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Career Overview

The genius who made *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* in just two years in the early forties didn't go on to the smoothly developing career of productive growth and maturity that his admirers wanted for him and for themselves. There were great films later on – the last one, the sublime, simple *Chimes at Midnight,* and, before that, in a more brilliant, less natural style, *Touch of Evil* – and there were very interesting and entertaining not-quite-successes like *Macbeth, Othello,* and *The Lady from Shanghai.* A fantastic curio, *Mr. Arkadin,* was badly botched but vivid with temperament; no one but Welles could have conceived of it. Yet something, many things, blocked satisfying development. The failure was not in talent, certainly, but in control over the circumstances in which the talent had to work. But the talent did to some extent suffer in the process.

This was no classic trajectory of decline. *Citizen Kane* appeared in 1941 and *Chimes at Midnight* appeared in 1966, so we aren't dealing with an artist going dead, unable to live up to early promise. On the contrary, in some respects failure came with great rapidity. At the end of the forties, Welles was for the world in general a fascinating and famous artist who had produced two brilliant, perhaps great, films and a couple of very interesting ones; but already in the early fifties, he seemed to many people not just an artist who hadn't done anything important recently, but one whose career had gone seriously wrong, from whom nothing further was expected. At about this time, Walter Kerr, a drama critic and a coarse-minded bellwether of opinion, entirely self-appointed but influential nonetheless, said that Welles was "an international joke, and possibly the youngest living has-been."[1]

Then came the last act, when from *Chimes at Midnight* in 1966 until his death in 1985, he produced nothing – nothing, that is, that came to

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anything. He was constantly reported to be working on some new project that never appeared. Some see a pathological element in this behavior, but the style in which Welles carried it through almost suggests instead a modern echo of Dickens's Mr. Micawber – Welles was waiting for something to turn up.

Instead of retiring into the obscurity that would seem the suitably discreet setting for such failure, Welles became a prominent and popular figure on television, everlastingly on hand on variety and talk shows – *The Dean Martin Show, The Dick Cavett Show, The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson, The Merv Griffin Show* – and in addition keeping his face and immense bulk constantly before the public in the Paul Masson wine commercials he made into a legendary and cautionary feature of TV culture. He seemed in many eyes to have sunk as low as a major artist could sink. He himself didn't seem to share that opinion. He made these undignified appearances with smiling, benevolent imperturbability, without a sign of shame or anxiety or depression, and with obviously genuine and infectious goodwill and charm. He weighed some 350 pounds, and therefore might be thought quite seriously ill, but he made even this colossal bulk into a character and a performance. This long final chapter of the Welles story, the great film master who was producing no films, was lived out with bewitching grace, charm, and warmth. He was always a performer, and he had performed his nature and his talent with dash and flair in earlier days; in the seventies and eighties he performed his wit, his warmth, his size, his knowledge, his knowledgeability, and his memory of his unequaled past, with sedentary benevolence and, what is rarer, with an almost populist eagerness to please.

A tragicomic ironic note remains to be added to this image, for while Welles's decline as a filmmaker was being taken for granted in the world of show business, the virtual opposite was taking place with his reputation elsewhere. The growth of serious film criticism in the fifties and sixties in magazines such as *Cahiers du cinéma, Sight and Sound,* and *Film Comment,* the eminence of Pauline Kael's powerful writing in *The New Yorker,* and the growth of film study in colleges and universities – all these were steadily building up Welles's reputation as a master director. The fat, jovial wine salesman was the same man who had directed *Citizen Kane.*

As one examines the many starts and stops in Welles's career, the disappointments and self-betrayals, the great body of uncompleted work, there is no escaping the conclusion that something in Welles himself was making trouble. Many of the causes were obvious in Welles's nature from the beginning. His lifelong addiction to the performance of self, his ego-

