

# I remember Orson Welles

There, but for the grace of God, goes God." So Orson Welles, who died last week at 70, was described by screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz. It was intended as a nasty remark yet one had to admit that Welles, with his magnificent voice, majestic personality and imposing stature did, at times, resemble Zeus come to earth.

Welles was, for me, a tragic character. Boy genius, star of stage and screen by 24, Welles took American dramatic arts by storm. In short order he created the great classic film, *Citizen Kane*, scared the pants off half of America by his radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, and became the enfant terrible of Broadway.

Then, at the pinnacle of his career, something went very wrong. Welles continued to produce and act in more films, including that absolute gem, *The Third Man*, which I consider the best and most perfect movie ever made. Yet, after *Kane*, the meteor began to fall. For the remaining 40 years of his life, Welles was unable to recapture the glory of his youth; worse, he produced little of artistic or dramatic value.

I remember spending a long spring evening in 1959 with Welles at his villa in Ostia, Rome's ancient seaport. At the time, my father, Henry Margolis, was producing plays with Welles on Broadway and in London. We dined with Welles and his wife, the Italian actress Paola Mori.

Hour after hour, Welles filled the room with the soaring majesty of his personality and ego. He was a brilliant raconteur, able to turn even the most trivial incident into an arresting narrative. Welles' voice rolled on like an orchestra's woodwinds, deep, sonorous and chromatic. Soon, we were all captured by the spell that he wove, riveted by his eyes, mesmerized by that voice, entranced by his tales. It mattered not at all where truth stopped and fiction began.

Later, I remember Welles appearing as King Lear in New York. He had become so fat that he sprained both ankles in falls — or, more accurately, capsizings. Welles played Lear from a wheelchair. The critics fulminated against Welles but I recall his crippled Lear as the most moving that I have ever seen.

Critics became an intrinsic part of Welles' life. He was roundly hated and despised by critics, producers, financial backers and associates of all types. People were jealous of Welles, as they are always of great genius. It was simply too much that one man could so triumph, and be so young. The art establishment never accepted the brash youngster who told them without respite that he was smarter and more talented than themselves.

But it was not jealousy alone that caused so many to detest Welles. He treated people much as Zeus would deal with his servants and retainers. It seemed to me that Welles truly believed that the world owed him an income, adulation, fealty and attention simply as the right of genius.

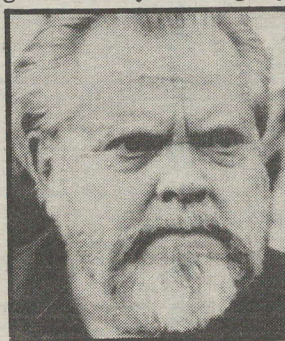
Welles, like so many in theatre and films, used people up like Kleenex, discarding them when no longer needed. In the process, he created a permanent class of enemies. They joined the legion of theatrical critics who regarded Welles as a poseur rather than an artist. Together, Welles' enemies crippled his career.

ERIC  
MARGOLIS



But, in the end, it was Welles himself who did the most damage. Here was a man of almost superhuman talent: He could have been the era's greatest actor; the greatest director; even the greatest producer. Instead, Welles determined to be all of these at once and, even more, to also be a consummate writer, stage designer, painter, bon vivant, critic, filmmaker. In trying to be the ideal Renaissance genius of all the performing arts, Welles ended up as the master of none.

This was the true tragedy of this man's life of genius and waste. Welles tried to ignite a thousand lights at once instead of one great flambeau of concentrated power and brilliance. For his remaining 40 years, Welles sheltered in the dying afterglow of his youthful glory. In this respect, Welles



ORSON WELLES  
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reminds us of another greater genius, the composer Richard Strauss who created most of his dazzling music before the age of 40. Strauss, like Welles, had to live another 40 years of stunted creation and growing melancholy.

Such is, of course, the curse of early blooming genius. Perhaps Mozart was lucky to have died so young, before his creative forces became spent. Welles went on to live the life of a TV personality, haunting late-night talk shows, doing commercials for a brand of wine that he would likely never have touched at home. In a sense, Welles became an immensely overweight self-parody.

It was very sad, even tragic. I am reminded of my father once telling me how he had seen the great actor, John Barrymore, down and out, trapped in the last terrible days of alcoholism, reciting Shakespeare from the stage of a strip club in Baltimore's seedy The Block. Watching Welles chatter about trivia on late-night TV conjured a similar feeling of waste, dissipation and sorrow.

I find myself quite saddened by Welles' death. My long-ago encounters with him left me with a sharp distaste for the man because of his lack of character or scruples. Yet, there was still something majestic and enchanting about him, the perpetual naughty boy breaking windows in a world of sombre adults, the conjurer, the weaver of tales.

I suppose that, in retrospect, Welles played a life-long tragic role. Here was a man in whom the force of genius surged so powerfully that the flawed vessel of his character could neither contain nor channel so elemental and thunderous a force.