

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 Miguuel '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, skill 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 for 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-Hur* 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.

WALTER MURCH got Welles' 58 pages of notes and is responsible for us seeing the film Welles was trying to make. Some of the films Murch edited are *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *The English Patient* (1996), *The Godfather Trilogy: 1901-1980* (1992), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Julia* (1977). He edited sound for *The English Patient*

Apocalypse Now, *The Conversation* (1974), *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *American Graffiti* (1973), *THX 1138* (1970), and *The Rain People* (1969). He was nominated for eight editing Academy Awards and won three of them: *The English Patient* (editing and sound) and *Apocalypse Now* (sound).

ROGER EBERT on TOUCH OF EVIL

Come on read my future for me.

You haven't got any.

What do you mean?

Your future is all used up.

So speaks 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 speaks well for the story," Welles rumbled sarcastically, but Bogdanovich replied, "No, no—I mean 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 one that begins in the street and follows the characters through a lobby and into an elevator. The British critic Darrin Camon writes of its "spatial choreography," in which "every position and movement latches 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 these 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 Quinlan wants final cut in the plot of this movie, and doesn't get it. He's running 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 Hark Quinlan. Welles brought great style to his movies, embracing excess in his life and work as the price (and reward) of his freedom.

—to receive the Angelika Film Center's weekly film summaries and screening times, send an email to ldamelio@compuserve.com with your email address

—for cast and crew info on almost any film: imdb.com/search.html or allmovie.com

—for information on major American films, including detailed plot summaries: www.filmsite.org

—email Bruce Jackson: bjackson@buffalo.edu

—email Diane Christian: engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu

—for the series schedule, links and updates: www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/movies.html

—to get on the listserv for the class send an email to listserv@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu with this line & nothing else as the message: *sub greatmovies-list Firstname Lastname*

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS ARE PRESENTED BY THE CITY OF BUFFALO, THE ANGELIKA THEATERS
& THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO.