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The AFI FEST Interview: Peter Bogdanovich on Orson Wellesâ?? CITIZEN KANE

Description

Ranked at the top of AFIâ??s list of the greatest films of all time, Orson Wellesâ?? portrait of newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane (a thinly veiled stand-in for William Randolph Hearst) is brilliant, blistering and beautiful. The story moves through the tragedies and triumphs of Kaneâ??s life, from a happy childhood in snowy Colorado cut short; to a towering ascendance in the newspaper industry; a dysfunctional marriage with a tone-deaf wife he tries desperately to mold into a great opera singer; and a cloistered existence in his palatial home, Xanadu. Wellesâ?? superb cast, many from his own Mercury Theatre, is made up of some of the most vibrant stars of the 1940s, including Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, Everett Sloane and, of course, Welles himself, who perfectly captures the aging Kane with a deft mix of sensitivity and ferocity. Gregg Tolandâ??s innovative cinematography is now the stuff of legend, putting the deep focus technique on the map with shot after shot of crisply layered foreground and background images. If this is your first or 100th time seeing this landmark film, make sure to catch it at AFI FEST 2016 in a restored DCP, courtesy of Warner Bros. Classics.

The screening will be followed by an AFI Master Class with Welles expert Peter Bogdanovich, who spoke to AFI about CITIZEN KANE ahead of AFI FEST.

AFI: CITIZEN KANE turns 75 this year. Why do we still talk about it today?



Bogdanovich and Welles

Peter Bogdanovich: Itâ??s a landmark film, not just Orson Wellesâ?? best film but a masterpiece. It was a masterpiece then in 1941 and still is. Itâ??s a brilliant symphony, and is exciting to watch. Everything about it is dynamic, and that very dynamism is the camouflage for the extremely sad story Welles tells. Youâ??re not moved to tears by CITIZEN KANE really, except as a kind of thrillingly done film.

AFI: What was it like seeing the film for the first time, in 1955?

PB: I was 16, and I was quite bowled over by it. I thought it was brilliant. Iâ??ve seen it, I think, 10 or 12 times since then. I saw it the other day on television briefly. You canâ??t resist it. Everything about it is brilliant. The performances are amazing, and Orson himself, his performance is extraordinary. People spend so much time talking about the direction that they donâ??t notice how brilliant that performance is. It was everybodyâ??s first film, which makes it even more extraordinary. Itâ??s amazing to realize that all those people had never made a movie before.

AFI: Would you say that much of contemporary cinema is indebted to the style and direction of CITIZEN KANE?

PB: Itâ??s funny because itâ??s not that extraordinary in terms of the technique. He used a pretty simple technique in many ways. A lot of long takes. The scene goes on, and you donâ??t notice how long it goes without a cut. That wasnâ??t that common, though a lot of filmmakers in that period did do shots like that, but not to the degree that Orson did. Years later, I said to him, â??What do you think is the difference between doing a scene in one shot or in many cuts?â?• He said, â??Well, we used to

say thatâ??s what distinguished the men from the boys.â?• The whole thing, the construction of the story, the flashback structure â?? it wasnâ??t any one thing that was unusual. It was the whole production. Itâ??s a very depressing story. Thereâ??s not a shred of hope at the end. Itâ??s all very downbeat, but the style of the film, the way he made it, the overlapping dialogue, the flashback structure, some surprising camera angles â?? the whole thing made a tremendous impression if you were sensitive to what he was doing.

AFI: How was the film received in 1941, versus years later when you first saw it?

It got great reviews in its original release, except in The New York Times. [Critic] Bosley Crowther didnâ??t care for it much. He thought the central character was shallow. It couldnâ??t play in a lot of theaters because the Hearst organization had blacklisted it. So, as Orson said, they couldnâ??t make money if they couldnâ??t get a theater. Thatâ??s why it failed. Orson suggested they open it in tents around the country. It was not shown for many years, but it was brought back to New York in 1955, to a small art house, and thatâ??s where I first saw it. Thatâ??s when it started to gain this reputation.

READ MORE: 15 Facts About Orson Wellesâ?? CITIZEN KANE â?? Americaâ??s Greatest Film Turns 75



AFI: You had a close relationship with Welles for many years. How did he feel about the film?

PB: He didnâ??t want to talk about it much. Orson did THE DAVID FROST SHOW [as guest host] in 1970 and I was there. He had a guest, [author] Norman Mailer, and after the show they went to Frankie and Johnnieâ??s in Manhattan and I joined them for dinner. We sat down and Norman said to Orson, â??Thereâ??s a great shot in CITIZEN KANEâ?¦â?• and Orson said, â??Oh, no, Norman, not CITIZEN KANE.â?• Norman looked perplexed for a minute and then said, â??Oh, yeah, I guess itâ??s like me and â??The Naked and the Dead,â??â?• meaning that both Norman and Orson were plagued by the notoriety of their first effort. It was the only picture that anybody ever talked to him about, and he was irritated about it because heâ??d made other pictures that nobody saw. It depressed him actually. It was a struggle to get him to talk about KANE. Reluctantly he talked about it; I would trick him into it sometimes.

AFI: When Welles began CITIZEN KANE, did he know he was making a masterpiece?

PB: I couldnâ??t say. I think he thought he was making a pretty good picture. The thing about CITIZEN KANE is itâ??s very cold, and there are moments that are touching, but theyâ??re few and far between. Itâ??s not an emotional picture. KANE is relentlessly negative, but what makes it exciting is the way itâ??s told, and the way itâ??s acted and the way itâ??s done, really. Itâ??s almost as though heâ??s saying that itâ??s only through art that we can really survive. The artistry of the picture is what gives it its lift, because if you examine the story, itâ??s pretty bleak.

AFI: How has CITIZEN KANE influenced your own seminal work?

PB: I canâ??t say I was influenced by CITIZEN KANE directly. I was influenced by Orsonâ??s thinking, and things he said to me. But I wasnâ??t particularly influenced by the film. I wasnâ??t influenced by the technique of it as much as by the youthful spirit of it. I was influenced by a general feeling of fearlessness. CITIZEN KANE was nominated for Best Picture, but what won was HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY by John Ford, an emotional film about the dissolution of a family. CITIZEN KANE is a cold film about the dissolution and tragedy of a man who loses everything, including his soul.

CITIZEN KANE screens AFI FEST on Sunday, November 13, at 1:30 p.m.



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