



Below is Kino Ken's review of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*.

United States 1941 black-and-white 119 minutes
live action feature melodrama RKO Radio Pictures / Mercury Productions
Producer: Orson Welles

10 of a possible 20 points = mediocre film

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Orson Welles
- 1 Editing: Robert Wise Editing Supervision: John Houseman
- 2 Cinematography: Gregg Toland*, Russell Cully*, Harry Wild*
- 0 Lighting: Vic Jones
- Special Visual Effects: Vernon Walker, Russell Cully, Linwood Dunn,
Fitch Fulton, Douglas Travers
- 1 Screenplay: Herman Mankiewicz, Orson Welles, John Houseman,
Roger Dennt and Mollie Kent
- Script Supervision: Amalia Kent
- Music Editing: Ralph Bekher
- 1 Music: Bernard Herrmann

- 2 **Art Direction: Van Nest Polglase* and Perry Ferguson***
Set Decoration: Darrell Silvera* and Sydney Moore*
Set Dressing: Al Fields*
Costume Design: Edward Stevenson*
Makeup: Mel Burns* (Supervision), Maurice Seiderman*
- 0 **Sound**
Sound Supervision: John Aalberg
Sound Effects: Harry Essman* and Truman Wood*
Sound Recording: Bailey Fesler; James Stewart; Terry Kellum;
Hugh McDowell, Jr.; Edward Ullman
- 1 **Acting**
- 1 **Creativity**
- 10 total points**

Cast: Orson Welles (Charles Foster Kane), Everett Sloane* (Mr. Bernstein), Joseph Cotten* (Jedediah Leland), Dorothy Comingore* (Susan Alexander), Ray Collins* (James Gettys), George Coulouris (Walter Parks Thatcher), Agnes Moorehead (Mrs. Kane, Charles Foster's mother), Paul Stewart* (Raymond), Ruth Warrick (Emily Norton), Erskine Sanford (Herbert Carter), William Alland (Jerry Thompson and newsreel narrator), Fortunio Bonanova (Matiste), Gus Schilling (Headwaiter), Philip Van Zandt (Mr. Rawlston), Georgia Backus (Miss Anderson, attendant at Thatcher Memorial Library), Harry Shannon (Kane's Father), Sonny Bupp (j) (Kane III), Buddy Swann (j) (Charles Foster Kane, age 8), Joan Blair (Georgia), Gino Corrado (Gino), Thomas Curran (Theodore Roosevelt), Al Eben (Solly), Carl Ekberg (Adolf Hitler), Carl Faulkner (Hermann Goering), Jesse Graves (Joseph), Joe Manz (Jennings), E. G. Miller (Neville Chamberlain), Irving Mitchell (Dr. Corey), Frances Neal (Ethel), Benny Rubin (Smather), Karl Thomas (Jetsam), Glen Turnbull (Flotsam), others

First, it's the opinion of this reviewer that *Citizen Kane* is by no stretch the greatest film yet made. It is not the greatest American film. Nor is it the greatest film directed by Orson Welles, who helmed at least three better motion pictures: *Macbeth*, *The Stranger* and *Touch of Evil*.

Since Orson Welles was the monumental center of *Citizen Kane*, he alone guaranteed its ultimate success or disaster. It's well known his directorial debut was a financial bust bringing RKO to the edge of bankruptcy. The studio was saved from insolvency by proceeds from *Cat People*, which showed in scene after scene what the Welles opus lacked: suspense. There are no surprises in the screenplay developed by a small squad of writers: Herman Mankiewicz, Orson Welles, and three uncredited "ghosts": John Houseman, Roger Dennt and Mollie Kent (See the credits list for *Citizen Kane* at IMDB.) Script similarity to a tabloid gossip column hardly qualifies it as a literary masterpiece.

Having a proposed classic adaptation torpedoed by executive rejection (*Heart of Darkness*), Welles found himself short on time and ideas. The expiration date of his unique carte blanche contract was rapidly approaching. Studio brass might well have been gleefully preparing to celebrate successful termination of RKO's most expensive legal turkey. The boy wonder needed a story idea to counter the studio's sci-fi thriller suggestion of a sequel to *War of the Worlds*.