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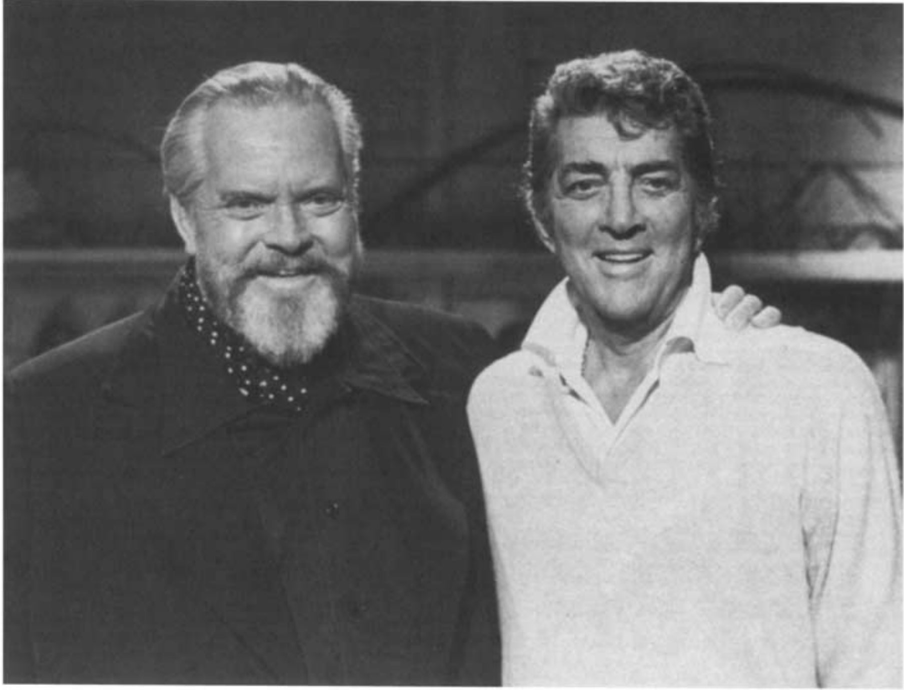

"An almost populist eagerness to please": Welles with Dean Martin for a 1981 TV show. (Photo courtesy of Photofest)

tism and self-display, his lack of discipline, his recklessness, his lack of concern for contracts, or for other people – anybody who cares about his work has had to come to terms with these traits in order to take the full measure of his life or his art, for these traits were basic to his nature and behavior. They were also central to his art. If his performance of self was too often uncritical, and if for that reason it was a cause of the irregularities of his career, as it must somehow have been, nevertheless, performance of self was always the source, soul, and living center of his art. Everybody feels this, really, just as everybody feels it about another great performing artist, Dickens.

An artist can be called a performing artist when in each element of his work we feel in immediate contact with the artist himself and his intentions – trying to impress us, to show us his skill, to surprise us, to move us, to share his art with us. Dickens never wrote a description without calling attention to what he was doing: 'The master of description is now writing a brilliant description' or 'The master of eccentric characterization is now creating an eccentric character – and right in front of you.' When

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late in his career Dickens began putting part of his immense energy into dramatic readings of his works – Bill Sykes's murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* was the most popular and apparently the most hair-raising – it must have been because his hunger to perform his art for people could no longer be satisfied by performing on the page. He needed the audience right there, in person. It's not just a figure of speech to say that he killed himself in the overexertion of reaching for this contact. Dickens's thrilling readings were major exhibitions of energy and imagination, in comparison with which Welles's TV appearances may seem a dim and degenerate echo; but Welles closely resembled Dickens in practicing a mode of art in which we feel in contact, not primarily with an illusion of reality, but with the artist himself, the personality, the temperament, of the person who is making and sponsoring the illusion. You can't come within range of the power of such artists without responding, positively or negatively, to their assertive presence, their will to capture attention, to please, to astonish, to impress, often simply to make an exciting appearance before you. If such self-presentation offends you, this art is not for you.

To expect from such artists discipline and good behavior, to expect them to pay bills on time, live up to promises, keep to the budget, isn't sensible, and to use such expectations as a standard against which to judge them is simply to set a trap for them. Dickens himself happens to be an odd exception that proves this rule, for he was to all intents and purposes a man of great discipline and exceptionally controlled behavior, a hard worker, a family man, and all the rest. But although these accomplishments were movingly real, this ideal good-citizen behavior can seem but another part of the performance, as Dickens's lapses from this behavior in his treatment of his wife and children show.

