

## Welcome to StageDirect

StageDirect is dedicated to capturing top-quality live performance (primarily contemporary theater) on digital video. We know that there is tremendous work going on every day in small theaters all over the world. This is entertainment that challenges, provokes, takes risks, explodes conventions - because the actors, writers, and stage companies are not slaves to the Hollywood/Broadway formula machine. These productions appear for a few weeks, usually with little marketing, then they disappear. Unless you're a real fanatic, you'll miss even the top performances in your own town, not to mention those from distant cities.

### What we mean when we say Fringe...

"Fringe Theater" used to mean any theatrical performances that took place on the outskirts of London. In the United States its equivalent was the title Off Broadway. By implication the term suggested that a performance was to be considered of lesser status because it was found in poky little oddball places, such as the back room of a pub.

Today, many consider Fringe stages to be where much of the best action is, where actors and audiences meet on the most intimate terms, and directors have complete artistic license. But it would be a mistake to identify the Fringe with just the avant-garde. Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson made their debuts on Fringe stages beside far more experienced actors. So too with John Malkovich and Gary Sinise of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. There is a long and illustrious line of actors and performers who paid their dues in the Fringe.

Ultimately, it is best to think of the Fringe as a grand theatrical experiment capable of yielding big things in small spaces.

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# The MAGNIFICENT WELLES

## An Educational Guide

### The Magnificent Welles: Summary

In 1941 Citizen Kane rocketed Orson Welles into boy genius Hollywood stardom, a trajectory rarely witnessed before or since. It had won the New York Film Critics Circle for Best Picture and was nominated for nine Academy Awards. Only in his mid-20s, he was given complete artistic control over his next film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the movie he thought was certain to be his masterpiece.

*Continued inside*

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It's now 1942 and the 27 year old Orson Welles is in Rio de Janeiro on behalf of the State Department, making a goodwill film for the war effort. Still struggling to satisfy RKO with a final edit, Welles is forced to entrust *Ambersons* to his editor, Robert Wise, and oversee its completion from afar.

It's a hot, loud night in Rio as Orson Welles (actor: Marcus Wolland) settles in to relate to us his 'memoir,' summarizing the early years of his career in theater and radio. Wily, personable and filled with youthful bravado, Welles is a genius who is in love with the sound of his own voice.

Recounting his family history and his love of theater and literature, Welles traces his early meteoric rise. From his acclaimed staging of the 'voodoo' *Macbeth* to his controversial production of *The Cradle Will Rock* to his 1938 radio broadcast of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (so convincing that many listeners were panic-stricken, convinced that a real attack on Earth was underway) to Citizen Kane, it is no exaggeration to say that Orson Welles commanded the American cultural scene of the late 30s and early 40s.

This night of intimate autobiography is punctuated by phone calls to and from Hollywood as Welles gradually loses control of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. At first confident that he will once again triumph against Hollywood in this battle of wills, by the play's end, Welles is a broken artist, trying to make ironic sense of what the studio has done to his masterpiece.

### Orson Welles: A Brief Biography

*"I started at the top and worked my way down."*

*-Orson Welles*

Though under appreciated in his time, Orson Welles is considered today to be one of Hollywood's greatest actors and directors.

Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1915, George Orson Welles was the prodigy son of an inventor father and musician mother. Well versed in literature at a very early age—especially Shakespeare—and an accomplished young musician, Welles demonstrated his impressive artistic abilities early in life.

Educated in private schools and well-traveled, Orson lost both of his parents before the age of 15. He was left with a modest inheritance and few family obligations and at 16 ventured to Ireland where he finagled steady stage work -from the Dublin's Gate Players.

Returning to the U.S. in 1932, Welles managed to get a job with Katharine Cornell, with the help of such notables as Alexander

Woollcott and Thornton Wilder. He later became associated with John Houseman, and together, they took New York theater by storm with their work for the Federal Theatre Project. In 1937 their production of *The Cradle Will Rock* led to controversy and they were fired. Soon after Houseman and Welles founded the Mercury Theater. The company soon made the leap from stage to radio.

In 1938, the Mercury Theater's *War of the Worlds* made broadcast history when thousands of listeners mistakenly believed aliens had landed on Earth. Soon after, in 1940, Hollywood beckoned and Welles began his short-lived reign over the world of film. Working as the director, producer, screenwriter and star, he made *Citizen Kane* (1941), the most discussed—if not greatest—movie ever made in America.