Necessity forced Welles, it would seem, to scout for an original story the film-going public would find both familiar and fascinating. When Herman Mankiewicz shopped around a story about a ruthless publishing mogul's rise and decline Welles snapped at the bait. Favorite themes and stylistic preferences could be pursued: a darkly Gothic ambience, Puritan emphasis on sin and subsequent punishment, focus on a shockingly outsize public figure spewing Hitlerian vituperation only to finally end isolated by gargantuan conceit, pointless addiction to possessiveness, inclusion of operatic gestures and costuming, overlapping dialogue lines, sublime art jumbled amid sheer kitsch, visual and aural turbulences to stun audiences accustomed to predictable, smoothly flowing narratives.

Of course, the novice director wished to surround himself with familiar faces. Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, Everett Sloane, Erskine Sanford, William Alland – all from his Mercury Theater of the Air troupe – would be gifted with key roles. Otherwise, support would come from newcomers to both film and Welles himself. Most acquitted themselves quite capably. Acting flops came instead out of professional ranks.

Welles didn't seem able to understand at that stage of his life what works well on a stage can be cinematically repulsive. Stodgy impassivity, like that of Moorehead as Kane's frosty mother, is a prime example of the latter. So is

offensive Ruritanian blustering of Harry Shannon in the role of Kane's father and ditheringly impotent objections from Erskine Sanford's Herbert Carter character, a supposedly outdated piece of supercargo in the managing editor's office of San Francisco's *Inquirer*.

Other cast members turned in inspired achievements. Joseph Cotten's Jedidiah Leland, whose humorous banter and completely credible old-age makeup for the retirement segment of his moments on screen pleurably recall the avuncular, yet impish bonhomie of Lionel Barrymore. Dorothy Comingore generates true pity in viewers as she embodies nagging distress and unfeigned boredom resulting from an impossible personality remake. Her Galatea-like situation is retooled in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, where the detective character attempts to remold a female physical double to match an idealized original's magnetism.

Paul Stewart's mercenary, backstabbing Raymond and Ray Collins' blackmailing, corrupt James Gettys are also memorable success. Even superficial toadying of chatterbox Bernstein makes for delightful comic relief thanks to Everett Sloane's total immersion in his role.

Setting aside a vexed question of determining who wrote what in the screenplay, *Kane's* plot structure is that of a mystery. Who or what is Rosebud?

That tantalizing final word must hold viewers fascinated for nearly two hours as a series of cul-de-sac interviews intentionally detour around a solution. It doesn't. Mainly because the explanation offered in *Citizen Kane's* final scene is so banal.

Mankiewicz's own Rosebud seems to have been a stolen bicycle his younger incarnation was censured for leaving unattended. Perhaps Welles utilized this plot device as essential concession to a collaborator threatening to sue him over elimination of co-scripting credit. He doesn't grant it positive value in later interviews on the subject.

The cinematography of Gregg Toland is still a marvel to behold, extending experimentation begun as early as William Wyler's 1937 *Dead End* with its profusion of tracking shots investigating an enormous slum apartment complex in Manhattan. Here Toland applies the same type of probes along diagonal axes as well as linear ones, not shying away from extreme close-ups such as those seen in Von Stroheim's *Greed* and silent features of David Wark Griffith. Expressionism reveals itself from time to time, such as jarring juxtaposition of

screaming cockatoo outside with rapid cutaway to a shrill woman's screeching voice inside Kane's rambling fortress. This combination of unanticipated sound effect, high-speed editing and tonally matching vocal recalls animal symbolism preceding human counterpart in Griffith's post-*Intolerance* film productions. Griffith, in turn, borrowed such audiovisual schemes from Scandinavian silent pictures. They certainly did not originate with *Citizen Kane*.

Deep-focus is not always a strength of this melodrama. Occasionally figures appear blurry in backgrounds, perhaps due to uninspired choice of lens or flawed film stock. At other points, foreground, middle ground and backgrounds are equally well-defined, a formidable achievement for an early 1940s production.