With Welles, as with Dickens, performance of self wasn't exactly personal exhibitionism, though it may have been centered in it. Both artists were marvelously, perhaps supremely, gifted in the use of their media. Welles the person, in his mind and flesh, his personality, his temperament, above all his voice, was himself perhaps his prime medium, but he gave performances of self in the other media in which he worked as writer and director: theater, radio, and film, media for which he had an intuitive feel, and the mechanics of which he always mastered and deeply understood before he ever attempted performance. From an early age it was he who had the ideas and gave the orders in every enterprise in which he participated, but that was not only because he egotistically wanted to and needed to run the show (though he clearly did want and need this), but because much of the time he happened to be the only person on the premises

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who actually understood the machinery of the enterprise. The conception of Orson Welles as a romantically imaginative artist with an instinctive, intuitive feel for theater, radio, and film, is a right one, but so is another conception: that he was an artist who could be counted on for a high degree of sheer know-how and competence. It was competence as well as brilliance and charisma that won the cooperation of his professional colleagues even when what they felt toward him wasn't exactly affection or loyalty. To try to bring into focus his competence and his irresponsibility at the same time may be a good way to approach the Orson Welles puzzle.

For Welles's case offers more difficult problems about responsibility and irresponsibility than that of most artists. In 1892 Shaw paid a moving tribute to Chopin's sense of responsibility to his talent and his art, and in doing so sketched out what one might call the normal version of the issue, against which it is useful though painful to measure the ambiguities of the Welles case. Shaw was criticizing a biography of Chopin written by an earnest and very young man who was troubled by Chopin's failure to behave sensibly about money:

> To say . . . that Chopin was not a man to grasp opportunities merely because he did not jump at a chance of giving a paying concert, is to substitute the business standard of a smart agent for the artistic standard of the critic of a great composer. A man who died of consumption at thirty-nine and yet produced what Chopin has left us, was clearly a man of immeasurably greater energy and practicality than the late Mr. Jay Gould, who worked far longer than Chopin, and produced nothing.[2]

The clarity of Chopin's sense of priority contrasts painfully with the confusion of Welles's career.

Responsibility to one's talent, like Chopin's, is one thing at issue with Welles. Responsibility to people and institutions, and to one's commitments to them, is another. That kind of responsibility lies between duty and loyalty; it involves learned moral behavior but also the ability to imagine other people's wants and needs and an interest in doing so. But it's hard to be sure what responsibility to one's talent really means and to what extent moral considerations should come into play when responsibility to one's talent is the issue. Welles's responsibility to his own talent and his own work is hard to separate from his responsibility to the organizations and people with whom he was involved. And it is hard too to separate Welles's lack of responsibility to his talent from his susceptibility to other kinds of failure – of nerve, of self-confidence, of invention, of

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imagination. Throughout his career Orson Welles seemed to admirers and detractors alike to be tragically implicated in issues of responsibility, and it seemed to them tragic too how little steady awareness of this he showed.

The mix of self-performance and competence in Welles began early in his childhood in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and in Chicago. He was a show-off from the start, like a lot of other children; but the nervous energy, concentration, and focus of his showing off suggested from the beginning something exceptional in process. He was deeply attached to his mother, for whom art was a major passion, though she was not particularly talented or even well-informed about it. Long after her death she remained an important person in his life; it was for her pleasure and to win her attention that he had given his earliest performances. It may in fact have been because his mother was his first audience that he discovered the excitement and especially the rewards of the performance of self. He used to stand on a chair and pretend to conduct an orchestra, and he put on complicated shows with the magic set and toy theater his godfather had given him. This fairly ordinary childish behavior might have led anywhere or nowhere, but Welles's early self-performance seems always to have been tied to self-education; while he was showing off by playing these games he was at the same time figuring out how they worked, so that his fun with the magic set and the toy theater turned out later to have been the beginning of serious apprenticeship.

He showed the first fruit of the apprenticeship at the age of twelve, when he entirely dominated the theatrical enterprises of his school. Welles's parents had chosen the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois, for him because they had sent his undisciplined and unfocused flop of an older brother, Richard, there for correction when it was still almost a military academy of discipline. The correction had worked to some extent, but that doesn't seem to have been the reason Orson was sent, and by the time he arrived the school had been transformed by the new headmaster, Roger Hill. His style was almost the opposite of severely disciplinary: indulgent, highly cultivated, and imaginative, but also shrewd and tough. Hill regularly sanctioned what a more anxious headmaster might have prohibited. It was he who allowed Orson complete control over the school theatricals for several terms, instead of insisting that the task and the honor be spread around in a more acceptably democratic manner. The trust paid off, for Welles's control of the Todd theatricals was deep and detailed to a degree amazing in a schoolboy. Welles's hard-to-please biographer, Simon Callow, who can hardly bear to acknowledge Welles's mas-

