



Citizen Kane

Andrew Sarris on the 50th anniversary of the opening of 'Citizen Kane'

Citizen Kane erupted on to the screen, at least as a long-lived figure of speech, on 1 May 1941 at New York's Palace Theater. The film was originally to be premiered at the more prestigious and profitable Radio City Music Hall, but the booking was rejected – presumably because of the controversy surrounding the film's allegedly libellous treatment of William Randolph Hearst and his mistress, Marion Davies. Although Orson Welles always insisted that Charles Foster Kane was a composite of several tycoons, Barbara Learning's authorised biography of Welles contains the startling information that: 'Somehow, before making the movie, Orson had found out the secret name that Hearst used to refer to Marion Davies' genitalia: Rosebud'. So much for the arcane analysis of this most tantalising of cinematic symbols.

After 50 years of relentless re-evaluation, whether or not *Citizen Kane* is all that it is cracked up to be remains an open question. There are many people who have never even seen the movie – we're not talking here about *Gone with the Wind* or *It's a Wonderful Life* or *The Wizard of Oz*. We are talking instead of a dark, shadowy slab of celluloid that Jorge Luis Borges once described as that 'centreless labyrinth' mentioned in Chesterton's *The Head of Caesar*.

Even when first released, *Citizen Kane* was never viewed as popular, feel-good entertainment and the various conspiracy theories that seek to explain its bombing at the box office probably rely too heavily on a right-wing publisher's wrath. It was certainly no fault of Hearst's that the movie was a commercial flop in Britain, where Hearst had as little influence as Lord Beaverbrook in the US. Here, things were so bad that C. L. Lejeune of the *Observer* claimed British cinema owners frightened their children to sleep with stories of what happened (or rather, didn't happen) at the ticket counters when they played *Citizen Kane*.

The three most perceptive American film critics of the early 40s – James Agee, Manny Farber and Otis Ferguson – were also less than enchanted by the movie and by Welles' work in general. Suspicion of his eccentric compositions, shock editing and dizzying camera movements led to accusations that he was a faker, a charlatan, or, worst of all, an ivory-tower exhibitionist who failed to address the problems of the 'common people'.

Neither audiences nor critics was comfortable with Welles' 'cinematic' innovations borrowed from his own theatrical expressionism and experimentation. Every bit of portentous lighting and shadowing in *Kane* was first manifested in the Wellesian theatre of the late 30s. What did make *Kane* seem fresh in 1941 was its casting of theatre and radio people – Joseph Cotten, Everett Sloane, George Coulouris, Dorothy Comingore, Ray Collins, Ruth Warrick, Agnes Moorehead, William Alland, Erskine Sandford, Paul Stewart, et al – who had never before been seen on the screen. Welles himself was the biggest histrionic explosion on the movie screen, but to this day people differ on whether as a performer he was all that good or revelatory, or all that bad and hammy.

The film met with a warmer reception in France. For filmmakers and critics such as François Truffaut and his colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma*, the destiny of Charles Foster Kane was merged with that of Welles himself in an extreme expression of auteurism. For French critics, who were not able to see *Citizen Kane* until after the end of the German occupation in 1945, Welles' spectacular screen debut was seen in the context of his subsequent precipitous decline and fall. And when he turned up in Europe with the harried demeanour of a political exile, he was greeted as another Stroheim, another Chaplin, another Keaton – a genius to be cherished. *Kane* thus became inseparable from Welles and his ordeal at the hands of the American philistines.

Andrew Sarris, *Sight and Sound*, October 1991

Orson Welles on 'Citizen Kane'

One day in the office they said there's a man called Toland waiting to see you. And he was, of course, the leading cameraman and he said, 'I want to make you a picture'. And I said, 'Well that's wonderful. Why? I don't know anything about movie.' And he said, 'That's why I want to do it. If you're left alone as much as possible we're gonna have a movie that looks different. I'm tired of working with people who know too much about it.' We came to a moment in the first week of shooting ... no, the second week, where I suddenly was told by somebody that it was not the job of the director to do all the lighting. Up to then I'd been doing all the lighting with Toland behind me balancing and all but saying don't tell anybody, you see. Then I had to go and apologise to him and everything. Then another awful moment came when I didn't understand directions. And that was because I had learned how to make movies by running *Stagecoach* every night for a month ... if you look at *Stagecoach* you will see that the Indians attack left to right and then they attack right to left and so on. In other words, there's no direction followed. Every rule is broken in the picture. And I sat and watched it 45 times. So of course when I was suddenly told in an over shoulder shot that I had to look camera left instead of camera right I said no, because I was standing here... So we closed the picture down. And at about two in the afternoon I went back to my house and Toland showed me how that worked. And I said, 'Well there's a lot of stuff here I don't know,' and he said, 'There's nothing I can't teach you in three hours.' And that's when I said that... which has been taken as a very pompous statement, that I learned everything in three hours. It was Toland's idea that anybody can learn it in three hours and that he taught it to me in three hours. Everything else is if you're any good or not.

