

An interview with Joseph McBride, author of *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?*

Orson Welles, the blacklist and Hollywood filmmaking—Part 2

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This is the second part of an interview with Joseph McBride, author of What Ever Happened to Orson Welles? A Portrait of an Independent Career (2006). The first part was posted June 16.

WSWS: Is there any other film figure about whom such a hostile mythology has been created as there has been about Orson Welles?

Joseph McBride: Director Erich von Stroheim was ruined by the studios because he was profligate and his films had a lot of sexual aspects that were groundbreakingly frank. Von Stroheim depicted the military and rich people as decadent and corrupt. His films made a lot of money; the public ate these things up. But he was seen as this crazed artist—*Greed* [1924] was originally nine and a half hours long. He was stretching the rules in terms of length and budget.

Von Stroheim was perhaps the first major director whom they reined in. And Irving Thalberg at MGM was the guy who fired him, and Thalberg became known as the guy who represented the system in which the producers were in charge and the directors were the employees. So von Stroheim was broken, and he had to go to Europe and spend time as an actor just like Welles. But he never really resumed his career as a director. He was not able to do that after 1933.

WSWS: Yes, but von Stroheim is not a living figure for most people. No one continues to put out unfavorable stories about him, do they? Whereas in Welles's case, there continue to be unflattering pictures made of him.

JM: It's actually a tribute to Welles.

WSWS: Absolutely.

JM: The actor Vincent D'Onofrio made a little film [*Five Minutes, Mr. Welles* (2005)] in which he also stars as Welles working on *The Third Man*, and again he plays him as an egomaniac. At the Locarno film festival a few years ago, I saw another short film that had Welles as a Faust figure being tempted by Mephistopheles, represented by the African-American actor Jack Carter, who played the lead in his "Negro Macbeth." Welles makes a deal where he sells his soul for success, winds up damned and all that. It was ridiculous. I said to the filmmaker: why did you feel the need to claim that Welles sold his soul to the devil? He couldn't answer, so I think he just picked up what's in the air about Welles without thinking.

With a lot of people you get this kneejerk conventional wisdom: Welles was a reckless, out-of-control artist who ate too much and drank too much, he stopped making films in the 1950s, 1960s, or whatever. They are completely ignorant of his later work.

WSWS: Your book is important in that regard. Unless you become

something of an expert, how would you know?

JM: As the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum points out, the media are partly responsible for that because you don't read stories about this in the *New York Times* or even the *Nation*. There's sort of a blackout on his later career. When he died in 1985, the *Times* obituary said he had been inactive as a director for a number of years. Their film critic Vincent Canby wrote a piece a few days later in which he corrected that. Without saying "we were wrong," he said that Welles had been working on independent projects for a number of years. For "the paper of record" to say the contrary is indicative of how ignorant people are, and that has not changed a lot.

I think my book helps, but it's read by a small audience. I'm hoping to affect people who write about film.

WSWS: Speaking of those unfinished projects, we saw a version of Welles's *Don Quixote* a few years ago in Buenos Aires.

JM: A Spanish director, Jesús Franco, an assistant to Welles at one point, assembled a version of *Don Quixote*. It's very bad. The head of the Munich Film Museum, Stefan Drössler, has shown 30 minutes of *Don Quixote*, with much better material and scenes that weren't in that other version. Rosenbaum feels that's the most important unfinished Welles film. More than *The Other Side of the Wind*. But the version of *Don Quixote* that came out in 1992 was a real travesty—a terrible print, badly put together, and it was mixed with a travelogue that Welles made about Spain.

WSWS: This was a different version. At any rate, there was no travelogue.

JM: There are various documentaries about Welles from different countries. There's one about him in Yugoslavia, a film from Croatia. There are documentaries about him working in Spain and Italy, as well as in Brazil. His career is so vast that people are still putting the pieces together. There are so many unfinished projects. There was a good script he wrote about Sirhan Sirhan [the alleged assassin of Robert F. Kennedy], entitled *Assassin*, or *The Safe House*, which he adapted from a script by Donald Freed.