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tery in his adult ventures, enjoys describing Welles's boyish omnicompetence at Todd:

> Welles was dealing with kids, not merely untrained but not necessarily even talented. He was their own age, yet they took it, apparently without demur. It can only be because they acknowledged that the results justified it. During his time at Todd, Welles devoted himself to the theater to such an extent that it almost became a theater arts degree course – except that he was the teacher and pupil, course director and apprentice. He mastered every aspect of production during this time – design, stage management, lighting design, set-building. The campus theater was a well-equipped two-hundred seater, with a reasonable number of lamps, all on dimmers; a plaster back wall which made possible "realistic and stunning outdoor effects"; an arras, with a drape setting (the drapes being removable) and a rigging loft equipped with ten sets of lines. He used every aspect to its utmost potential. . . . He had, at this astonishingly early age, a clear conception of the unifying role of the director.[3]

One gets a vivid sense of watching Welles at play with the machinery of his medium in the élan of his first films, and indeed in all his films. Welles always wanted to get more than fun out of his new toys – he wanted to find out how they worked and what he could do with them. Along with play went concentration and purpose, qualities that in their completed development are richly visible in the finish and fullness of his great films. Welles's mastery of the machinery of his school theater was probably as much a matter of instinct as of diligent discipline, but that had been the case with Dickens, too, and with many other performing artists. Welles knew all about his own competence and delighted in it. When he boasted about it to Barbara Leaming, his least skeptical biographer, you can tell he knew how outrageous he was being, yet the frankness of tone is lovely, and the details of the boast compel belief. He was a virtuoso liar all his life, but he could also be a movingly sincere egoist:

> See, the one thing on which I am totally without self-doubt is the technical side of the theater, radio, and movies. And I never did anything that wouldn't work. I did things people didn't *like*. But any story you hear about something not working: *not true!* I am the only director in the world that I've ever heard of, or anybody that I've ever talked to has heard of, who comes on a set and puts his closed fist in a certain position in the air: *this will be a 40, right here*. Without a viewfinder, without anything – and I know exactly what will work. I am the absolute technical master of the medium. I have no shame in saying it. So if

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> people say something doesn't work, they don't know any better. That's all I can say.[4]

Instinctive mastery of the medium to some degree deserted him later in his life, conceivably because he got fewer and fewer chances even to touch the machinery.

The triumphs at the Todd School were followed by a series of lucky opportunities on which he seized with such speed and implemented so fully that they can be called his creations – genius plus competence, again. There's something like magic in the opening of Welles's career, though perhaps it's just the strength and certainty with which he believed in himself, and presented and performed himself.

Somebody – possibly Hill, most likely Welles himself – concocted the plan for Welles to go to Ireland entirely on his own at the age of sixteen, a seemingly unmotivated act that proved to have serious thinking and planning behind it. Somehow Welles had come to feel the glamour of literary and political Ireland. His teachers at Todd helped, probably, yet for a sixteen-year-old in Chicago in 1931 to try under any circumstances to explore and bring to reality such an intellectual discovery was an act of genius in itself. He got off the ship at Galway, instead of continuing to Cobh, and proceeded through the West Country to the Aran Islands and then to the Gate Theatre in Dublin, where he staged a major and thoroughly rewarding self-performance and self-creation. He wangled his way, as a gofer and intern, into this young company, which had been founded only five years before, and then, on the shaky basis of this minimal status, asked to audition for the long and important second lead in the upcoming production, an adaptation by Ashley Dukes of Feuchtwanger's *Jew Süss*. Despite the theatrical know-how he had gained at Todd, he had had no experience in the professional theater, and Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, the joint managers, knew as much, but they had a role to fill, and Welles had already won them over with his energy and presence. Edwards told Welles immediately after his audition that he had been "bloody awful," which seems to have been a complicated compliment, for the audition actually seemed to both directors to have held great and complex promise. Mac Liammóir's brilliant memoir shows and explains his excitement about the occasion:

> It was an astonishing performance, wrong from beginning to end but with all the qualities of fine acting tearing their way through a chaos of inexperience. His diction was practically perfect, his personality, in spite of his fantastic circus antics, was real and varied; his sense of passion,