I wanted to have nobody in the film you'd ever seen before. I thought that'd be a great thing in a movie, because those were the days when every studio made 120 pictures a year and those faces were all so well known. Because I believed that a great deal of the success of foreign language films came from the fact that the faces were new to the American public. I've since decided that it also came from the fact that the movies were good. But I was an arrogant bastard then and I thought a lot of it came from just new faces. And I liked my people and we got along well together and we'd been in the theatre and radio together, so why not in films.

***Sight and Sound*, October 1991**

'Citizen Kane' reviewed on its original release

This is unquestionably one of the most intelligent films to appear for many years. No one who is really interested in the cinema can afford to miss it. Even those who go to the cinema simply for a few hours' entertainment, and who even perhaps profess to be bored by intelligence, will find themselves curiously spellbound by this spirited attempt to break with most of the formulas which Hollywood holds so dear. *Citizen Kane* is refreshingly new, from its theme, which has a maturity which one has almost despaired of finding on the screen, right down to its cast, everyone of which acts superlatively well and none of which has ever appeared in films before [sic]. Orson Welles's innovations of style will almost certainly influence current filmmaking, although the question whether he has made any significant contribution to film technique is not likely to be apparent until the film has taken its place in history. Meanwhile the fact that it should even give rise to the question is a measure of the film's stature. Its style is essentially theatrical but is unusual in its narrative construction, in its dialogue, which has been written with amazing realism (as where a single voice rises out of a babel of voices and suddenly dominates the rest), and above all in its pictorial composition. These last (for which probably Gregg Toland, the camera-man, deserves most credit) have been most carefully constructed so as constantly to give emphasis to the dramatic action. To the resources of lighting, which has been most skilfully used, has been added construction in depth, made possible by wide-angle lenses used in combination with ceilinged sets. This construction in depth is the most obvious novelty of the film and the one most easy to imitate. There is every danger that the imitators will repeat the device without a due appreciation of the narrative skill which has made its use here so effective. *Citizen Kane* is not above criticism but it would be unthankful to seek to analyse weaknesses in a film which offers such a full measure of merit and brilliance.

Monthly Film Bulletin, December 1941

CITIZEN KANE

Director: Orson Welles

©/Production Company: RKO Radio Pictures

Production Company: Mercury Productions

Producer: Orson Welles

Screenplay: Herman J. Mankiewicz, Orson Welles

Director of Photography: Gregg Toland

Special Effects: Vernon L. Walker

Editor: Robert Wise

Art Director: Van Nest Polglase

Associate Art Director: Perry Ferguson

Costumes: Edward Stevenson

Music/Music Conductor: Bernard Herrmann

[Sound] Recorders: Bailey Fesler, James G. Stewart

uncredited

Associate Producer: Richard Baer; *Editorial Supervisor:* John Houseman;

Production Assistants: William Alland, Richard Wilson; *Assistant Directors:*

Edward Donahoe, Fred A. Fleck; *Continuity:* Amalia Kent; *Camera*

Operator: Bert Shipman; *Assistant Camera:* Eddie Garvin; *Camera for*

Early Make-up/ Wardrobe Tests: Russell Metty; *Retakes/ Additional*

Shooting: Harry J. Wild; *Grip:* Ralph Hoge; *Gaffer:* William J. McClellan;

Stills: Alexander Kahle; *Matte Artist:* Mario Larrinaga; *Effects Camera:*

Russell A. Cully; *Montage Effects:* Douglas Travers; *Assistant Editor:* Mark

Robson; *Assistant Art Director:* Hilyard Brown; *Set Decorator:* Darrell

Silvera; *Assistant Set Decorator:* Al Fields; *Principal Sketch Artist:* Charles