WSWS: The most shameful aspect of his career is the connection with the Shah's regime. Even if he needed money badly that shows a real demoralization.

JM: He even narrated a documentary about the Shah. You have to wonder why he did that. Also disgraceful was a 1945 radio program written by Norman Corwin, a left-wing radio writer, praising the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Welles is ranting and raving about how wonderful it is.

WSWS: That was the Communist Party line, super-patriotic and militaristic. We point that out in the review of *Hollywood's Blacklists*.

JM: There are a few bad moments, but his record is better than most.

WSWS: Can you speak about Welles's unfinished film that you worked on in the 1970s, *The Other Side of the Wind*?

JM: They've been working on trying to get it finished. This has been going on for a long, long time. A year ago, [director] Peter Bogdanovich was working to make it more presentable to Showtime [cable television network], which continues to be interested in funding the completion. Then that fell through because someone came forward and claimed that he owned a piece of the footage.

From the 1970s to the 90s I spent years trying to raise interest in this film. With [Welles's longtime cinematographer] Gary Graver and [Welles's companion at the time of his death] Oja Kodar, we went to Showtime and got them to agree to put up \$3 million to finish the film. We made a deal with the Iranian producer; he'd get \$1 million, and Oja would get \$1 million. He has since died, and his heirs are willing to sell their share. They just want to get their money. Then we'd have a million left over for post-production, and this was all set to go.

Then Peter and Oja fired me from the project because they didn't need me anymore. And I decided, OK, I've done enough. And then Beatrice Welles [Welles's youngest daughter] showed up and threatened Showtime, and scared them, even though she has no rights at all. Welles left the film to Oja. Some other things went to his wife, Paola Mori, who died in 1986, and Beatrice inherited her estate. But it's specified that the unfinished works were all left to Oja, so Beatrice has no control over that film. Companies tend to pay her money to make her go away, and that only emboldens her. She also argues that Oja should not be entrusted with the film because she did a bad job in hiring Jesús Franco to finish *Don Quixote*. There is something to be said for that.

However, I'm not sure that that's Beatrice's main concern. It's usually the money. From her point of view, she sees this as her legacy, and because he wasn't the greatest of fathers.... But she's become the William Randolph Hearst of his later life. It's very ironic that she's the one who's stopping his works from coming out. Otherwise, we would have seen *The Other Side of the Wind* years ago.

WSWS: What do you think of it as a film?

JM: I've seen a rough cut, which we've shown to investors, but no one has seen the entire ten hours of footage. Even Welles did not see all the footage. It's in a laboratory in France. It's hard to judge it without seeing all the material. Also the rough cut has kind of deteriorated and faded. Even though I'm not a professional editor, I could put it together. What I wanted to do was work with a professional editor. But there are issues surrounding the editing.

In *The Other Side of the Wind*, there's "a film within a film." That aspect of it apparently makes it more difficult for some viewers or potential investors. Graver, Oja and I approached Walter Murch—a great editor—and we were disappointed when he said, "I don't get it." And at one point we went to George Lucas who said, "I don't get it." And Steven Spielberg didn't get it.

I was surprised, it's hard for people who are not in the film industry to look at a rough cut, but people in the industry should be able to understand one. Mind you, some parts were very rough, there were entire scenes missing. Gary Graver put it together, and he didn't do the greatest job editing the rough cut.

The real problem is that it's a very unusual film, very avant-garde in its style. Welles never did the same film twice. With an Alfred Hitchcock or a John Ford, you knew what a film by them would be like. With Welles, people were always surprised, he was always breaking new ground. So

that's hard for people who go in and think to themselves, "Well, this does not look like an Orson Welles film."

In *The Other Side of the Wind* the style is a faux *cinema verité* framing story. It's hard for people to understand because Welles is having fun with camerawork and rough shooting. He's spoofing the *cinema verité* style. I don't think that's hard to understand. And then "the film within the film" is a spoof of Antonioni. But you have to be clued into that. But I would think that somebody like George Lucas would be clued into that and get it, but he didn't. I guess he's too conventional.

