

The Days with Orson

By GEORGE COULOURIS

At the first rehearsal of what turned out to be a monumental flop (it closed after one performance) I became aware of a rather gigantic young man, with a cavernous bass voice and the figure of a Japanese wrestler. This, needless to say, turned out to be Orson Welles, at that time known as the boy wonder or the Triple Threat Man (actor, writer, director). I was in revolt against the legend; it is a role that comes easily to me.

I badgered Orson with questions like "Why did you just do this *Macbeth* with an all-coloured cast?" (a reference to his latest sensational success in the Government-sponsored theatre project). "Just to be different, wasn't it? And what about the time *Macbeth* got ill, in Indianapolis, and you had to rush there and black up all over to play a Scotsman - didn't you feel rather silly, sloshing on the bole?"

Orson was too "big a guy" to allow such heckling to stop him asking me to play Anthony when he was planning his first real Broadway production, *Julius Caesar* in modern dress (no scenery). So I found myself on a chilly October morning in a ruined bootleg brewery on the banks of the Hudson grappling with "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," surrounded by chunks of falling ceiling.

The production was a smashing success. Its course was enlivened, if that is the right word, by ~a series of minor catastrophes. For instance, one evening Welles, practically demolished Caesar by (accidentally) severing an artery in his arm in the assassination scene. For once Anthony's speech beginning "O pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth" had real point. The dictator, you will be glad to know, recovered, after a month in hospital.

During a matinée later on tropical rain suddenly descended, in dense sheets. This was caused by the youngest member of the cast, the boy Lucius, fiddling with the working of the fire prevention system in the privacy of his dressing-room. Since the rain with utter impartiality descended on the audience too (even the cheapest seats getting a short downpour) the theatre historians are still trying to decide whether this was the first

manifestation in the U.S.A. of the famed Brecht alienation effect. (For readers of *Encore* magazine and of Ken Tynan, *Verfremdungseffekt*.)

The next catastrophe was nationwide, starting with the utter disorganization of New Jersey one peaceful summer night. I take it that everyone knows all about the famous broadcast describing the landing of the Martians, a version of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. As a direct consequence I found myself, in the middle of 1939, on the train to California, with a contract from R.K.O. guaranteeing me five weeks' salary at a quite handsome figure. I was to appear, along with several other Mercury actors, in Orson's first film project, a version of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. We had at that time no script, but as each of us had been handed a leaflet describing briefly the character we were to play, with a short list of idiosyncrasies, we were not worried; after all, we did have a five-week guarantee. I read mine over on the train. It said "If you fell into a pit you probably wouldn't attempt to get out, but if you did start trying you'd probably never stop." I searched through the story, but could find no evidence that my character ever went near a pit. "Good," I thought, settling back contentedly, "Orson's still in the groove."

Let us skim contentedly through the five-week guarantee period, bathed in the peculiar California sun, which has all the quality of moonshine. Nothing was required of us, apparently, save to sign for that weekly cheque.

At the end of the five weeks Orson summoned a meeting of his actors, dismissed Conrad summarily as "unmalleable and uncooperative", saying in effect "He's a dead duck, we're not taking up his option. Ambler's the man, and *Smiler with a Knife* the book. We haven't started on the script yet, but don't worry, boys, you're all on the R.K.O. payroll until the script's ready, and at your present salaries. Another thing, I want you to look on me as your group father. Come to me if anything at all worries you, day or night."

"On the payroll until the script's ready-what does he mean, worry? What's there to worry

about?" I thought bemusedly, as some hours later I sent off a wire to my wife which can be summarized thus: Very profitable script trouble. Come at once. Have taken furnished house complete with Japanese gardener, cook and maid.

On Wednesday of the following week two things happened. We were told we were off the R.K.O. payroll. Orson disappeared.

I will not go into details of the following many weeks. We were a group of New York theatre and radio actors at sea in Hollywood. There didn't seem to be much demand for our services. This was explained later, when we discovered that our joint agent, who was also Orson's, had strict instructions from the elusive Orson not to offer us anywhere else. Orson must have new faces for his first film.

Big Daddy eventually reappeared. As far as I remember I first caught sight of him again in the R.K.O. canteen. I sat down anxiously at his table and ordered something quite inexpensive, and as soon as possible said "Orson, please let Al (the agent) try to get us other jobs."

"George, I can't," he replied. "It'll lessen your impact."

"But Orson, my impact is getting less day by day, so is my family's."

"I know, George, it's a problem, but there it is."

I had to damage my impact, injure my schoolgirl complexion and take a couple of parts in films now forgotten. Then one night Orson summoned me to his mountain-top chalet and outlined the story of Kane. The period of Kane remains in my memory as a melange of pastry tubes, old silk stockings, corn flakes, dim lighting and terribly low ceilings.

The first scene I played was with Agnes Moorhead. I had to take over the boy Kane in the middle of a Colorado blizzard. For snow Orson tried everything, including, of all things, snow. We tried all the breakfast foods. Nothing worked but corn flakes. So we spent three days up to the neck in them. They're much worse than crumbs in bed.

We spent five hours at a time, starting at 5 a.m. in the make-up chair, having liquid rubber squirted all over our faces, and silk stockings glued to our pates. Toland, the lighting camera man, was a genius, full of revolutionary ideas, such as universal focus (background figures just as clear as those in the foreground). He believed that ceilings had never been evident enough in films. Have a look at the Kane ceiling during the next revival.

The lighting was a bit too low to please

actors, who nearly always like to be clearly visible. There must have been a lot of subterranean activity going on at R.K.O. as Kane went on its tortuous and lengthy course. The front office couldn't do a thing to hurry it up because of Orson's contract, which gave him *carte blanche* - blanner than Renoir, Claire, Murnau, Duvivier. etc., were ever able to get out of the Hollywood tycoons.

We did finish eventually. At the party to celebrate in Orson's bungalow dressing-room I tried to act as his conscience and steer him back to the straight and narrow path of the theatre, asking him to do more productions such as *Faustus*, *Caesar* and *Heartbreak House*. He strode around, Scotch in hand, declaiming "I can do anything:- out-Barnum Barnum, out-Hitchcock Hitchcock! "

I tip-toed off to the projection-room to see, with all the others, the first run of the complete rough cut of the film. At the end in the darkness a voice was heard: "I think it stinks . . . Not a dame worth looking at in the whole goddamn film." Then, from Orson, "You may be right." This candidate for immortality-turned out to be an assistant publicity man who had just been fired, but had crept in. But who knows whether he would, have liked *Heart of Darkness* any better?