Ohmann; *Sketches/Graphics:* Al Abbott, Claude Gillingwater Jr, Albert

Pyke, Maurice Zuberano; *Property Manager:* Charles Sayers; *Newspaper*

Props: Harry Reitz; *Wardrobe:* Earl Leas, Margaret Van Horn; *Make-up:*

Maurice Seiderman; *Assistant Make-up:* Layne Britton; *Make-up*

Department Head: Mel Berns; *Optical Printing:* Linwood G. Dunn; *'Charlie*

Kane' Lyrics: Herman Ruby; *Dance Choreography:* Arthur Appel; *Sound*

Department Head: John Aalberg; *Boom Operator:* Jimmy Thompson;

Sound Effects: Harry Essman; *Publicity for Mercury Theatre:* Herbert

Drake; *General Press Representative:* Barret McCormick

Cast

Joseph Cotten (*Jedediah Leland/newsreel journalist*)

Dorothy Comingore (*Susan Alexander Kane*)

Agnes Moorehead (*Mary Kane*)

Ruth Warrick (*Emily Norton Kane*)

Ray Collins (*James 'Boss' W. Gettys*)

Erskine Sanford (*Herbert Carter/newsreel journalist*)

Everett Sloane (*Mr Bernstein*)

William Alland (*Jerry Thompson/narrator*)

Paul Stewart (*Raymond*)

George Coulouris (*Walter Parks Thatcher*)

Fortunio Bonanova (*Matiste*)

Gus Schilling (*John, El Rancho headwaiter/ newsreel journalist*)

Philip Van Zandt (*Mr Rawlston*)

Georgia Backus (*Bertha Anderson*)

Harry Shannon (*James Kane*)

Sonny Bupp (*Kane III*)

Buddy Swan (*Kane, aged 8*)

Orson Welles (*Charles Foster Kane*)

uncredited

Al Eben (*Solly*)

Ellen Lowe (*Miss Townsend*)

Charles Bennett (*entertainer*)

Irving Mitchell (*Doctor Corey*)

Joe Manz (*Jennings*)

Alan Ladd, Harriet Brandon, Jack Santoro, Louise Currie, Eddie Coke,

Walter Sande, Arthur O'Connell, Richard Wilson, Katherine Trosper,

Milton Kibbee (*reporters*)

Bruce Sidney (*newsman*)

Lew Harvey (*newspaper man*)

Louis Natheaux (*reporter*)

Thomas A. Curran (*Teddy Roosevelt*)

Edward Peil, Charles Meakin (*civic leaders*)

Mitchell Ingraham, Francis Sayles (*politicians*)

Louise Franklin (*maid*)

Edith Evanson (*nurse*)

Arthur Kay (*orchestra leader*)

Tudor Williams (*chorus master*)

James Mack (*prompter*)

Gohr Van Vleck, Jack Raymond (*stagehands*)

Herbert Corthell (*city editor of Chicago Inquirer*)

Shimen Ruskin, George Sherwood, Eddie Cobb (*hirelings*)

Olin Francis (*expressman*)

Frances Neal (*Ethel*)

Robert Dudley (*photographer*)

Tim Davis, George Noisom (*copy boys*)

Jack Curtis (*chief printer*)

Landers Stevens (*investigator*)

John Dilson, Walter James (*ward heelers*)

Joe North, William O'Brien (*Thatcher's secretaries*)

Dona Dax (*housemaid*)

Myrtle Rischell (*governess*)

Petra De Silva (*newswoman*)

Gino Corrado (*Gino, waiter at El Rancho*)

Suzanne Dulier (*Marie, French maid*)

Major McBride (*shadowgraph man*)

Karl Thomas (*Jetsam*)

Glen Turnbull (*Flotsam*)

Harry J. Vejar (*Portuguese labourer*)

Captain Garcia (*general*)

Art Yeoman (*speaker at Union Square*)

Philip Morris (*politician*)

Albert Frazier (*gorilla man*)

Guy Repp, Buck Mack (*men*)

Jack Morton (*butler*)

Carmen La Roux (*maid in Xanadu corridor*)

Edward Hemmer, Marie Day

Jean Forward (*Dorothy Comingore's singing voice*)

USA 1941©

119 mins

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