

## Member Lecture – 15 October 2020

Autumn film club – Citizen Kane  
Rob Miller & Chris Butcher

Questions and answers not taken during lecture and answered post-lecture.

### **Q1 A problem for me is that having watched the film, I still do not understand ‘rosebud’?**

I’m going to assume that you didn’t fall asleep for the last five minutes of the film and miss the ‘reveal’ of what rosebud is (although don’t feel bad if you did, you wouldn’t be the first to do that).

If your issue is more that you did not feel the film explained what ‘rosebud’ was meant to represent, then hopefully that may have been partially explained in the lecture. Welles wants us to think about how Kane’s personality is shaped by events in his childhood. Kane’s memories of ‘rosebud’ take him back to a time in his life before all the disappointments and challenges of adulthood, but also specifically to a traumatic event – being separated from his parents in the scene where ‘rosebud’ first appears in the film.

Depending on your own views on the film, you might find that too simplistic and trite (a whole life explained by one object and one memory) or you might think that Welles perhaps doesn’t really want us to get too hung up on ‘rosebud’ and to just see it as one more piece in the complicated jigsaw that makes up the story of Kane’s life. Nobody manages to piece the whole thing together and ultimately he remains a mystery.

There is a very good exploration of rosebud’s meaning (including one very rude suggestion apparently put forward by Welles himself) in this article –  
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/25/citizen-kane-rosebud>

### **Q2 Is it based on a novel?**

The short answer is no. I find it interesting and surprising that it isn’t though. Or at least that he didn’t choose to do an adaptation of a stage play or some other secondary source.

Welles was only 25 when he made Kane, but he’d already had a successful few years producing and acting in theatre and radio. Quite a lot of those productions were adaptations or standards (e.g. Macbeth and Julius Caesar on stage, Sherlock Holmes and, infamously, War of the Worlds on radio. Many first-time feature film directors go back to their earlier successes in other media, perhaps short films they had made before, to take the pressure off working on a big budget movie.

Not Welles though. In addition to negotiating a unique contract which gave him total control over the shoot and the edit with no studio interference at all, he also co-wrote an original script. In fact, the only Academy Award won by Citizen Kane was for Best Original Screenplay. There is an interesting twist to that too, however. A lot of film history has seen Welles as the sole driving force behind Kane, directing, starring, writing. Starting in the 1970s, however, some critics began to question this, citing his co-writer Herman J Mankiewicz as being crucial to the film and potentially even the originator of the story.

Later this year, a new film comes out called 'Mank' directed by David Fincher (of Seven and The Social Network), which will tell the story of the (supposed?) battle between Mankiewicz and Welles – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mank>.

### Q3 How did Welles' theatre experience influence 'Citizen Kane'?

I'm glad you asked this because I had about 15 minutes worth of notes that I never got round to using. In summary form, I'd point to:-

**The Mercury Players** – if you look at the closing credits of Citizen Kane, there is a title card that says most of the 'principal players' are new to motion pictures. Welles brought across with him several actors, including Joseph Cotton, Agnes Moorhead and Everett Sloane, who he work with first on stage and / or on his radio productions. The producer John Houseman also came to Hollywood with Welles and was influential in the development of Kane and even composer Bernard Herman (who went on to work with Hitchcock and many others) worked on Welles' radio shows. All of this, I think, gives Kane and the following film, Magnificent Ambersons the feel of a theatre repertory company. Welles even makes a big deal of introducing them in the credits.

**Confidence and artistic freedom** – Welles negotiated for himself an extraordinary contract which gave him complete control over the making of Citizen Kane, with no real interference or even oversight from the studio. I don't think he'd have had the confidence to do this or been allowed to do this had he not been so successful on stage and on radio previously.

**Style** – Many of the design and lighting effects in Kane are similar to theatrical effects which Welles had used previously. There are photographs from some of Welles' productions, in particular Julius Caesar which was performed in modern dress military uniforms, where the settings look very similar to stills from Kane in the way they are lit, or the way the actors are positioned.

**Scenes in theatres** – Welles clearly has a firm understanding of the architecture and layout of theatres. In the Gettys speech scene, we see Kane on the impressive stage of Madison Square Garden, with its vast auditorium (all a reconstructed set of course, not on location) and then we see Gettys up in the balcony looking down on him. Welles has thought carefully about the viewpoints in a theatre. Even more obviously, in the Susan Oliver opera scenes, we see into the prompt corner, into the orchestra pit, lots of cut aways to the auditorium and even at one point, the camera pans up slowly into the ropes and pulleys that work the scenery to find two stage hands standing on a gantry, giving an instant 'review' of the performance they are watching below them.

**The New Deal** – In the lecture, we touched a little bit on Welles’ politics. A lot of his theatre work was supported by funding programmes associated with Roosevelt’s New Deal, a progressive, democratic approach to public art which encouraged inclusive work. Welles, for example, staged a production of Macbeth featuring a cast entirely of Black actors. The character of Kane is more ambiguous in his politics than Welles, but he can be seen at times as a democrat or a ‘man of the people’. Certainly, William Randolph Hearst viewed Kane with suspicion not only because of the probable depiction of himself, but also because he distrusted Welles’ background in progressive theatre.

**Too Much Johnson** – This is a particularly interesting footnote and I’d recommend looking into this further. We tend to think of Citizen Kane as Welles’ first film, and of course it is his first completed and distributed feature film. But it is not his first step into film making. In 1938, he produced a play, derived from an 1890s farce, called Too Much Johnson. Ever the innovator, Welles decided to incorporate the film into the theatrical production, ‘cutting’, as it were, between the action on stage and the action on screen. Welles was not the first to do this but it was one of the more ambitious attempts. Welles shot well over an hour of film for this purpose, and much of it has been recovered, restored and can be readily found on DVD and YouTube. Joseph Cotton, who goes on to star in Kane, is also the star of Too Much Johnson. It is well worth watching, partly because it also demonstrates Welles’ interest in experimenting and his taste for pastiche and nostalgia. Although it was made in 1938, TMJ adopts the style of a Keystone Cops silent movie of 20 years before, closer to the spirit of the turn of the century play it accompanies.

The whole episode has an unfortunate ending however. When Welles came to the dress rehearsals for the play, it became clear that the theatre they were in had ceilings that were too low to accommodate a projector, so they had to go ahead and open the play without any of the filmed segments. Needless to say, the resulting stage show was an incomprehensible mess without the connecting filmed scenes and it closed pretty quickly to stinking reviews!

Welles and the Mercury Theatre – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercury\\_Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercury_Theatre)

Too Much Johnson – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dkC8vG4x54>