WSWS: You would have thought a little bit more of Spielberg. That he would have made an effort because he has a bit of film history. Even if he didn't like it, he ought to have recognized its significance.

JM: Yes, I'm generally an admirer of Spielberg. I'm disappointed—even if they didn't like the film, if I were one of them, I'd say, "Let's finish it." For its historical importance at least. My feeling is, maybe this will not be the greatest film in the world, but so what?

With *The Other Side of the Wind*, many critics would say it's an experiment, if nothing else. It's a shame that a complete film by Orson Welles is just sitting in the can, and this has been going on now for 39 years. I'm starting to get pessimistic.

I'm one of the last surviving cast members. Peter Bogdanovich and Oja Kodar have big parts in the film. But a good number of the cast, like John Huston, Susan Strasberg, Mercedes McCambridge and Paul Stewart, have all died. So I have this fantasy of hobbling into a theater in the year 2039 with a walker....

Most of the crew is still around because they were young guys at time film was made. But it's tragic that Gary Graver died. He died a couple of years ago, of cancer, at 68. He was someone whose life was devoted to completing *The Other Side of the Wind*. I had the feeling when he died, the film died too.

WSWS: You don't paint a flattering picture of Hollywood in the "swinging" '70s. Welles thought he would have a better time of it, but it was more difficult for him.

JM: He wrote an article for *Look* magazine in 1970. He was inveighing against all the young directors, and the cult of the director. *Look* wanted him to write something about the "New Hollywood," so he wrote this angry polemic basically saying that the cult of the director reminded him of Mussolini on his balcony. The director on the crane is the God-like figure, so there's something vaguely fascistic about this cult of the director. Then he said a lot of young people who had no experience were being given a lot of money to make films, and the implication was that figures like him were not.

Welles implied that the fact that he had a track record worked against him. The fact that he had made *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *The Lady from Shanghai* was not a good selling point for him because these films and others all had clouds over them. So if you were Joe Blow, or like a lot of these guys, you had never made a film, the producers were more willing to take a chance on you because you were a fresh new talent who had not failed yet.

Welles felt there was less place for him in that system than there had been in the 1950s, ironically. And in the '50s he thought there was less place for him than in the heyday of the studios in previous decades. In those days there were moguls who could do what they wanted. And they would make a little film every once in a while that was kind of an art film. There was always a place for a Welles film with Darryl F. Zanuck or Harry Cohn, or people like that.

But in the 1950s the system began splintering and there were more independent producers who were releasing through United Artists and other companies outside the normal studio system. And Welles felt they were even more conservative than the moguls, because they were more

risk-averse, so he had less chance getting a film made in that period. He also had the political system working against him. And then, even if he had been allowed to work in Hollywood, the subject matter was so circumscribed in the 1950s. There were certain subjects that were hard to do. It's an interesting decade in American films, but a lot of the more political works were covert or transposed into genres such as science fiction and the western.

Welles was threatening because he was not a corporate lackey. There are certainly a lot of great directors and others who functioned well in the system. For example, John Ford, who was Welles's favorite director, and is my favorite director. Welles said that Ford functioned quite well in the system. That's because what he wanted was what the system wanted.

WSWS: Ford sincerely believed in America, however he may have interpreted that.

JM: Ford made some films that were critical of American policy. I think that *Fort Apache* [1948] is an amazing film because it's pro-Indian.

WSWS: The FBI thought he was a Communist fellow traveler. His nephew went to fight in the Spanish Civil War with the International Brigade.

JM: Well, Ford had some problems too. But he had such a track record in the military that he weathered that. Some of the films he made in the 1930s were leftist.

WSWS: *The Informer* is a fabulous film.

