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The Films of Orson Welles

This book offers a comprehensive survey of Orson Welles's life and career, charting the progress of the extraordinary talent that produced such a sequence of splendid successes and puzzling failures. Robert Garis offers both an insightful account of Welles's fascinating character and ample interpretive commentary that freshens our appreciation and understanding of his work. At the heart of this book are sustained readings of Welles's masterpieces, *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and critically incisive accounts of his other major films, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Touch of Evil*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Chimes at Midnight*.

Robert Garis was the Katherine Lee Bates Professor of English at Wellesley College. He published on a broad range of topics, including poetry, fiction, drama, dance, music, and film, and was the author of *The Dickens Theatre* and *Following Balanchine*. He completed *The Films of Orson Welles* just before his death in 2001.

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Orson Welles as Harry Lime in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. (Photo courtesy of Photofest)

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Foreword

James Harvey

Robert Garis was my dear friend. And he had, as he says of himself in *Following Balanchine*, a talent for friendship. He was generous and funny. Even before I knew him, he was described to me by a woman friend – no stranger to brilliance herself – as the one genius she knew. And though I might not have thought of quite that word for it myself, I came to know what she had meant by it. What Bob gave to his friends wasn't so different from what he gave to his readers or to his students. He distrusted the messianic almost as much as anyone could – but he had a messianic force in his relation to art. To hear him talk about a movie or a book or a ballet was to be invaded by the conviction of just how important, even *salvific*, art could be. Not everyone has that conviction – but to talk to Bob was to know it.

This is a marvelous book – a passionate response to a passionate artist. It's a genial passion: Garis is on the side of Welles – not at all condescending to him the way some of his recent biographers (David Thomson, Simon Callow) seem to do, in their dominating concern with the way Welles finally disappointed us. That he did so is probably inarguable, but – as Garis felt – it was the wrong emphasis to give to a career that gave us so much: *Citizen Kane*, for a start (was there ever such another?), followed by *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and later by *Touch of Evil*. Garis's essays on these films alone – with his account of Welles as a performative artist in the tradition of Charles Dickens (as well as John Ford and Sergei Eisenstein) – make this book indispensable. But then there are also his reflections on film noir, on Welles's commitment to Shakespeare on film, as well as a reading of *Macbeth* itself as multileveled and deeply persuasive as any account of that play I've read.

Garis is a major critic, as he showed not only in his two previous books

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(*The Dickens Theatre* and *Following Balanchine*), but also in articles and reviews over his lifetime. This is the first of his books to deal directly and explicitly with movies, which became the consuming interest of his life toward the end. This book then is the culmination of that interest. And how grateful we must feel to have it. As with Welles himself, we could wish that the author had given us *more*. About *Chimes at Midnight*, for example, where the brevity encapsulates Garis's intensity of feeling about the film in a way that makes you long to hear more, and it's that intensity of engagement that you register – as the feeling behind his judgments, and behind this whole splendid book.

James Harvey is the author of *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood* and *Movie Love in the Fifties*.

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