

Below is Kino Ken's review of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE®: *The Battle Over Citizen Kane*.

United States 1996 color & black-and-white 113 minutes

live action feature documentary WGBH Boston /

Lennon Documentary Film Group

Producers: Thomas Lennon, Michael Epstein, Susan Mottau, Mark Samuels, Margaret Drain, Julie Sacks

12 of a possible 20 points = *** above average film

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- Direction: Thomas Lennon and Michael Epstein
 - 1 Editing: Ken Eluto and Caleb Oglesby
 - 1 Cinematography: Greg Andracke and Michael Chin
 - 1 Lighting: Duncan Forbes
 - 1 Written by: Thomas Lemmon and Richard Ben Cramer
 - Animation: Alex Radnoti
 - 1 Music: Brian Keane and Maurice Wright
 - Historical Consultants: Nancy Loe, Joyce Milton, James Naremore
and Andrea Nouryeh
 - 2 Researchers: Kathryn Pope* and Helen Weiss*
 - 1 Sound: Felipe Borrero and Juan Rodriguez
 - Sound Editing: John Bowen and Ken Eluto
 - Locations: Abra Grupp, Flora Moon, Christopher Speck
 - 1 Interviewees: William Alland; Peter Bogdanovich; Jimmy Breslin;
Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.; Richard France; William Herz;
Sam Leve; Norman Lloyd; Frank Mankiewicz;
David McCullough; David Nasaw; Ruth Warrick;
Orson Welles; Robert Wise; others
 - 2 Insightfulness
 - 1 Creativity
- 12 total points

The PBS documentary *The Battle Over Citizen Kane* focuses on parallels between the lives of William Randolph Hearst, *one* of the models for Charles Foster Kane, and actor / director / producer / writer Orson Welles. Both had massive egos. Each was spoiled in childhood. Like Phineas Barnum, Hearst and Welles were publicity hounds of the first magnitude, relishing sensationalism to the extent of creating it where none actually existed. Welles mostly limited his autocratic behavior to film studios and theater stages. Hearst tyrannized newsrooms. Power, fame, popularity – these three drives shaped the careers of both these anything-but-gentle men.

Having obtained in early adulthood an enormous amount of influence over the public, this ambitious pair discovered as they aged an inability to maintain that dominance over peers and rivals. Hearst couldn't adapt to changing political situations. Welles slid downhill due to a combination of glib prevarications and an arrogance that repelled would-be admirers and collaborators. His insatiable appetite added pounds to him annually but it simultaneously subtracted dramatic opportunities, strangling a once prosperous acting career.

Talent as a public speaker overshadowed Welles's other roles as time passed. Orson the writer suffered greatly in comparison to Orson the orator. Always extremely impassioned on stage or in a studio, Welles frequently overacted, promoting himself at the expense of the character he supposedly was portraying. By the 1960s, many of his film appearances had become fodder for jokes.

Hearst had similar political aspirations to Kane's. He managed to be elected twice to the United States House of Representatives. Running unsuccessfully for the presidency of the country in 1904, he experienced a major setback. Twice campaigning for New York City's mayoral office, Hearst suffered two more defeats. His 1906 bid to become New York state's governor also failed. After that the magnate appeared content to limit political ventures to editorial pages of his publications.

Like many other folks, this self-styled people's champion moved from liberal beliefs to conservative ones as he grew older. This helped diminish readership of his newspapers and magazines. His ongoing feud with President Franklin Roosevelt, public praises of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party, and continuous attacks on labor unions hardly endeared him to Depression working-

class readers. Lavish expenditures on art collected from overseas, real estate purchases in California, construction of a castle at San Simeon, a bitter separation from his wife, and amorous adulterous pursuit of actress Marion Davies to the neglect of said spouse combined to send this iconic media titan into a tailspin. His final years were spent in and out of financial scrapes, one of which temporarily caused him the embarrassment of renting San Simeon Castle in order to remain there. Even massive sales from his art collection in 1937 and 1941 barely kept him solvent. By the time of *Citizen Kane's* production Hearst was in major decline as a power broker. *Citizen Kane* added insult to injury.

Though much of RKO's board of directors disapproved of hiring Orson Welles as a film director with complete artistic control over whatever two projects he chose to undertake, company president George Schaefer backed and promoted his protégé against all internal opposition. He was sure Orson was a creative genius, one who merited having the full resources of a film studio placed at his disposal. This despite the young stage and radio wonder boy's having had only one dismal previous film directing experience, an experimental short of the chaotic type titled *The Hearts of Age* in 1934. Hardly an inspiring film resume.

What brought Welles into direct battle with Hearst appears to have been Herman Mankiewicz's screenplay insertions of denigrating material about Dorothy Comingore's alcoholic character. Susan Alexander appeared transported in *Citizen Kane* to a fortress named Xanadu, which bore strong resemblance to San Simeon Castle. But Alexander was a singer, not an actress. In the film she utterly lacks the extroverted hosting amiability of Marion Davies. The latter, with the patronage of Hearst, continued to build a movie career of sorts. But she doesn't seem to have ever gained a foothold in musicals. Certainly not as a vocalist.

However, Mankiewicz was out for revenge after being excluded from the Hearst-Davies social set, possibly for repeated shameful drunkenness. It appears prominent inclusion of the word Rosebud in his script set a fire under gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and her sister Luella Parsons. One or both of them urged Hearst's legal team to threaten RKO with a potential libel suit. Davies herself may have been sufficiently offended to join in the attack.

As a consequence, Hearst newspapers and magazines refused to accept ads for Welles's film. Faced with potential box office losses, major Hollywood studios and RKO itself tried to either shelve or destroy *Citizen Kane's* print.

Counterattacking, Welles tried to purchase all rights to the film and handle distribution personally.

Concurrently, studio bosses united to persuade RKO's Board of Directors to at the very least delay release of this now-controversial film. However, a private screening in New York City (not, notably, in Los Angeles) caused them to back down and withdraw their demands for its banning.

Due to all the adverse publicity already generated, many theater owners refused to show the picture. Those that did often regretted that choice. For the public largely either ignored or dismissed *Kane* as downbeat anti-capitalist propaganda.

The documentary being reviewed covers most of this territory ably. Yet its editors include many unsubstantiated tidbits of gossip which have accumulated over the years. They incline toward making an anti-censorship hero of Welles and a tyrannical villain of Hearst.

Their film is largely unexceptional, except for the work of its researchers. Sound, cinematography, editing, lighting, narrative, and music are competent and no more. While some insight into the central conflict between Hearst and Welles / Mankiewicz can be gained from a viewing, there are no bombshell disclosures. Audiences will either align themselves with conservative Hearst's desire for privacy or Mankiewicz's liberal assault on protected privilege.

Due to central themes of adultery and monopolistic censorship, as well as completely unnecessary profanity from Jimmy Breslin in interview clips, *The Battle Over Citizen Kane* is unsuitable for teen and preteen audiences. It's of some limited value in providing background information about the making and exhibiting of *Citizen Kane*.