JM: Speaking with [blacklisted director] Abe Polonsky, whom I knew well, I once referred to Ford as conservative. He said, "No, no, no, you can't classify Ford. He was not one thing or another. He was a mixed bag." I think Abe was right. Welles thought that Ford was able to work in the system. After the war Ford realized that contemporary political themes were dangerous, so he made westerns that dealt with racism and things like that. Because nobody really cared what you said in a western.

He made *Wagon Master* in 1950. The *LA Times* attacked him because they said the Indians were portrayed positively instead of as killers, and that the main character does not want to kill people—the cowboy of the title throws his gun away at the end. That's why I *liked* the film. The *Times*, in effect, attacked it because it was subversive. But it was a western, so it really did not attract much attention.

Jean Renoir said Welles was an aristocrat artistically. He was a democrat politically, but he was an aristocrat aesthetically. And that's an interesting contradiction. The public never really got Welles. He was too esoteric for them. And his style was too unusual. So he was not a popular artist like John Ford or Steven Spielberg, who could take you along on difficult projects because the style was accessible. It's ironic that Welles always wanted a mass audience. I heard him say that his biggest dream was to have a mass audience and be a popular artist. He said that Charles Dickens was his idol when he was young. He wanted to be the American Charles Dickens.

WSWS: It's odd, because one always thinks of him as being popular. Accessible certainly. Artists aren't in control of their circumstances. In part, at certain points, the audience was blocked from Welles by powerful, reactionary forces, and also the population shifted. The mood in this country shifted. It was not his fault that the Cold War came along and all the other problems came along. He would probably subscribe to the Oscar Wilde line, if interpreted correctly, that "Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic."

JM: A book by Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, makes the point that Welles was very popular as a radio performer—he had a vast audience. He was an entertainer. On the radio, he would do a mixture of Shakespeare and low comedy. Welles said he liked highbrow art and lowbrow art. He didn't like middlebrow art. He said most people in the film industry and the critical profession were middlebrows. Welles always wanted to bring Shakespeare to the masses and bring slapstick to the highbrows. He thought film was a wonderful

medium because it was popular, and you could bring Dickens or Dostoyevsky to the screen.

WSWS: The last chapter has not been written on Welles. He's an artist of such magnitude. His films may have more resonance today.

JM: I'm glad you say that, because sometimes I get discouraged. Because when you're a cast member in *The Other Side of the Wind*, you get discouraged. Also, I've spent most of my adult life proselytizing for Orson Welles, since 1966.

Today anybody who wants to see a serious film faces an uphill battle. One reason documentaries are doing well is because people are starved for adult subject matter. The media are letting us down because they are not doing investigative reporting. So if you want to see a serious adult film you watch *Touch of Evil* [1958] or *Citizen Kane*. The problem is getting the films seen. Like *Chimes at Midnight* [1965].

WSWS: When *Chimes at Midnight* came out it made a big splash in New York. It made quite a sensation and then it disappeared.

JM: One of the problems there was *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther's hatred for Welles. He saw *Chimes at Midnight* at Cannes and wrote a negative review. It took a year for the film to get to New York because of Crowther. This little distributor bought it, Peppercorn Wormser, and they put it in New York theaters, and Crowther attacked it again. And then it disappeared.

So I called Carl Peppercorn, the distributor—here I am this 19-year-old kid berating him. He said he was discouraged because of Crowther's review. He thought there was no money in the film. I saw it in Chicago and the audience was half winos and half intellectuals from the University of Chicago. They all loved it. The winos got the jokes; the intellectuals got some of the rest. It showed me that film could have been a mass audience success.

Back in the 1950s, they would take kids from school to see Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* [1948]. The right distributor could have set up screenings for kids for *Chimes at Midnight*, which was very accessible. Welles was the best interpreter of Shakespeare. He made a wonderful Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, which exists only in pieces. That looked like a major Welles film, but sections are lost and somebody stole part of it. Like I say in the book, Renoir's line in *The Rules of the Game* [1939] is that "On this earth there is one thing that's terrible—it's that everyone has his reasons," and, equally, every Welles film has different problems.

