

Interviews with critics and film historians about Orson Welles

David Walsh and Joanne Laurier
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During the recent celebration in Woodstock, Illinois, commemorating 80 years since the Todd Theatre Festival organized by the then 19-year-old Orson Welles, we had the opportunity to speak to a number of the presenters and participants. (See also Orson Welles: An “unfinished artist” in an unfinished century.)

The following is an edited version of conversations with, first, critics and film scholars Joseph McBride and Jonathan Rosenbaum and Welles expert Roger Ryan, and then film critic and historian Tony Williams of Southern Illinois University.

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David Walsh: Why does Orson Welles remain such a compelling figure?

Joseph McBride: I think he’s a challenge to the system. He always was and always will be. A radical in a commercial film system, which is almost a contradiction in terms, at least in America.

I think of him as someone who ran up against the establishment wherever he was, whether it was South America or Hollywood or New York or the Federal Theatre. Sooner or later there was a collision, even with the European film community which one would expect to be more sympathetic. He’s an interesting ideological challenge to the system, especially the corrupt and degenerated American film industry.

Welles was both a high-brow and a low-brow artist. What he didn’t like was the middle brow, which gets you praise from the mainstream media and Academy Awards. He commented in various interviews that the mainstream media never liked his work. He loved low-brow culture like magic, vaudeville, the popular stage of his youth.

His work on radio was perhaps the one time that he was very successful as a popular artist and entertainer. He would take a classic novel, for example, and condense it into one hour of exciting drama and that worked commercially, at least up to a point.

Jonathan Rosenbaum: I think part of the problem, and the fascination, results from the fact that his films are scarce. Fundamentally, there is no closure with Welles. It makes him interesting, but it’s precisely what makes him frustrating to the average viewer. There is too much that is squirreled away, or did not get finished, or is unresolved. I think that’s what I find most compelling.

JM: He left behind so many unfinished works, keeping us working after his death. While we were working on *The Other Side of the Wind* [shot between 1969-1976], one of those unfinished works, the crew invented this wonderful phrase, “Volunteers in service of Orson Welles.” Today, this is still going on. Roger [Ryan] did that excellent reconstruction of Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons* [1942], and Jonathan and I write books.

I tried for a long time to get *The Other Side of the Wind* finished, I found *The Hearts of Age* [an eight-minute film shot in 1934] and other people have found *Too Much Johnson* [1938]. There’s a whole community of scholars who are trying to finish his unfinished work.

JR: Isn’t it strange that the whole issue of closure does not come up with someone like Kafka? People never say, “Oh, we’ll never get to the

bottom of Kafka.” There is not the same sense of frustration as with Welles. He was outside the system.

DW: He was embattled early on. Obviously, he had his idiosyncrasies, but he ran into real difficulties. *Citizen Kane* didn’t just encounter the hostility of [William Randolph] Hearst, Welles was blasted as a “red” before that film came out.

JM: And the FBI opened up his file as a result of that and “His Honor, the Mayor” [1941], his radio play about civil liberties. Hearst got J. Edgar Hoover to open a file on him, and the FBI was following Welles for 15 years.

DW: Whether he was officially blacklisted or not, he was an embattled figure, he came up against institutions and he fought the fight. And he paid the price for fighting that fight.

JR: Popular books about the history of cinema, such as Arthur Knight’s *The Liveliest Art* [1957] and Paul Rotha’s *The Film Till Now* [1930, 1949], end up putting down *Citizen Kane*. And the reason they do so is they say people who don’t understand film think that Welles’ film is very cinematic, but really it’s all derived from stage techniques and radio techniques ...

In fact, the first and only film course I took, at NYU [New York University], concluded with *Champion* [1949, directed by Mark Robson]. There was no Welles in the course, and I asked why, and the professor trotted out the same kind of thing. Even on the aesthetic level too, Welles has always represented a challenge.

DW: I agree.

JM: A book on Welles in Italy suggests that he was regarded as a Hollywood hack. They thought that *Kane* was somehow a vulgar, exhibitionistic film. Neorealism was their passion at the time. Welles was not neorealistic, he was expressionistic. They did not like his style or his approach.

JR: Did you know [Theodor] Adorno’s attack on Welles?

DW: I haven’t come across it, but it doesn’t surprise me a bit.

JR: Adorno saw him as some kind of middle brow who claimed to be radical.

