



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Magnificent Ambersons

A study of *The Magnificent Ambersons* will keep speaking of it as a ruin and treating it as one of the great tragedies of movie history. I recognise that, in the state to which its owners reduced it, the picture careers between brilliance and banality, its very worst scenes being the ones that RKO Pictures imposed to wrap the story's finish in rose-tinted cellophane. But my main concern will be with Orson Welles' film as one of cinema's glories – an incisive, moving, generous and thrillingly accomplished work. I shall not spend too long on the studio's part in first enabling and then wrecking the production.

An efficient outfit would not have made the film at all. After the first unhappy previews in March 1942, the company president George Schaefer wrote a gutless letter to Welles complaining that there had been particular trouble with the Pomona audience that had gone to the Fox theatre to see *The Fleet's In*: 'In Pomona we played to the younger element ... who contribute the biggest part of the revenue. If you cannot satisfy that group, you just cannot bail yourself out with a \$1,000,000 investment.'

Schaefer should have seen it coming. Welles delivered what we must suppose he had promised, a remarkably close adaptation of Booth Tarkington's 1918 Pulitzer prized novel. All the problems that the film encountered were predictable if anyone at RKO had taken the trouble to read *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Tarkington interwove a family saga with social history at the turn of the century so as to portray the rise of a mid-western American city – Indianapolis in all but name. His 'study of a triumphant family becoming submerged' was a hazardous subject for a movie. It required the reconstruction of an extravagant way of life that would first be displayed and then traced through the transformations caused by the rise of the automobile. The setting alone made it a difficult and inevitably an expensive project.

Early estimates on Welles' Ambersons script put the production cost at close to one million dollars. Welles undertook to cut back. But the final figure that Schaefer presented for his board's approval, agreed in September 1941, was above \$850,000. The decision was remarkable. RKO Pictures was once more in a state of near-bustitude, having emerged from receivership as recently as January 1940. Now like other Hollywood companies it was suffering the effects of the war in Europe in the reduction of its foreign earnings. But it was less able to withstand that loss because of its films' poor performances at the US box office. A crisis in mid-1941 had necessitated borrowings to keep the studio in operation. One of the conditions of a three million dollar loan had been an undertaking to set \$750,000 as the upper limit for all production.

At the top of the studio's scale you would expect to find starry properties packed with commercially promising ingredients and supplied, above all, with a clear and gripping emotional line. Tarkington's novel tells a story of failure

and frustration; its key events are deaths, and disappointments passively endured. His text carries a warning against dramatisation; a young audience in the theatre would, he says, be 'not only scornfully amused but vaguely angered' by his tale of middle-aged romance between the prospering car manufacturer Eugene Morgan and the widowed Isabel Minafer (née Amberson), heiress to a declining fortune.

While that is the novel's most appealing relationship the main thread of the narrative is carried by Isabel's only child, George, the product of her loveless marriage to the pallidly respectable Wilbur Minafer. Adored and indulged by his mother George grows up in idleness with an arrogant conviction of superiority that makes the townsfolk long for his 'come-upance' [sic]. As a young man, George falls for Eugene's daughter Lucy. But when his father's death frees Isabel to respond to Eugene's love, George is outraged. On a pretext supplied by Aunt Fanny Minafer's report of a gossiping slight on Isabel's reputation, he turns Eugene from the house, and breaks with Lucy to take his mother abroad, away from Eugene and from the imagined interest of the townsfolk. Thwarted in this late hope of romantic fulfilment, Isabel wastes away. She dies essentially of a broken heart.

There are two unavoidable issues. Why is Isabel's union with Eugene so vile a prospect for her son? Why can Isabel, threatened with heartbreak, not bring herself to face George down and insist on her own right to happiness? Answering these questions in ways that adequately motivate the key events required the clear and forceful presentation of the bond between a young man and his mother in its least attractive and potentially most embarrassing aspects. The actions and motives are not hard to credit. The threat was that audiences might not be willing to understand, and might retreat from discomfort into impatience or contempt.

In addition a time span of about 25 years presented difficulties in casting, performance and make-up to compound the awkwardness of a bumpy construction whose stops and starts might break, or kill, dramatic momentum. It may have been reasonable to rely on Welles' genius to solve these problems. But the ending of Tarkington's novel was another matter, a desperate patch-up that had to bring Isabel's voice across from the Spirit World in order to promote a reconciliation between Eugene and a George ennobled by adversity. Tarkington had contrived the semblance of a happy ending, for a story whose logic would not go that way [...] It seems extraordinary that any studio head would schedule a major production without having satisfied himself that solutions had been found for his Tarkington Problem.

