


[_\(https://blog.oup.com/\)](https://blog.oup.com/)

Search

Menu 

Orson Welles at 100



Oxford Bibliographies

Developed cooperatively with scholars and librarians worldwide, *Oxford Bibliographies* offers exclusive, authoritative research guides. Combining the best features of an annotated bibliography and a high-level encyclopedia, this cutting-edge resource guides researchers to the best available scholarship across a wide variety of subjects.

[READ MORE](#)(HTTP
97801
97801
0121..)BY CATHERINE L. BENAMOU ([HTTPS://BLOG.OUP.COM/AUTHORS/CATHERINE-L-BENAMOU/](https://blog.oup.com/authors/catherine-l-benamou/))

MAY 6TH 2015

Today, 6 May 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of George Orson Welles in Kenosha, Wisconsin, to concert pianist Beatrice Welles and inventor Richard Head Welles. Widely recognized as a child prodigy, Welles exhibited musical talent, a fascination with magic, and the ability to recite Shakespeare all before the age of ten. At age sixteen, he traveled to Ireland, where he seized the opportunity to appear on the professional stage in a production of *Jew Süss* at the Gate Theatre in Dublin.

At age nineteen, Welles launched his first book series, *Everybody's Shakespeare*, with the headmaster of Todd School, Roger Hill. The series, as its title suggests, aimed to provide educators with a textual toolkit to stage the works of the Bard. That same year in 1934, Welles would also launch his radio career, appearing as McGafferty in an adaptation of Archibald MacLeish's *Panic* and as an actor on NBC's *The March of Time*. Before the end of the decade, he would star as "The Shadow" on the homonymous radio show, establish his own theater company, The Mercury Theatre, with John Houseman in New York, and shock many U.S. listeners with his Halloween-eve radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (<http://www.mercurytheatre.info>). Hollywood soon took notice and on 21 August 1939, he signed a two-film contract with RKO Radio Pictures (later expanded to three), where, in addition to acting, directing, writing, and producing, together with the relocation of his Mercury team to the studio lot, he would have the unprecedented right to the "final cut" of films he was to direct.

Notwithstanding this privilege, Welles soon encountered difficulties with the studio, the first of which involved budgets (the unproduced *Heart of Darkness*, based on the novel by Joseph Conrad). This was followed by industrial controversy, as suspicion of a strong resemblance between the character, Charles Foster Kane, in *Citizen Kane*, and newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, led to a publicity blockade by Hearst papers, a lengthy delay in the film's release, and—as some biographers have suggested—the unofficial blacklisting of Welles and some of the film's actors by the film industry during the McCarthy era.

Welles's notoriety as a media personality, and the Latin American success of *Citizen Kane*, earned him a special appointment in late 1941 as "Goodwill Ambassador" by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. Troubled previews of family melodrama *The Magnificent Ambersons*, set in the turn-of-the-century Midwest, and the studio's misunderstanding of Welles's approach to the semi-documentary *It's All True*, led to the termination of Welles's RKO contract while he was still filming on location in Brazil. Thereafter, Welles would struggle for creative control over the films he directed in Hollywood, and in 1947 he left for Europe, where he would spend most of the remainder of his career.

Few filmmakers have been as multi-talented, publicly outspoken, inventive, and culturally adventurous as Orson Welles. In addition to completing twelve feature-length films, and scripting and shooting at least a half-dozen other projects, including the soon to be reconstructed *The Other Side of the Wind*, Welles sustained a twenty-year radio career in the United States and the United Kingdom, produced television shows in the 1950s, performed Shakespeare on television shows in the 1970s and early 1980s, and staged occasional theatrical productions in Europe and the United States.



Publicity photograph for *Citizen Kane* (1941), featuring star Orson Welles by RKO Radio Pictures. Public Domain via [Wikimedia Commons](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AOrson_Welles-Citizen_Kane1.jpg) (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AOrson_Welles-Citizen_Kane1.jpg).

While still in the United States in the 1940s, he was a staunch advocate of civil liberties and racial equality, staging an adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1941), maintaining editorial columns in the *New York Post* and *Free World Press*, and speaking out against the mistreatment of Mexican-American youth in the Sleepy Lagoon murder case (1942) and an act of police brutality against a returning African-American veteran, Isaac Woodard (1945). Two of his mid-1940s films, *The Stranger* (1945) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), reflect a concern with educating the public about the Holocaust and the prevention of fascism after the war, respectively speaking. Speaking about his craft upon receiving the AFI Lifetime Achievement Award in 1975, Welles characterized himself as "your friendly neighborhood grocer" in an "age of supermarkets."

His acting career, which spanned performances in major roles (such as Harry Lime in Carroll Reed's *The Third Man*) and stints at voice-over narration in over one hundred films, took him around the globe and enabled him to work on cherished projects such as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1952), the unfinished *Don Quixote* (1958-), and adaptations of Isak Dinesen's short stories, including *The Immortal Story* (1968). For his own independent film productions, he chose to film in Mexico, Spain, Morocco, Italy, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Germany, and Macao, engaging casts of actors and technical crews that were multilingual and international in composition. While Welles excelled at mystery, film noir, and drama, his masterpiece, *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), adapted from five Shakespeare plays, and his lesser known episodic series, *Around the World with Orson Welles* and *One-Man Band*, demonstrate the degree to which he was equally at home writing and performing comedy.