However, *Citizen Kane* attracted far more critical praise than audience and William Randolph Hearst (who had served as a model for the role of Charles Foster Kane) tried to suppress what he considered an unflattering portrait of himself. While RKO rejected his offer to reimburse their costs in exchange for burning the negatives, *Citizen Kane's* release was hindered by an advertising boycott in newspapers belonging to Hearst, ensuring its box office defeat.

Welles' second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, ran into budget and production problems, which brought down the studio management that had hired Welles. After public previews in Pomona, California, *Ambersons* received many negative comment cards... most likely due to being inappropriately double-billed with a light Dorothy Lamour musical called *The Fleet's In* (1942). Worried about its financial viability, RKO declared the film unreleasable, took control of the film and ordered it recut without Welles' consent or input. The film was reduced from 131 minutes to a mere 88 minutes. Over a third of Welles' original footage was removed by shortening his tracking shots, and eliminating or drastically shortening other scenes. With a tacked-on, optimistic ending, and with rewritten/reshot portions of film, *Ambersons* was re-released, and all surviving footage from the original film was destroyed. To this day there are many who consider the lost footage to be the holy grail of American Cinema.

Despite the controversies surrounding the film, it was still nominated for four Academy Awards. However, it was a financial loss for RKO, and soon after Welles and his Mercury Players were evicted from RKO. Word quickly spread through the film community of Welles's difficulty in following shooting schedules and budgets. His career never fully recovered, and although he directed other films in Hollywood, including *The Stranger* (1946), *Macbeth* (1948), and *Touch of Evil* (1958), he was never again given full control of his movies in the United States.



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## Questions & Issues For Discussion

**1** Think of a current film you have seen that you liked and consider great but has received little attention or, even, negative criticism. Describe the elements, ideas and style of the film and why you think highly of it. Now, outline why you believe this movie has been overlooked or disliked by critics. Can parallels be drawn to the work of Orson Welles?

**2** Citizen Kane was a film about truth. It asks, “Can we really know the meaning of a person’s life?” How does this question relate to Welles presentation of his-own life? Can we believe the history he presents to us? If not, what do we learn about him as an artist and a man despite this?

**3** Why was Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” broadcast important in the history of media effects?

**4** What does The Magnificent Welles have to say about artistic integrity? How does this correspond with the emotional and artistic temperament of Orson Welles? Is there room for creative ego in a collaborative process like film? Should an artist compromise his vision to accommodate business concerns?

**5** Orson Welles has often been called a genius. What traits make an individual a genius? Do those traits exist in Orson Welles? If so, what are the pitfalls associated with genius? How can an individual compensate for those pitfalls?

**6** Since motion pictures can be considered both an art form and a commercial product, what problems does this present to a filmmaker? Do you think Orson Welles respected the commercial side of filmmaking? If not, why? Should he have shown greater respect? Or did his artistic vision justify his approach?

**7** How does the motion picture studio system’s reliance on audience comment cards compare with modern-day political polling? What problems do you see with these kinds of surveys? Do you think audiences should have a say in the development of a film? How does their involvement change the artistic nature of filmmaking?

**8** What is the connection between film and theater? How do they compare as art forms? Why do you think Orson Welles had so much success in theater and so little success in film?

**9** What were Orson Welles’ character flaws? Why do you think he made so many enemies? If you were a friend of Welles, what advice would you give him? Do you think he would take it? Why or why not?

**10** Why do you think Orson Welles ultimately lost control of The Magnificent Ambersons? Did he get what he deserved or was the studio’s seizure of the picture a great injustice?

**11** What do the following quotes say about Orson Welles’ as a person and an artist?

*“I do not suppose I shall be remembered for anything. But I don’t think about my work in those terms. It is just as vulgar to work for the sake of posterity as to work for the sake of money.”*

*“I passionately hate the idea of being with it; I think an artist has always to be out of step with his time.”*

*“Man is a rational animal who always loses his temper when called upon to act in accordance with the dictates of reason.”*

*“The best thing commercially, which is the worst artistically, by and large, is the most successful.”*

## Historical Context

*The Magnificent Welles* evokes an important time in American history. The play mentions people, organizations and events that helped shape the culture of 20th Century America. Here is a list of people & topics in the play that are worthy of discussion:

- Works Progress Administration
- The Federal Theater Project
- The Harlem Theater
- *The Cradle Will Rock*
- RKO Pictures
- The Spanish American War
- The Mercury Theater
- Hollywood studio system
- America/ Latin American relations during World War II

