The Buffalo Film Seminars
Angelika 8 Theater

Touch of Evil
(1958)

Director  Orson Welles
Script  Paul Monash and Orson Welles,
based on Whit Masterson’s novel Badge of Evil
Producer  Albert Zugsmith
Original music  Henry Mancini

Cinematographer  Russell Metty (uncredited director of reshots–Harry Keller)
Film Editor  Edward Curtiss, Walter Murch (director’s cut), Aaron Stell, Virgil W. Vogel

Orson Welles    Hank Quinlan
Charlton Heston  Ramon Migyuel ‘Mike’ Vargas
Janet Leigh     Susan Vargas
Joseph Calleia  Pete Menzies
Akim Tamiroff    "Uncle Joe" Grandi
Joanna Cook Moore  Marcia Linnekar

Marlene Dietrich    Tanya
Dennis Weaver    Motel Manager
Mercedes McCambridge  Leader of the gang
Zsa Zsa Gabor    Nightclub Owner
Joseph Cotten    Police surgeon
Keenan Wynn    Bit Part (uncredited)

Orson Welles (George Orson Wells, 6 May 1915, Kenosha, Wisconsin — 10 October 1985, Hollywood, sometimes Credited as  O.W. Jeeves an G.O. Spelvin) did it all: actor, director, writer, producer, editor, cinematographer, shill for Gallo Wines. In his later years he played himself, but he got to do that only because the self he created was so interesting. His bio lists 133 acting credits, beginning as Death in the 1934 film Hearts of Death. Many of those credits were as “narrator”: he was the offscreen voice of the narrator in “Shogun” and Robin Masters “Magnum P.I.” He played some of history’s great characters: Cardinal Wolsey in A Man fo All Seasons 1966, Falstaff in Chimes at Midnight 1965, Harry Lime in Third Man 1949, Cesare Borgia in Prince of Foxes 1949, and Macbeth 1948. Not one of the 28 films he directed is uninteresting and several are masterpieces, among them It’s All True (1993), The Lady from Shanghai (1948), Macbeth (1948), The Magnificent Ambersons (1942), and Citizen Kane (1941). He won a lifetime achievement academy award 1971, was nominated for The Magnificent Ambersons 1942, won for best writing original screenplay for Citizen Kane (1941).

Like Orson Welles, CHARLTON HESTON (John Charlton Carter 4 October 1924, Evanston, Illinois) played Long John Silver and had a voice people liked enough to hire him as narrator for commercials and films long after he’d stopped being of interest as an actor. There the similarities end. Heston appeared in more than 100 films, among them Wayne’s World 2 (1993), Earthquake (1974), Airport 1975 (1974), Soylent Green (1973), The Omega Man (1971), Will Penny (1968), Planet of the Apes (1968), Khartoum (1966), The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965), Major Dundee (1965), El Cid (1961), Ben-Hur (1959), The Ten Commandments (1956), Ruby Gentry (1952), and Peer Gynt (1941). In 1960 Huston won a best actor Oscar for Ben-Her and in 1978 he won the Academy’s Gene Hersholt Humanitarian Award. That was pre-NRA. He was responsible for Welles’s getting the director job in Touch of Evil.

JANET LEIGH (Jeanette Helen Morrison, 6 July 1927, Merced, California) was in Harper (1966), Bye Bye Birdie (1963), The Manchurian Candidate (1962), Psycho (1960), How to Smuggle a Hernia Across the Border (1949), The Romance of Rosy Ridge (1947) and 59 other films.

MARLENE DIETRICH (Marie Magdelene Dietrich, 27 December 1901, Berlin-Schöneberg, Germany— 6 May 1992, Paris) liked to deny she’d ever been in silents. If that’s true, then Madame wünscht keine Kinder (1926), Tänzerin (1926), Der Mönch von Santaren (1924), So sind die Männer (1922), and Im Schatten des Glücks (1919) have soundtracks no mortal ear has ever heard. No matter. She’s great when she did get around to talking, whenever it was. Some of her other films are Judgment at Nuremberg (1961), Witness for the Prosecution (1957), Around the World in Eighty Days (1956), Rancho Notorious (1952), Destry Rides Again (1939), Der Blaue Engel (1930). She’s Tina Turner’s ego-ideal.


ROGER EBERT on TOUCH OF EVIL

"Come on read my future for me.
You haven't any,
What do you want?
Your future is all up."

So spake a fortune-telling madam, played by Marlene Dietrich, to the drunken sheriff of a border town, played by Orson Welles, in "Touch of Evil." Her words have a sad resonance, because Welles was never again to direct in Hollywood after making this dark atmospheric story of crime and corruption.

It was named best film at the 1958 Brussels World Fair (Godard and Truffaut were on the jury), but in America it opened on the bottom half of a double bill, failed, and put an end to Welles' prospects of working within the studio system. Yet the film has always been a favorite of those who enjoy visual and dramatic flamboyance. "I'd seen the film four or five times before I noticed the story," the director Peter Bogdanovich once told his friend Orson. "That spake well for the story." Welles rumbled sarcastically, but Bogdanovich replied, "No, no-I meant I was looking at the direction."

That might be the best approach for anyone seeing the film for the first time: to set aside the labyrinthine plot, and simply admire what is on the screen. The movie begins with one of the most famous shots ever made, following a car with a bomb in its trunk for three minutes and 20 seconds. And it has other virtuosic camera movements, including an unbroken interrogation in a cramped room and a sequence that begins in the street and follows the characters through a lobby and into an elevator. The British critic Damian Cannon writes of it as "spatial choreography," in which "every position and movement latch together into a cogent whole."

Welles and his cinematographer, Russell Metty, were not simply showing off. The destinies of all of the main characters are tangled from beginning to end, and the photography makes that point by trapping them in the same shots, or tying them together through cuts that match and resonate. The story moves not in a straight line, but as a series of loops and coils.

Some of those loops were removed when Universal Studios took the film from Welles and re-edited it, adding closeups and chopping scenes, so that it existed for years in a confusing 95-minute version and then belatedly in a 108-minute version that still reflected the studio's meddling. Now at last Welles' original intentions (explained in a 58-page memo to the studio) are reflected in a restored version that is three minutes longer and contains 50 changes, some large, some small. This version was produced by Rick Schmidlin and edited by Oscar winner Walter Murch, inspired by a crucial 1992 article in Film Quarterly by Chicago critic Jonathan Rosenbaum.

"... Viewers familiar with the earlier version will not feel they are seeing a different film but may be able to follow the plot more easily. The most important changes take place in those opening minutes, when the stories of the Heston and Leigh characters are now intercut (the studio positioned all of the wife's hazards with a local gang after her husband's dealings with Quinlan). Another significant change: The opening shot is now seen without superimposed credits (they've been moved to the end), and with music from car radios and clubs, instead of Henry Mancini's title theme (Welles thought source music and sound effects would better establish the atmosphere)..."

"... Much of Welles' work was autobiographical, and the characters he chose to play (Kane, Macbeth, Othello) were giants destroyed by hubris. Now consider Quinlan, who nurses old hurts and tries to orchestrate this scenario like a director, assigning dialogue and roles. There is a sense in which Quirin wants final cut in the plot of this movie, and doesn't get it. He's turning down after years of indulgence and self-abuse, and his ego leads him into trouble."

Is there a resonance between the Welles character here and the man he became? The story of Welles' later career is of projects left uncompleted and films altered after he had left them. To some degree, his characters reflected his feelings about himself and his prospects, and "Touch of Evil" may be as much about Orson Welles as Hank Quinlan. Welles brought great style to his movies, embracing excess as the price (and reward) of his freedom.