

Orson Welles

George Orson Welles (May 6, 1915 to October 10, 1985) was an American theatre, screenwriter and film producer and director, and a theatre, radio and film actor. In 1936, the Federal Theatre Project (part of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration), put unemployed theater performers and employees to work. Welles was hired by John Houseman and assigned to direct a project for Harlem's American Negro Theater. Wanting to give his all-black cast a chance to play classics, he offered them *Macbeth*, relocated to Haiti at the court of King Henri Christophe (and with a setting of voodoo witch doctors.) Jack Carter played Macbeth. The play was rapturously received and later toured the nation. It is considered a landmark of African-American theater. At twenty Welles was hailed as a prodigy.

After the success of *Macbeth*, Welles mounted the absurd farce *Horse Eats Hat*. A complete volte face, but also highly successful. He consolidated his "White Hope" reputation with *Dr. Faustus*. This was even more ground-breaking theatre than *Macbeth*, using light as a prime unifying scenic element in a nearly blacked-out stage. In 1937, he rehearsed Marc Blitzstein's pro-union labor opera *The Cradle Will Rock*, but due to severe federal cutbacks across the country and rumored Congressional worries about Communist propaganda in the Federal Theatre, the show's premiere at the Maxine Elliott Theatre was cancelled and the theatre locked and guarded by National Guardsmen. In a last-minute theatrical coup Welles announced to waiting ticket-holders that the show was being transferred to the Venice, about twenty blocks away. Cast, crew and audience walked the distance on foot. Since the unions forbade the actors and musicians performing from the stage, *The Cradle Will Rock* began with Blitzstein introducing the show and playing the piano accompaniment onstage, with the cast performing their parts from the audience. This impromptu performance was a tremendous hit. Resigning from the Federal Theatre, Welles and Houseman formed their own company, the Mercury Theatre, which included actors such as Agnes Moorehead, Joseph Cotten, Ray Collins, George Coulouris, Frank Readick, Everett Sloane, Eustace Wyatt and Erskine Sanford, all of whom would continue to work for Welles for years. The first Mercury Theatre production was Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, set in fascist Italy. Cinna the Poet died at the hands not of a mob but a secret police force. According to Norman Lloyd, who played Cinna, "it stopped the show." The applause lasted more than three minutes and was widely acclaimed.

Welles was now very active on radio, as an actor and soon as a director and producer. He played Hamlet for CBS on *The Columbia Workshop*, adapting and directing the play himself. The Mutual Network gave him a seven-week series to adapt *Les Miserables*, which he did with great success. Welles was chosen to anonymously play Lamont Cranston, *The Shadow*, in late 1937 (again for Mutual) and in the summer of 1938 CBS gave him and the Mercury Theatre a weekly hour-long show to broadcast radio plays based on classic literary works. The show was titled *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, with original music by Bernard Herrmann, who would continue working with Welles on radio and in films for years.

Their October 30 broadcast, H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, brought Welles notoriety and instant fame on both a national and international level. The fortuitous mixture of the news bulletin format with the between-breaks dial-spinning habits of listeners from the rival and far more popular Edgar Bergen/Charlie McCarthy program, created widespread confusion among late tuners. Panic spread among many listeners who believed the news reports of an actual Martian invasion. The resulting panic was duly reported around the world and disparagingly mentioned by Adolf Hitler in a public speech a few months later. Because of the impact of this

production and Welles's growing fame, Hollywood offers followed, lures which the independent-minded Welles resisted at first. However, *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*.

Welles was also a practiced magician, starring in troop variety spectacles in the war years. During this period, he became a serious political activist and commentator through journalism, radio and public appearances closely associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1941, he co-wrote, directed, produced and starred in *Citizen Kane*, most often chosen in polls of film critics as the greatest film ever made.

In 1942-43, Welles starred in a little-known radio series entitled *Hello Americans*. This series, which featured visits to various South American countries was done as a propaganda piece for the U.S. Government.

Welles received a 1975 American Film Institute Life Time Achievement award, the third person to do so after John Ford and James Cagney. Despite this accolade, Welles' artistic ambitions as a producer and director were frustrated by Hollywood movie studios. His one Hollywood film that remains as he conceived it is *Citizen Kane*, and only because its contract guaranteed him final cut. Although Welles remained on the margins of the major studios as a director/producer, his larger-than-life personality made him a bankable actor. In his latter years he struggled against a Hollywood system that refused to finance his independent film projects, making a living largely through acting, commercials and voice-over work.

Critical appreciation for Welles has increased since his death. He is now widely acknowledged as one of the most important dramatic artists of the 20th century. In 1999, the American Film Institute ranked Welles as number 16 in their list of the 100 Greatest Male Stars of All Time.

Welles died of a heart attack at his home in Hollywood, California at age 70 on October 10, 1985. He had various projects underway, including a planned film adaption of *King Lear*, *The Orson Welles Magic Show*, and *The Dreamers*. His final interview had been recorded the day before, on *The Merv Griffin Show* and with his biographer Barbara Leaming. The last film roles before his death included voice work in the animated films *Transformers: The Movie* (as the villainous transformer Unicron) and *The Enchanted Journey* and on-screen in Henry Jaglom's film *Someone to Love*, released in 1987.