

## Section: Orson Welles0

Context: Breaking with the Federal Theatre Project in 1937, Welles and Houseman founded their own repertory company, which they called the Mercury Theatre. The name was inspired by the title of the iconoclastic magazine, *The American Mercury*. Welles was executive producer, and the original company included such actors as Joseph Cotten, George Coulouris, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel, John Hoyt, Norman Lloyd, Vincent Price, Stefan Schnabel and Hiram Sherman. "I think he was the greatest directorial talent we've ever had in the [American] theater," Lloyd said of Welles in a 2014 interview. "When you saw a Welles production, you saw the text had been affected, the staging was remarkable, the sets were unusual, music, sound, lighting, a totality of everything. We had not had such a man in our theater. He was the first and remains the greatest." The Mercury Theatre opened November 11, 1937, with *Caesar*, Welles's modern-dress adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar* – streamlined into an anti-fascist tour de force that Joseph Cotten later described as "so vigorous, so contemporary that it set Broadway on its ear." The set was completely open with no curtain, and the brick stage wall was painted dark red. Scene changes were achieved by lighting alone. On the stage was a series of risers; squares were cut into one at intervals and lights were set beneath it, pointing straight up to evoke the "cathedral of light" at the Nuremberg Rallies. "He staged it like a political melodrama that happened the night before," said Lloyd. Beginning January 1, 1938, *Caesar* was performed in repertory with *The Shoemaker's Holiday*; both productions moved to the larger National Theatre. They were followed by *Heartbreak House* (April 29, 1938) and *Danton's Death* (November 5, 1938). As well as being presented in a pared-down oratorio version at the Mercury Theatre on Sunday nights in December 1937, *The Cradle Will Rock* was at the Windsor Theatre for 13 weeks (January 4–April 2, 1938). Such was the success of the Mercury Theatre that Welles appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, in full makeup as Captain Shotover in *Heartbreak House*, in the issue dated May 9, 1938—three days after his 23rd birthday. Simultaneously with his work in the theatre, Welles worked extensively in radio as an actor, writer, director and producer, often without credit. Between 1935 and 1937 he was earning as much as 2,000 a week, shuttling between radio studios at such a pace that he would arrive barely in time for a quick scan of his lines before he was on the air. While he was directing the *Voodoo Macbeth* Welles was dashing between Harlem and midtown Manhattan three times a day to meet his radio commitments. In addition to continuing as a repertory player on *The March of Time*, in the fall of 1936 Welles adapted and performed *Hamlet* in an early two-part episode of CBS Radio's *Columbia Workshop*. His performance as the announcer in the series' April 1937 presentation of Archibald MacLeish's verse drama *The Fall of the City* was an important development in his radio career and made the 21-year-old Welles an overnight star. In July 1937, the Mutual Network gave Welles a seven-week series to adapt *Les Misérables*. It was his first job as a writer-director for radio, the radio debut of the Mercury Theatre, and one of Welles's earliest and finest achieve-

ments. He invented the use of narration in radio. "By making himself the center of the storytelling process, Welles fostered the impression of self-adulation that was to haunt his career to his dying day," wrote critic Andrew Sarris. "For the most part, however, Welles was singularly generous to the other members of his cast and inspired loyalty from them above and beyond the call of professionalism." That September, Mutual chose Welles to play Lamont Cranston, also known as The Shadow. He performed the role anonymously through mid-September 1938. After the theatrical successes of the Mercury Theatre, CBS Radio invited Orson Welles to create a summer show for 13 weeks. The series began July 11, 1938, initially titled First Person Singular, with the formula that Welles would play the lead in each show. Some months later the show was called The Mercury Theatre on the Air. The weekly hour-long show presented radio plays based on classic literary works, with original music composed and conducted by Bernard Herrmann. The Mercury Theatre's radio adaptation of The War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells October 30, 1938, brought Welles instant fame. The combination of the news bulletin form of the performance with the between-breaks dial spinning habits of listeners was later reported to have created widespread confusion among listeners who failed to hear the introduction, although the extent of this confusion has come into question. Panic was reportedly spread among listeners who believed the fictional news reports of a Martian invasion. The myth of the result created by the combination was reported as fact around the world and disparagingly mentioned by Adolf Hitler in a public speech. Welles's growing fame drew Hollywood offers, lures that the independent-minded Welles resisted at first. The Mercury Theatre on the Air, which had been a sustaining show (without sponsorship) was picked up by Campbell Soup and renamed The Campbell Playhouse. The Mercury Theatre on the Air made its last broadcast on December 4, 1938, and The Campbell Playhouse began five days later. Welles began commuting from California to New York for the two Sunday broadcasts of The Campbell Playhouse after signing a film contract with RKO Pictures in August 1939. In November 1939, production of the show moved from New York to Los Angeles. After 20 shows, Campbell began to exercise more creative control and had complete control over story selection. As his contract with Campbell came to an end, Welles chose not to sign on for another season. After the broadcast of March 31, 1940, Welles and Campbell parted amicably. CANNON-ANSWER

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STUDENT: **Did they win any awards?**

TEACHER: ⇨ CANNOTANSWER

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