DW: For Adorno, any piece of art that was accessible was suspicious by definition. I reject his views.

JM: Welles was not a purist. He was obviously a democrat with a small “d,” but he was an aristocrat in his tastes, although he also had low-brow tastes. He was not one thing or another.

JR: That corresponds to his parents: his father was mainly low brow in taste and his mother was high brow.

DW: It’s very complicated. In one sense, the limitations of Italian neorealism are also the product of Stalinism and the Communist Party, and the general lowering of or attack on socialist culture. There was a time when Shakespeare was not considered to be “high brow.” I think there was a degeneration in the middle of the 20th century and Welles was on the right side of the argument, the correct side. He had the idea that the population was capable of appreciating the highest art. But that’s rejected

by all these so-called leftist thinkers.

[To Roger Ryan] May I ask for a brief account of your restored *The Magnificent Ambersons*?

Roger Ryan: It's not really a restored version. I received [the book] *This is Orson Welles* for Christmas in 1992. I looked through its appendix and saw all the excised scenes represented by a cutting continuity done for the initial version of *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

The final third of the film was changed the most [by the studio, behind Welles' back]. I thought I could get some friends together and we could recreate this as a radio play, and I could use some of the frame enlargements as stills to accompany the audio. I wanted to see something closer to the way Welles saw the original film. I worked on it for nine months—I showed it to friends and sat on it for a long time.

JM: It's remarkably good. I've shown it to my classes. For one thing, it's so different from the released version that it's shocking. There is much more about the effects of American industrialization on the landscape, the corruption of the city, the collapse of the city—a parallel with the collapse of the family in the film. It's a much more challenging, much darker film.

And Roger's version is very poignant, very Chekhovian. He was able to use the music by Bernard Herrmann that was dropped. Herrmann took his name off the film because RKO would not run some of his music.

DW: Could I ask the two of you to explain briefly what you're going to say tomorrow? I gather there's a chronological approach to his early years.

JR: I'm supposed to talk about Welles in Dublin [in 1931], but I'm actually going to cheat, because I'm going to use that as a springboard to talk about him as a writer. I think this is the most neglected side of his talent.

Actually, what I'm proudest of having done in relation to Welles is publishing *The Big Brass Ring* [1987] and making available one silent sequence of *Don Quixote* by posting it on the Internet. I'm prouder of that than editing *This is Orson Welles* [1992], although I'm really glad I did that and it obviously took more effort and time. *The Big Brass Ring* is just a great book, the closest thing to a novel that Welles wrote, and hardly anyone knows about it. Nobody would know about it except for that publication. It's a remarkable, unflattering look at American politics and politicians.

The George Hickenlooper film [1999] hardly has any connection to Welles' work. The crime is that people call it by the same name.

RR: It's a bit like the A&E version of *Magnificent Ambersons*, which they described as restoring Welles' version. It includes a scene of George dancing the tango with his mother's corpse! My mouth hit the floor. It's a fiasco ...

JM: For my talk, I'm borrowing the title of a *Saturday Evening Post* story from early 1940 entitled "How to Raise a Child: The Continuing Education of Orson Welles, Who Didn't Need It." I think he did need it, and he got it here at the Todd School, and Roger Hill proved to be the perfect mentor, a very unconventional, mercurial educator. Hill let Welles be himself and encouraged talents he saw in this kid. An amazing meeting of two minds. Hill encouraged his theater work, Shakespeare.

Some people were pressuring Welles to go to college, Harvard or another place. He didn't want to do that, and I think it's fortunate he didn't go to college. I don't think he would have been as interesting if he'd gone through the educational mill. Sometimes when I tell my students this, they say, "Well, should we be here in your class then?" College is great for some people, but certain geniuses don't need it.

Welles may have had a nervous breakdown. He told certain people that's why he was sent to Ireland at sixteen, in 1931. That's where he got exposed to the professional theater for the first time, he fell in with the Gate Theatre in Dublin and that was a huge influence on him. He was exposed to European drama, because Hilton Edwards was an innovative

director who had learned a lot from German expressionism. And there was Micheál MacLiammóir as well. So he had a series of mentors, including Roger Hill, and I'm going to talk about that. Even a genius needs people to nurture their talent, to make sure it flowers.