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> of evil, of drunkenness, of tyranny, of a sort of demoniac authority was arresting; a preposterous energy pulsated through everything he did. . . . And that was because he was real to himself, because it was something more to him than a show, more than the mere inflated exhibitionism one might have suspected from his previous talk, something much more.[5]

He got the role and had a personal triumph in it; the reviews singled out the sixteen-year-old boy almost embarrassingly for special praise. He had earned his place as a bona fide member of the company for the rest of the season, which ended with another happening that may count as a Wellesian magical conjuration, for the play scheduled for the end of the season turned out to be what always has had talismanic force and implication for theater people, *Hamlet,* in which Welles (still only sixteen) got to play – not Hamlet, to be sure – but both Claudius and the Ghost, getting some bad reviews for Claudius but some very good ones for the Ghost. In less than a year at the Gate, he had fashioned out of energy and belief in himself a solidly structured minicareer in the Irish theater.

What Mac Liammóir saw in that audition was not only raw talent and personality, but also the result of some form of discipline. "Practically perfect diction" on the part of a sixteen-year-old Midwestern American had to have come about through a more or less orderly process of self-shaping. Granted Welles's temperament, the process might have *looked* impetuous and instinctual rather than careful and painstaking, might have seemed closer to imitation, even mimicry, than to drill; but that is how this very young man's nature functioned and how it was to continue to shape itself. Mac Liammóir's stern description of Welles's performance of self offstage – "mere inflated exhibitionism" – usefully puts into relief his capacity to transmute "exhibitionism" into controlled performance in the medium of theater.

Luck was instrumental again in Welles's next career step, a chance meeting at a party back in Chicago with Thornton Wilder, at that time a major player in American cultural life, even before *Our Town.* Welles was in moody doldrums about his career (his mood perhaps another precocious self-performance of a would-be theatrical professional), but Wilder surprisingly turned out to know a lot about the Dublin triumph, which had got only "local boy makes good" attention in the Chicago press. In fact, entirely on the basis of the Gate Theatre's guarantee, Wilder offered Welles the magnificent gift of a career introduction to his good New York friend Alexander Woollcott, the critic and radio personality, one of the most powerful figures in the American theater. Woollcott in turn intro-

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duced him to his own great friends, Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic, virtually the queen and king of the American theater in the thirties. They were then casting, in that summer of 1933, a small repertory company for a national tour to perform *Candida* and their latest hit, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street,* and to make their first attempt at Shakespeare with *Romeo and Juliet.* As at the Gate, it was after only the most perfunctory auditions that Welles was invited into the company. This can't have been as unprofessional an action on McClintic's part as it sounds. Welles had come to McClintic's attention through the kind of old-boy network now much distrusted, but McClintic was an experienced networker, who knew perfectly well how to further his own interests by these means. He couldn't have hired Welles so quickly if he hadn't been impressed by him – by his gifts and by the self-confidence with which he used them.

What McClintic saw in this audition must have been akin to what we see in the early films. At eighteen, Welles seems to have been, in everything that goes into the fashioning of a theatrical presence, essentially the actor we know from, say, the image of the youthful Charlie Kane in the first newspaper office scene in *Citizen Kane.* The height and bulk (just slightly odd in its awkwardness without seeming peculiar), the self-command, the almost comically chubby-cheeked and faintly Asian handsomeness that was yet undeniably handsomeness, the witty eyebrows – all this was fully formed and in force. Above all there was the voice, which had developed early and remained unchanged until he died. It was in the deployment of this voice that Welles's performance of self chiefly and most vividly took place. The voice was unusually loud and penetrating; many noticed and responded to a certain powerful "vibration." As one can hear at many moments in the films, he loved his own competence in using that voice for high eloquence in strong rhetorical patterns, for which he was equipped with a wide range of volume, nuance, and color, all under flexible control; he was also capable of and fond of bombastic roaring. But there is a more original and potent aspect to Welles's voice than eloquence: a seductive tonal undercurrent that is hard to fix because it plays in and through many other tones. At its toughest and most brilliant this tonal undercurrent expresses an almost cruel, cutting insolence, yet one that is seductive because we are invited to share in the power of the insolence and because we very much want to; we also want to share the voice's sly tone of amusement, a teasing, exciting complicity, even though it may be at something we don't quite understand. Almost whatever the subject, Welles's voice takes an ironic tone toward it, often with little discernible intention of doing so – not discernible, you feel, even to Welles himself. The irony is often free-

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