**Sample Chautauqua Essay**

**Orson Welles**

By George Frein

Movies are expensive to make. A painter can purchase canvas and brushes for a few dollars, whereas a film director requires millions to make a movie. But, if successful at the box-office, movies can be profitable beyond anything a painter could ever hope for.

And just here, at the intersection of cost and profit, the film artist in America is caught in a struggle between making art and making money. And this is true of no one more than Orson Welles.

George Orson Welles was a genius; at least the family physician pronounced him a genius while he was still an infant. “The word *genius* was whispered into my ear while I was still mewling in my crib,” Welles said, laughing. “So it never occurred to me that I wasn’t until middle age.”

Long before reaching middle age, however, Orson Welles, had a successful debut on the Dublin stage at 16; was a playwright at 17; acted in a Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet* at 18; directed a critically acclaimed *Macbeth* at 20; was given his own theater in New York and produced *Dr. Faustus* for standing room only audiences at 21; formed his own theater company, the Mercury Theatre, at 22; and was on the cover of *Time* magazine at 23.

Welles was still only 23 when he produced, directed and starred in the Mercury Theatre on the Air--a series of weekly programs that featured radio versions of literary classics. One of these classics was H. G. Wells’ “The War of the Worlds.” Orson Welles produced it as a breaking news story in which men from Mars were reported to be invading New Jersey. Millions of unsuspecting dial-turners missed the beginning announcement that what followed was a radio play. They took it for a real news broadcast and panicked, flooding police offices around the country with phone calls. The show made Welles a national celebrity.

To capitalize on Welles’ sudden fame, RKO Pictures signed him, then just 24, to a contract which gave him complete artistic control to make a movie which he would write, direct, produce, act in, and edit. At age 25, Orson Welles made *Citizen Kane,* often said to be the best American movie ever made and certainly a work of genius. Critics loved it. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards. It failed at the box office, however, in part because the press tycoon, William Randolph Hearst, correctly took the picture’s fictional Charles Foster Kane as an unflattering portrait of himself. He refused to allow advertisement’s of the film to appear in Hearst newspapers and he successfully campaigned against its distribution.

What caught the attention of RKO stockholders was not the artistry of *Citizen Kane* but the money it lost. Never again would Welles be given the kind of artistic freedom he enjoyed while making his first movie.

Welles’ first film after *Citizen Kane,* *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1943), was based on a Booth Tarkington novel about the decline of a wealthy American family. When a preview audience objected to the absence of a happy ending, RKO rewrote and re-edited the film; “ruined it,” Welles said. Worse, producers in Hollywood passed around the rumor that Welles could not finish a film on time and within budget.

Welles answer to the charge was to make a film with a straightforward, linear story that he produced on time and under budget. The movie was *The Stranger* (1946),about a former Nazi officer hiding out at an American boys’ school, waiting for a resurgence of the party in Germany. The film failed to make Welles a marketable director. It succeeded only in repressing his own artistry.

After *The Stranger* Welles increasingly turned away from the Hollywood studio system and relied more and more on his own artistic genius--though it meant he had to find individual investors for his film projects--and was even required to put in large amounts of his own money. But the result was a substantial body of work marked by high artistic merit.

In film after film there was evident genius at work and American movie-goers were challenged to react to true film art. *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), starring Welles and his wife, Rita Hayworth, became a film noir classic, famous for its final scene of a shoot-out in a funhouse hall of mirrors. A Shakespearian actor himself, Welles adapted and directed wonderfully experimental film versions of Shakespeare’s plays: *Macbeth* in 1948, *Othello* in 1952, and a collage of five plays in his 1965 film, *The Chimes at Midnight.* Though American audiences were largely unenthusiastic, Welles got the grand prize for *Othello* at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival and two awards in 1966 for *The Chimes at Midnight*--the film Welles thought was his best work.

