (“I think if you look carefully in the west wing, Susan, you’ll find about a dozen vacationists still in residence”).

“Citizen Kane” knows the sled is not the answer. It explains what Rosebud is, but not what Rosebud means. The film’s construction shows how our lives, after we are gone, survive only in the memories of others, and those memories butt up against the walls we erect and the roles we play. There is the Kane who made shadow figures with his fingers, and the Kane who hated the traction trust; the Kane who chose his mistress over his marriage and political career, the Kane who entertained millions, the Kane who died alone.

There is a master image in “Citizen Kane” you might easily miss. The tycoon has overextended himself and is losing control of his empire. After he signs the papers of his surrender, he turns and walks into the back of the shot. Deep focus allows Welles to play a trick of perspective. Behind Kane on the wall is a window that seems to be of average size. But as he walks toward it, we see it is further away and much higher than we thought. Eventually he stands beneath its lower sill, shrunken and diminished. Then as he walks toward us, his stature grows again. A man always seems the same size to himself, because he does not stand where we stand to look at him.
COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 31

Nov 10 Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 1997
Nov 24 Terry Gilliam, *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, 2009
Dec 1 Béla Tarr, *The Turin Horse*, 2011
Dec 8 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven*, 1946

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