**V.F. Perkins, *The Magnificent Ambersons*: BFI Film Classics (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999),
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THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

Director: Orson Welles
©/Production Company: RKO Radio Pictures
Production Company: Mercury Productions
Assistant Director: Freddie Fleck
Screenplay: Orson Welles
Based on the novel by: Booth Tarkington
Director of Photography: Stanley Cortez
Special Effects: Vernon L. Walker
Editor: Robert Wise
Design of Sets: Mark-Lee Kirk
Set Decorator: Al Fields
Ladies’ Wardrobe Design: Edward Stevenson
Sound Recording: Bailey Fesler, James G. Stewart

uncredited
Executive Producer: George J. Schaefer
Producer: Orson Welles
Unit Business Manager: Fred A. Fleck
Production Assistant: Richard Wilson
Additional Scenes Directors: Fred A. Fleck, Robert Wise, Jack Moss
Assistant Director: Harry Mancke
Additional Photography: Russell Metty
Camera Operator: James Daly
Assistant Camera: Howard Schwartz
Gaffer: James Almond
Stills: Alexander Kahle
Process Photography: Clifford Stine
Additional Editors: Mark Robson, Jack Moss
Art Director: Albert S. D’Agostino
Properties: Charles Sayers
Make-up: Mel Berns
Music: Bernard Herrmann
Additional Music: Roy Webb
Sound: Earl Mounce, John Tribby, Terry Kellum
Stunt Double for Anne Baxter: Helen Thurston
Stunt Double for Tim Holt: Dave Sharpe

Cast

Joseph Cotten (Eugene Morgan)
Dolores Costello (Isabel Amberson Minafer)
Anne Baxter (Lucy Morgan)
Tim Holt (George Amberson Minafer)
Agnes Moorehead (Fanny Minafer)
Ray Collins (Jack Amberson)
Erskine Sanford (Roger Bronson)
Richard Bennett (Major Amberson)

uncredited
Orson Welles (narrator)
Donald Dillaway (Wilbur Minafer)
Charles Phipps (Uncle John)
Dorothy Vaughan, Elmer Jerome, Sam Rice (funeral spectators)
Olive Ball (Mary)
Nina Guilbert, John Elliott (guests)
Anne O’Neal (Mrs Foster)
Georgia Backus, Kathryn Sheldon (matrons)
Henry Roquemore (hardware man)
Hilda Plowright (nurse)
Billy Elmer (house servant)
Edward Howard (chauffeur/citizen)
Harry Humphrey, Lew Kelly, Maynard Holmes (citizens)
Sada Simmons (wife)
Gus Schilling (drug clerk)
Bobby Cooper (George as a boy)
Drew Roddy (Elijah)
Jack Baxley (Reverend Smith)
Heenan Elliott (labourer)
John Maguire (young man)
Lyle Clement (man in barber shop)
William Blees (youth at accident)
James Westerfield (cop at accident)
Philip Morris (policeman)
Jack Santoro (barber)
J. Louis Johnson (Sam the butler)
Mel Ford (Fred Kinney)
Robert Pittard (Charles Johnson)
Lillian Nicholson (landlady)
Louis Hayward (ballroom extra)
Nancy Gates (girl)
Joe Whitehead
Del Lawrence
Harry Bailey
Edwin August

USA 1942©
88 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Magnificent Ambersons

Wed 14 Jul 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 25 Jul 15:00

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Thu 15 Jul 18:00; Sat 24 Jul 11:50

How Green Was My Valley

Fri 16 Jul 17:50

Casablanca

Sat 17 Jul 13:00; Sat 24 Jul 14:40; Thu 29 Jul 18:00

Man About Town (Le Silence est d’or)

Sun 18 Jul 12:30; Mon 26 Jul 14:20

Distant Voices, Still Lives

Sun 18 Jul 12:45; Mon 19 Jul 20:50; Fri 30 Jul 14:30

All the President’s Men

Tue 20 Jul 14:15; Sat 31 Jul 20:20

Rear Window

20 Jul 17:50; Mon 26 Jul 18:00; Sat 31 Jul 11:10

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Wed 21 Jul 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Tue 27 Jul 14:30

All about My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Thu 22 Jul 14:30

Hope and Glory

Fri 23 Jul 18:00

35 Shots of Rum (35 Rhums)

Wed 28 Jul 17:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by Be Manzini, poet and director of Caramel Film Club)

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