Even the work of his middle age was marked by genius. *Mr. Arkadin* (1955) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) brilliantly embodied his belief that actors and directors should give audiences the distance they need to make up their own minds about the action being portrayed on the screen, that is to say emotion should not interfere with reason. This is especially evident in *The Trial* (1962), a film inspired by Franz Kafka’s great and difficult novel. What pleased Welles about this film was that it was rather well received, proving, he thought, that one could make and market a film on a serious topic - and a film which asked questions but gave no answers.

Finally, Welles last film, and his only color film, *F for Fake* (1973), is the crowning expression of his belief that film art should make audiences think about what they are seeing on the screen--indeed, think about what life itself shows them. This is a must-see movie for those who enjoy Chautauqua, with its famous, “fake” characters. Orson Welles appears in the film as himself, telling the story of two famous fakes; and then adds a surprise third fake of his own. He boldly tests his audience with a serious question about fakery: “But is it art?” He asks the question as a playful, even youthful genius of 58.

**Sample Chautauqua Timeline**

**Orson Welles (1915-1985)**

1931 Welles makes his stage debut at the Gate Theatre in Dublin.

1936 He meets John Houseman and directs the hugely successful, all-black production of Macbeth in Harlem.

1938 Welles’ Mercury Theatre on the Air begins with him directing and acting in the shows. “The War of the Worlds” episode imagines an invasion of Earth by Martians and causes widespread panic among listeners.

1940 Welles writes, directs and stars in *Citizen Kane,* based on the life of press mogol/millionaire, William Randolph Hearst. It wins an Oscar in ‘41 for best Screenplay.

1942 He directs *The Magnificent Ambersons* based on a novel by Booth Tarkington. He loses his right to edit the film and it is badly bowdlerized.

1947 Welles directs, his wife, Rita Hayworth, in *Lady from Shanghai.*

*1*958 He directs and stars with Charlton Heston in *A Touch of Evil.*

1962 Welles adapts and directs Franz Kafka’s *The Trial.*

1965 Welles makes a movie, *Chimes at Midnight,* out of his play, “Five Kings.”

1973 Welles makes his only color film *F for Fake.*

**Sample Character Quotations**

**Orson Welles Quotations**

“We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone.”

“If there hadn't been women we'd still be squatting in a cave eating raw meat, because we made civilization in order to impress our girlfriends.”

“A film is never really good unless the camera is an eye in the head of a poet.”

“I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts.”

“Race hate isn't human nature; race hate is the abandonment of human nature.”

“Popularity should be no scale for the election of politicians. If it would depend on popularity, Donald Duck and The Muppets would take seats in senate.”

“I don't want to forgive myself. That's why I hate psychoanalysis I think if you're guilty of something you should live with it. Get rid of it--how can you get rid of a real guilt? I think people should live with it, face up to it.”

“In Italy, for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace--and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

“Living in the lap of luxury isn't bad except that you never know when luxury is going to stand up.”

“Fake is as old as the Eden tree.”

**Sample Suggested Reading**

**Orson Welles**

*This Is Orson Welles* byOrson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich (1992), edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum, is a sizable volume of interviews in which we have Welles own words on film-making and on himself.

A similar collection can be found in *My Lunches with Orson Welles: Conversations Between Henry Jaglom and Orson Welles* (2013), edited by Peter Biskind in which Welles corrects the record about his failure to make another *Citizen Kane.*

The best of the many made for television interviews is *The Orson Welles Story,*  a 2 hour and 44 minute 1982 BBC production.

Among the many biographies, the best, I think, is Barbara Leaming’s *Orson Welles, a Biography* (1985-95)*,* well researched and based on her many interviews with Welles. It presents a factual account of his film work neglected by many previous writers. Simon Callow is writing a larger, three-volume biography of which only two are published to date: *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (1995) and *Orson Welles: Hello Americans* (2006). Charles Higham’s 1970 work, *The Films of Orson Welles,* created the widely held view that after making *Citizen Kane* Welles could not finish a film for temperamental reasons. An intimate look at Welles can be found in Chris Welles Feder’s  *In My Father’s Shadow, A Daughter Remembers Orson Welles* (2009).