WSWS: Many critics blame Welles for his "completion problem." In the end, aside from any personal failings, that problem is bound up with the character of the 20th Century as an unfinished century. Not his fault, he was a victim of historical processes.

JM: Welles felt the left had betrayed itself, and the movement was destroyed in the 1950s. The American left is still in disarray.

WSWS: As a socialist, it's interesting to read Welles's comment, after his reading a number of books about Hollywood and how many people it had destroyed, that "the story of that town is a dirty one, and its record is bad." The problem is bad social relations, and the incompatibility, in the end, of a genuine artistic spirit with the drive for profits.

JM: Some people talk about the curse surrounding Welles. I got criticized for saying in my book that the curse was capitalism and some reviewer said this was very simplistic. But I think it's true.

I spent a long time in Hollywood trying to sell screenplays. I was a reporter for *Variety* and I saw the system and how it works, and it's not very compatible with artists. The only kind of artist who can succeed is one whose vision fits within accepted parameters, and Welles's did not. If he had been more predictable he might have carved out a niche for himself. But he did not want to be. He wanted to make different kinds of films.

I knew [director] Terrence Malick in the 1970s before he became a recluse. He thought the worst danger for artists was self-censorship. It's

partially the commercial stigma. You don't want to do something you can't sell, or that will get you in trouble. It's only gotten worse and worse. I just read an article about the studios being so timid, all they want to make are sequels and remakes. A genuinely original screenplay in Hollywood...forget about it.

WSWS: With Welles and Chaplin, you have high art and high politics, along with "low" comedy. That's rare. They paid a price.

JM: Chaplin was the only member of the Directors Guild ever to be expelled. Can you imagine it? And he was kicked out of the country. Chaplin was not literally deported, but the US government would not let him back in 1952. His wife had to sneak into the country and take their money out of the bank. They finally allowed him to come back in 1972, but he had to get a special visa.

Chaplin was so rich, he owned his own studio, so he could make *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947]. He could not get people to see it, and most of the critics attacked him for it. He was part owner of United Artists. But Welles, unfortunately, never had a great commercial success. The only film of his that made any money was *The Stranger* [1946], which was the weakest of the films he directed—the most conventional. But even that is interesting. It calls attention to neo-Nazism.

WSWS: At his best, what was Welles like personally?

JM: He was a great deal of fun to be around. In *RKO 281*, Liev Schreiber plays him as this dour, gruff character. 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.

The actor Paul Stewart, who was in *The Other Side of the Wind*, played the mercenary butler in *Citizen Kane*. He had never been in a film, he was a radio actor and director. In his very first acting scene in a film, he had to say, "Rosebud? I tell you about Rosebud—how much is it worth to you?" Stewart told me that just before they shot the scene, and he was already very nervous, Welles came over to him and said, "Remember, Paul, when this movie comes out, your face will be forty feet high on the screen at Radio City Music Hall." Stewart totally panicked. They rolled the camera, and he said, "*Goldberg*? I tell you about Goldberg." Welles thought it was hilarious. That's the kind of scene that should have been in *RKO 281*, to show what it was really like working with Welles.

Welles's films were fun. He was always telling jokes, telling stories. I think of him as a modern Samuel Johnson.

I think he was one of the great orators, and that's why he almost had a political career. On set, he made thoughtful, insightful comments. He kept you stimulated. He loved actors. So you felt valued. Although I was bullied for three years because I was not an actor. He wanted me to be in this completely malleable state, putty in his hands.

Finally, after three years, a crew member told me that Welles had said, "Joe looks good up there, but then he always looks good on screen." Suddenly liberated, I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

The last time I talked with him was in 1983, when I was writing a tribute to John Huston for the American Film Institute and I helped get Welles in the show. I called him to discuss what he was going to say, simply to avoid repetition in other speeches, but he thought I wanted to tell him what to write. So he wouldn't discuss his speech with me. I felt disrespected as a writer and passed up his offer to see him then. I felt bad that I never saw him after that.





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