The centenary of Welles's birth provides us with an opportunity not only to celebrate his intensely-lived life and work, but to help usher in a new round of scholarship that will help us appreciate the mutual influence of his work in radio, theater, film, and television, his contributions to civil rights and the democratic process, his unfinished films and abbreviated television programs. As an artist, Welles never stopped growing, experimenting with stage design, deep focus and non-linear narration, hand-held cinematography and location shooting, intercultural dialogue, creative collaboration (with John Houseman, Norman Foster, Herivelto Martins, Hilton Edwards, Peter Bogdanovich, Oja Kodar, and others), and dramatic and comedic performance. While his legendary status did not always help him, he is quoted as saying in a memoir by his eldest daughter, Chris Welles Feder (*In My Father's Shadow*), "A great figure of myth like Don Quixote, even like Falstaff, is a silhouette against the sky of all time." May his silhouette and resounding voice continue to inspire us to create, study, and collaborate into the next century.

Image Credit: "L'orgoglio degli Ambersons" by Breve Storia del Cinema. CC BY 2.0 via [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/116153022@N02/15524443890/) (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/116153022@N02/15524443890/>).

Catherine L. Benamou is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies and Visual Studies at the University of California-Irvine, with an affiliation in Chicano-Latino Studies. She is the author of *It's All True: Orson Welles's Pan-American Odyssey* (University of California Press, 2007), and has published numerous journal articles and book chapters on Latin American cinema and media, as well as book chapters and a special dossier on the cinema of Orson Welles in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

For further information on Orson Welles, explore freely available expert recommendations on further reading, research, and resources from Benamou and other top scholars in "[Orson Welles](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0121.xml) (<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0121.xml>)" and "[Citizen Kane](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0017.xml) (<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0017.xml>)" in *Oxford Bibliographies*.

POSTED IN: [ONLINE PRODUCTS \(HTTPS://BLOG.OUP.COM/CATEGORY/SUBTOPICS/ONLINEPRODUCTS/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/subtopics/onlineproducts/) / [TV & FILM \(HTTPS://BLOG.OUP.COM/CATEGORY/ARTS_AND_HUMANITIES/TV-FILM/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/arts_and_humanities/tv-film/)

Subscribe to the OUPblog via email:

Or subscribe to articles in the subject area by [email](http://blog.oup.com/subscribe-oupblog-via-email/) (<http://blog.oup.com/subscribe-oupblog-via-email/>) or [RSS](http://blog.oup.com/follow/) (<http://blog.oup.com/follow/>).

Recent Comments

There are currently no comments.

Leave a Comment

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

COMMENT

NAME *

EMAIL *

WEBSITE

POST COMMENT

- [About Us \(https://blog.oup.com/about/\)](https://blog.oup.com/about/)
- [Follow Us \(https://blog.oup.com/follow/\)](https://blog.oup.com/follow/)
- [Contact Us \(https://blog.oup.com/contact/\)](https://blog.oup.com/contact/)
- [Terms and Conditions of Use \(https://blog.oup.com/terms_and_condi/\)](https://blog.oup.com/terms_and_condi/)
- [Reuse of Blog Content \(https://blog.oup.com/reuse-of-oupblog-content/\)](https://blog.oup.com/reuse-of-oupblog-content/)
- [Cookie Policy \(http://global.oup.com/cookiepolicy/\)](http://global.oup.com/cookiepolicy/)
- [Privacy Policy \(https://blog.oup.com/privacy_policy/\)](https://blog.oup.com/privacy_policy/)

Categories

- [Arts & Humanities \(https://blog.oup.com/category/arts_and_humanities/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/arts_and_humanities/)
- [History \(https://blog.oup.com/category/history/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/history/)
- [Language \(https://blog.oup.com/category/language-words/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/language-words/)
- [Law \(https://blog.oup.com/category/law-legal/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/law-legal/)
- [Science & Medicine \(https://blog.oup.com/category/science_medicine/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/science_medicine/)
- [Social Sciences \(https://blog.oup.com/category/social_sciences/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/social_sciences/)
- [Multimedia \(https://blog.oup.com/category/multimedia/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/multimedia/)
- [Series & Columns \(https://blog.oup.com/category/series-columns/\)](https://blog.oup.com/category/series-columns/)

Social Media

- [Facebook \(https://www.facebook.com/OUPAcademic\)](https://www.facebook.com/OUPAcademic)
- [Twitter \(https://twitter.com/OUPAcademic\)](https://twitter.com/OUPAcademic)

- [Google Plus \(https://plus.google.com/+OUPAcademic/\)](https://plus.google.com/+OUPAcademic/)
- [Tumblr \(http://oupacademic.tumblr.com/\)](http://oupacademic.tumblr.com/)
- [Pinterest \(http://www.pinterest.com/oupacademic/\)](http://www.pinterest.com/oupacademic/)
- [YouTube \(https://www.youtube.com/OUPAcademic\)](https://www.youtube.com/OUPAcademic)
- [Vimeo \(http://vimeo.com/oupacademic\)](http://vimeo.com/oupacademic)
- [Soundcloud \(https://soundcloud.com/oupacademic\)](https://soundcloud.com/oupacademic)
- [Sina Weibo \(http://weibo.com/oupacademic\)](http://weibo.com/oupacademic)
- [OxfordWords blog \(http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/\)](http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/)

Gateways

- [Oxford Academic \(http://global.oup.com/academic/\)](http://global.oup.com/academic/)
- [Oxford Journals \(http://www.oxfordjournals.org/\)](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/)
- [Oxford Online \(http://global.oup.com/online/\)](http://global.oup.com/online/)
- [Higher Education \(http://global.oup.com/ushe/\)](http://global.oup.com/ushe/)
- [Oxford Index \(http://oxfordindex.oup.com/\)](http://oxfordindex.oup.com/)
- [Oxford Dictionaries \(http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/\)](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/)
- [OUP Worldwide \(http://global.oup.com/\)](http://global.oup.com/)
- [University of Oxford \(http://www.ox.ac.uk/\)](http://www.ox.ac.uk/)

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Copyright © Oxford University Press 2017