I'm also going to speak about Orson Welles' nascent political views. He and Hill wrote a play together about John Brown, called *Marching Song*. By the time Welles arrived in New York in 1934-35, he was becoming involved in the radical politics of the time. He had been a world traveler, he had seen poverty in Ireland and elsewhere. When he came back to New York there was an enormous amount of unemployment; he couldn't get a job in the theater. He was imbibing the culture and atmosphere of the times.

DW: Yes, I realize he was only 18 or 19, but still, people are taking things in, especially someone as sensitive as he was. Hitler had come to power. The Depression was still at its height in 1934, with some 22 percent unemployment. You had the first mass, organized responses in the Minneapolis and San Francisco general strikes that year, as well as the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, only 300 miles from here.

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David Walsh: I'll ask you the same question I asked the others: why does Welles remain such a compelling figure?

Tony Williams: I believe he was one of the great artistic talents of the 20th century, whose work transcends so many boundaries— theater, film, radio, etc., and he is someone whose work still speaks to us today. Welles is someone who has never been given his due in American culture.

DW: Why do you think that is?

TW: This culture is highly anti-intellectual, both in the past and in the present. The culture does not want to be challenged in terms of politics or any other realm. Welles operates on both the political and artistic level as a particularly strategic genius.

DW: We can say, accurately enough, that his work was unfinished. But he wasn't allowed to finish it. From a very early point he came up against limits and walls, and opposition from the powers that be, and he was an embattled figure, whether he wanted to be or not.

TW: He faced so many obstacles from the Hollywood system of production and distribution, the tragedy is, the man wasn't allowed to work and finish his films.

Welles never became part of the establishment. He was a radical artist.

DW: Which films by Welles do you think most highly of?

TW: I'd have to think. *Chimes at Midnight* [1965] and *The Magnificent Ambersons* are the ones I find most interesting at the moment. But I find them all interesting, in one way or another.

Shakespeare was read by the working class in the 19th century. Welles understood that to get people to watch Shakespeare you had to prune it down, get to its essence. He was acting as a proto-film editor, getting to the core meaning. That is why his *Everybody's Shakespeare* [edited, illustrated versions of the plays, 1934] and his Mercury Theatre productions were so good, they were intended to reach a mass audience, but not by betraying the original. That's why he's regarded as a threat.

DW: In fighting for Shakespeare, Welles was doing something in the finest tradition of the socialist movement, of the progressive and democratic movement, which was to enlighten the population, to raise its level of thinking and feeling, not to condescend. The literate, cultured worker is a danger.

TW: Today more than ever ...

DW: The interesting thing about Welles, like Abraham Lincoln, is that people continue to write about him and hold events such as this. Alfred Hitchcock is a fascinating figure, as is John Ford, but there is something more settled about them. There is something that continues to be urgently compelling about Welles, that reaches out and grabs you, so to speak.

TW: I agree. He was highly unusual in a number of ways.

In his comments, Joe McBride spoke about the value of higher

education, or lack thereof. The situation is far worse today. In Carbondale [Southern Illinois University], they're monkeying around with the core curriculum, trying to make the education a far more "utilitarian" and business-oriented experience.

The situation in the universities is scandalous, including the student debt situation. General Smedley Butler once described war as a racket, now that description is as relevant to higher education.

The whole idea is more and more conformity, to produce people who are not allowed to think critically, as well as to get rid of faculty by scaring them about the pension crisis. People who've retired are going to regret that they've done so.

The pressures on students are immense. I've had students with terrible problems. I do my best to pass on knowledge about the history of film. In some cases, my class is the only film class some of the students will ever take. I'm very gratified when they tell me that they appreciated seeing a film by, let's say, Howard Hawks or Nicholas Ray. The students are not stupid, although the administration treats them as if they were.

People need information, especially in America. In Welles' *The Stranger*, Loretta Young is freaked out when she sees footage of the concentration camps. What would be the reaction in the US if footage of that building in Odessa set on fire by the neo-Nazis was shown on mainstream American television? So that people could see the dead bodies and the dead pregnant woman, in footage taken by the neo-Nazis themselves. The irony is that in World War II America was fighting the Nazis and now they're fulfilling the dreams of Prescott Bush and John Foster Dulles by supporting neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

DW: You participated in our online May Day rally.

TW: It was very, very positive. The worldwide participation shows the value of the Internet, which the establishment wants to control.



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