

A Night at the Opera: A Scene Analysis of Citizen Kane

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At one hour and fifteen minutes into *Citizen Kane* a newspaper headline reading, “KANE BUILDS OPERA HOUSE,” fills the screen, immediately following Charles Foster Kane’s proud proclamation that his new wife, Susan Alexander, would sing at the Metropolitan Opera and no new opera house would be necessary. Before the famous opera scene even begins, the film makes no bones about undermining Charles Kane’s goals and ambitions for luxury and utter control over his life, surroundings, and legacy.

The mocking headline dissolves into an extreme close up of the terrified, shrieking Susan Alexander. As Alexander sings her note with a nervous and unconfident look on her face, the camera zooms out and pans to her intense instructor, Matiste, who is frantically trying to fix her singing moments before the show opens. The cacophony of people reprimanding Alexander emerges immediately before the pit orchestra erupts into the show’s overture, piercing the already tense environment with foreboding trumpet calls, which ultimately develop into a brassy and sinister orchestration similar to that of the opening sequence, albeit far more loud and lively. A slight zoom out reveals a number of crew members dressing Alexander before the camera vertically tilts to an overhead light which begins to blink, indicating the beginning of the opera. This flashing light mirrors the shifts in lighting utilized in the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane*; the sequence that introduced us to Kane and his pleasure palace, Xanadu.

The camera tilts back down to Alexander and begins slowly zooming out, revealing an ever growing mob of people. The opera’s backdrop rises behind Alexander as a man carries a smoking ceramic item across the stage, which very closely resembles the fog surrounding Xanadu during its introduction. People dressed as maids and butlers dote on Alexander’s makeup and costume, while she desperately tries to adjust to the dizzying backstage pace.

A litter is carried across the stage, closely resembling Kane's deathbed from the opening sequence, before the camera cuts to a wide shot of the stage, revealing the stylized backdrop to be a pleasure palace in its own rite, mocking Xanadu for the theatrical facade that it is.

As the cast scrambles into position, the scene begins its fluid upward motion, mimicking the upward motion of traversing Xanadu's gate. First the backstage light rises out of the picture, followed by a flood light illuminating the foot of the stage and rising to the top of the backdrop, creating the effect of the curtain being raised. The camera begins to follow the light but continues beyond the stage curtains and into the rafters. The vertically panning camera reveals the new aesthetic pattern of the ropes hanging from the rafters that becomes increasingly complex as the camera rises. This harkens back to the similar vertical motion of the camera over Xanadu's increasingly ornate fence. The camera comes to rest on two stagehands who look at each other with dismay as one pinches his nose in a disgusted manner. The scene then fades to a shot of the interior of the *Inquirer's* doors, ending the scene.

Welles very cleverly utilizes familiar camera motion, patterns, and set pieces to create a close link between Alexander's opening night and the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane*, in which we are introduced to Kane's decrepit splendor. Drawing a link between these two scenes, it must be noted that throughout the opera scene, Susan Alexander looks and acts noticeably out of place; she is entirely alone despite the sea of people around her. Alexander's alienation serves to undermine Kane's fame and power, bringing to light his true inner solitude that he has managed to desperately rope Alexander into. In addition, the

opera scene is composed entirely of an onstage set, crafted, produced, and utterly inauthentic, much like Kane's luxurious pleasure

palace and legacy that he has worked so tirelessly on. As if this scene had not already pointed out the futility of Kane's ambitions, it closes with the still image of two men, neither of whom are Charles Kane, literally pulling the strings of the show, and mocking it while doing so. In the end, Kane is rendered powerless and his accomplishments proven inauthentic.