Unfortunately, lighting is of inferior quality, a trademark of low-budget RKO filmings. Sound, too, is compromised as Welles disastrously forayed into musical territory employing overlapping spoken dialogue in imitation of layered operatic vocal lines. In opera, words are expendable. In sound cinema, they are not.

Does the editing of *Citizen Kane* add to its power? Yes and no. Inserted semi-authentic newsreel footage muddies the water, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. Was Welles setting out to furnish audiences with a docudrama? Apparently not, judging from his disavowals of any single person serving as model for Charles Foster Kane and the inconclusive, serpentine flashbacks which neither singly nor collectively reveal insights into motivations of that ultimately unhappy tycoon. While some sections of *Kane* are briskly taut – the famed breakfast table scenes, for example – others seem to overstay their welcome. Opera scenes are grandiose, yet contradictory and unconvincing. Susan is supposedly a wretchedly ungifted singer, yet her vocal dubbing by Jean Forward discloses unmistakable lyric talent of a competent professional, albeit one more at home with subdued chamber music nuances than auditorium belting. This leaves the impression Susan was quite a competent singer when sober, whose failure to ascend to high note perfection might be due more to jitters and self-doubt than vocal inadequacy. Including a rehearsal of her aria was dramatically wasteful. And the scene of Kane's discovery of Susan's botched suicide must have been extended solely to supply Welles a couple extra minutes of screen time.

The two examples cited above were not miscues or errors of the editors themselves. Rather they resulted from poor judgments of uncredited continuity

chief Welles. His prior restraints on shooting scene coverage and his written directions about cuts left minimal options for editing room staff, all of whom were tentative beginners likely unwilling to challenge decisions of their boss.

First-time film scorer Bernard Herrmann, faced with the daunting task of inserting cues rather than melodies, did his best to meet that challenge. His score is reliably adequate, but easily inferior to later musical accompaniments for films of Alfred Hitchcock, where Herrmann's decided preferences for Debussy and Ravel resulted in far greater propulsive drives and richer ranges of tone colors.

Perry Ferguson was cheated out of a well-deserved Oscar® by the Hollywood community's backlash against outsider Welles. His dozens of sets stand comparison with those of *Gone With the Wind* and the lavishness with which they were populated with bric-a-brac has rarely been observed since. Edward Stevenson's costumes and Maurice Seiderman's pioneering makeup effects guaranteed verisimilitude of visual detail to time period being portrayed.

Still, these assets were offset by the two biggest deficiencies of Welles's inaugural outing as film director: an inability or unwillingness to forego hammy showmanship and a screenplay alternating between vicious character assassination and abrupt shallowness. Skipping over the title character's entire adolescence as if it were completely irrelevant was positively stupid. Failing to disclose internal struggle over critical decisions involving finances, friendship, or even choices of residence made the plot unduly artificial. Repetitive replays of past events diminished immersion of audiences in ongoing action. Furthermore, chronological skips and seemingly haphazard ordering of interviews led inevitably to emotional detachment of those undertaking to pursue the story line.

There's a missing story arc also, as Kane never grows any wiser over time. This hollowness is summed up by Jorge Luis Borges's description of the film as a labyrinth, one in which a traveler is bound to never reach his or her destination because the center is utterly empty. It doesn't help Welles's nominal protagonist is a selfish, grabby hypocrite who sees other people merely as tools or obstacles. Who would identify with such a manipulative, vainglorious cynic devoid of discernible scruples? It's no astonishment audiences on its release and responded negatively to such a downbeat portrayal of the American Dream gone sour. With war already broken out in Europe and American entry to the

conflict looming, escaping was desired, not pessimism. Welles's initial adventure in filmmaking couldn't hardly have sailed out to the public at a less propitious time.

Due to pervasive gloom and emphasis on reprehensible adult behavior, *Citizen Kane* is unsuitable for viewing by children – Charles Schulz's promotions notwithstanding – or teens. As adult melodrama, it's tantalizing on first screening. Repeated explorations, though, do not yield additional pleasures. Once the Rosebud mystery is solved, the rest of what passes for intense drama is really much ado about nothing.