Letters on Orson Welles

20 June 2009

On "Orson Welles, the blacklist and Hollywood filmmaking"

I was fascinated by your interview with Joseph McBride, the author of *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?* due to the striking parallels between Welles's life and that of another cinematic artist often labeled—in my opinion, deservedly—"greatest of all time": Sergei Eisenstein. Both made their masterpieces at a very young age (Welles made *Citizen Kane* at 25; Eisenstein made *Potemkin* at 28). Just as Welles "incurred the wrath of right-wing publisher William Randolph Hearst" for making *Citizen Kane* and was blacklisted—officially or unofficially—and had to abscond to Europe, Eisenstein was the target of an anti-Semitic and anti-communist media campaign orchestrated by the fascist Major Frank Pease. He was effectively run out of the US as well after he came over to attempt to make a film for Paramount.

Welles came under fire in Brazil for going over budget while "reveling with 'native women.'" Eisenstein also went way over budget in Mexico working on *Que Viva Mexico! w*hile reveling with "native men," never finishing that project either. Both had long, desolate stretches of little output, in which they and their work endured bitter criticism. Funnily enough, neither were ever actual Communist Party members. Both were very anti-Stalinist. In fact, Eisenstein's last film, *Ivan the Terrible*, is a clever anti-Stalinist allegory in defense of Marxism. Joan Neuberger wrote a good analysis of the symbolism in that film. What an exciting era for filmmaking that was, despite what those involved were put through.

I just thought I'd share this observation that I found interesting as a historian, socialist, and classic film geek. McBride's book is definitely going on my "must read" list for the summer.

Loren P

North Carolina, USA
19 June 2009

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After reading the two-part series on Orson Welles, I feel compelled to write. I can verify that Orson Welles was not that enfant terrible who was cranky and arrogant, vain, and difficult to get along with, which is the Hollywood portrait that has been handed down to us. Why not? Welles was a great artist; in Hollywood shallowness runs deep, very deep.

I have been an actor in films, stage, and television for over thirty years—more if one counts college and high school. I have been a fan of Orson Wells since I was seventeen years old. I have, when during a hot summer in Washington, DC—it was very late at night—I was surfing channels and suddenly came upon the library scene toward the beginning of Citizen Kane. I have seen his more important films more than twice.

When I moved to Hollywood in the late 80s I filmed a TV pilot entitled Wolfpack, starring Dennis Weaver and Piper Laurie. I was sorry the pilot was never picked up. However, I did get close to Orson Welles—though he had been dead for a number of years. He was alive in the person of Dennis Weaver, a kind, generous decent person with definite leftist sympathies. Many people will remember him as Chester in Gunsmoke and as McCloud in the series of the same name.

Well, we had one week together on the set; and we did have one scene together. He was very approachable, not a vain or arrogant bone in his body. So, during a break, while sitting on the ground in front of a building that shielded us from the suffocating sun—and it was hot on the Warner lot!—we talked about his stint as president of the Screen Actors Guild, the Blacklist and so on. It just so happened that I had recently seen Welles' *Touch of Evil* the previous week. Mr. Weaver played the crazed farmer in it, and he had been indelible. I finally asked him what had been the greatest experience of his career. Mr. Weaver did not hesitate at

all; he replied quickly: “Working with Orson in *Touch of Evil*.”

Why, I asked him? What was so special?

“The man was a genius,” he said, “always full of ideas, so creative. He was stimulating and inspirational. And he was funny as hell— A lot of fun to be around—Always full of jokes and good things to say to and about everyone. Oh, yes, he could be tough sometimes, but he had the loyalty of all actors on that set. They adored him.”

I was so impressed by Mr. Weaver’s description of my favorite director that I wrote his words down immediately; I had been writing a diary of my first television pilot. I still have it.

So, Joseph McBride says in your interview that Welles was a “great deal of fun to be around,” that “In fact, he was a lot of fun on the set—he was entertaining and believed in giving people a good time to keep up the creative energy. He loved the act of creating, which often does not come across,” he is telling us the truth.

But Hollywood, in all its vulgar wisdom, has forever depicted this artistic genius, who in his films said more (and interestingly) about American society than any other I can think of—Chaplin and sometimes Altman come close—as a gruff, vain vulgarian who had no work ethic and whose films—sin of sins in Hollywood—could not rake in the money.

Art will out and Welles one day shall laugh last.

Raoul R
California, USA
17 June 2009

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Welles’ FBI file was 222 pages long—and Chaplin's was over two thousand pages! I wonder if any others were even longer. During the 1940s and early 50s, the process of destroying independent artists, and consolidating power over the modern film/television/entertainment industry, was undertaken in earnest. It is now firmly in the grip of giant corporations, that monopolize distribution, and keep people from understanding how they came to wield such power. More light needs to be shed on this period, and knowledge about it needs to be made available to the general public.

Speaking of Chaplin, watch his *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). It is a courageous film that was viciously attacked in the US when it was first released. It explicitly addresses the degrading effects of capitalism, and very much speaks to our own time.

KV
Vancouver, Canada
16 June 2009