- William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951)
- Nelson Rockefeller (1908–1979)
- Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982)
- Katherine Cornell (1893–1974)
- Thornton Wilder (1897–1975)
- Alexander Woollcott (1887–1943)
- John Houseman (1902–1988)
- Robert Wise (1914– )
- Bernard Hermann (1911–1975)
- Joseph Cotten (1905–1995)

## Further Suggestions For Teaching

**1** Watch *Citizen Kane* and *The Magificent Ambersons* along with *The Magnificent Welles*. Discuss the differences between the two films in terms of structure, style and themes. What insight does *The Magnificent Welles* provide in regard to the films’ differences and similarities? How much of Welles’ vision remains in intact? What influences does he carry from theater and radio into film?

**2** Watch *The Magnificent Welles* and read any one of Orson Welles’ favorite Shakespearean tragedies (*Macbeth*, *Othello*, etc). Knowing what you do of Welles from the video, what comparisons can be drawn between the tragic figures in these plays and Welles himself? Would you consider Orson Welles a tragic figure? What role does pride play in these tragedies?

### Questions for Citizen Kane

**3** The film presents itself as an investigation into the life of its mysterious main character. How well do we get to know Charles Foster Kane? What point of view, or points of view, are presented? How do the bits and pieces of Kane’s life, narrated to us in flashback by various secondary characters, fit together? What special techniques are used to convey particular bits of information to the reporter, or to us, the viewers?

**4** What aspects of *Citizen Kane* reflect Welles’ work in radio and theater?

### Questions for The Magnificent Ambersons

**5** If you were in charge of re-writing the film how would you change the ending?

**6** Discuss Welles’ concept of “Lost Eden” in regard to the film. Do you understand the themes he was exploring in both *Kane* and *Ambersons*? Explain.

**7** Why do you think so many notable movie directors and film historians make such a big deal about *The Magnificent Ambersons*’ lost footage?

## More Resources About Orson Welles

### Books:

*Orson Welles - The Road to Xanadu* by Simon Callow  
*Citizen Welles - A Biography of Orson Welles* by Frank Brady  
*The Magnificent Ambersons - A Reconstruction* by Robert L. Carringer  
*This is Orson Welles* by Orson Welles, Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Rosenbaum (Editor)

*Rosebud: The Story Of Orson Welles* by David Thomson  
*The Making Of Citizen Kane* by Robert L. Carringer

### Films:

*RKO 281* (1999) Directed by Benjamin Ross.  
*Cradle Will Rock* (1999) Directed by Tim Robbins.  
*The Battle Over Citizen Kane* (1996) Directed by Michael Epstein & Thomas Lennon - (*Terrific documentary about the trials and travails of bringing Welles’ masterpiece to the screen.*)

### Web sites:

The Estate Of Orson Welles

*http://www.bway.net/~nipper/home.html*

Wellesnet: The Orson Welles Web Resource

*http://www.wellesnet.com/*

The Mercury Theater

*http://www.unknown.nu/mercury/*

More Resources On Orson Welles

*http://www.rcubedproductions.com/orson.html*

The War Of The Worlds Radio Broadcast

*http://www.waroftheworlds.org/*

## Filmography

(bold films are must-see)

### Actor/Director

1934 The Hearts of Age (short film)  
1938 Too Much Johnson (short film)  
**1941 Citizen Kane**  
**1942 The Magnificent Ambersons**  
**1944 The Stranger**  
1945 The Lady from Shanghai  
1947 Macbeth  
**1952 Othello**  
1954 Don Quixote (unfinished)  
1955 Confidential Report/Mr. Arkadin  
**1957 Touch of Evil**  
1962 The Trial  
1966 Chimes at Midnight/ Falstaff  
1968 The Immortal Story  
1975 F For Fake

### Notable Acting Roles

1940 The Swiss Family Robinson  
1942 Journey Into Fear  
1942 Jane Eyre (Edward Rochester)  
**1949 The Third Man**  
1950 The Black Rose  
1956 Moby Dick  
**1958 The Long Hot Summer**  
1959 David and Goliath  
1961 King of Kings (narrator)  
**1966 A Man for All Seasons**  
1966 Is Paris Burning?  
1968 Oedipus the King  
1970 Catch 22  
1972 Treasure Island (Long John Silver)  
1972 Canterbury Tales