**13 Classic Facts About**

***Citizen Kane***

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All art is subjective, and it’s therefore perhaps pointless to argue over which movie is the “greatest” ever made. We still argue, though. And when discussing the best film ever made, there is, remarkably, an apparently universal answer. Roger Ebert used to joke that *Citizen Kane* is [“the official answer”](http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/whats-your-favorite-movie) to the question “What’s the greatest film of all time?”—and it’s easy to see why. In the nearly eight decades (it turns 75 years old today) since its release, *Citizen Kane* has remained one of the clearest expressions of creative freedom and artistic innovation ever put on film. Its co-writer, director, producer and star—Orson Welles—was granted an incredible amount of control over its production, and he put it to good use, setting new standards for cinematography, makeup effects, and storytelling on the big screen.

If much of what we see now in *Citizen Kane* seems commonplace in the landscape of cinema, it’s because this is the film that set the precedent. If much of how we view auteurs in film now seems clichéd, it’s because Welles got there first. When stating the importance of *Citizen Kane*, Ebert said it best: “It consolidated the film language up until 1941 and broke new ground in such areas as deep focus, complex sound, and narrative structure.”

So, in celebration of the “official” Greatest Film of All Time, here are 13 facts about *Citizen Kane*.

**1. ORSON WELLES GOT UNPRECEDENTED CREATIVE CONTROL.**

By the time he came to Hollywood, Orson Welles was regarded as one of the great young geniuses of his time. His work in the theater earned him the cover of *TIME* magazine by the age of 23, and the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*—arguably the first “mockumentary” ever made—caused such a national panic that he was forced to apologize for it. It was no surprise when Hollywood began seeking his talents, but what was surprising was just how much freedom he was given.

When George Schaefer, the head of RKO Pictures, was hoping to generate a creative shakeup at his studio, he signed a deal with Welles that granted the wunderkind direct access to Schaefer himself and, among other things, gave Welles final cut on his films. Because Welles was a first-time film director, the move generated immense controversy in Hollywood, particularly when Schaefer cut the salaries of RKO employees while still granting Welles creative freedom over his work.

**2. WELLES’ FIRST IDEA WAS AN ADAPTATION OF *HEART OF DARKNESS*.**

When Welles was granted his ambitious RKO movie deal, his initial plan was to make an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s classic novel *Heart of Darkness*, featuring first-person camera techniques, elaborate sets, and Welles’ own narration. Though production got far enough that [test footage was shot](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmw68sw7AIE&list=PLhgNUe4nxSOM9fUpVuOuTU864Gi8EaiuW) featuring miniature set designs, RKO ultimately shut the movie down because the budget grew too high. In searching for an alternate project, Welles happened upon a massive screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz called *American*. After several rewrites, this screenplay would become *Citizen Kane*.

**3. AUTHORSHIP OF THE SCRIPT IS STILL DISPUTED.**

In the end, both Mankiewicz and Welles would win an Academy Award for the screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, but it’s [still not entirely clear](http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=27624) how much work each man did on the final product. Welles once claimed that Mankiewicz was responsible for the first two drafts, while he had significant input on the third. A contract signed by Mankiewicz apparently stipulated that the studio was allowed to omit his name on the script, while a Screen Writers Guild rule at the time stated that a producer (in this case, Welles) could not be given a writing credit unless he wrote the script “entirely without the collaboration of any other writer.” In the end, the two parties agreed to share credit.

**4. WELLES WAS INSPIRED BY WATCHING *STAGECOACH*.**

At the beginning of filming *Citizen Kane*, Welles was an acclaimed theater and radio director with no real experience in cinema. In an effort to learn the ropes of a new craft, Welles turned to one of the most acclaimed films of the day: John Ford’s iconic Western *Stagecoach*. He once claimed he watched the film “every night for a month” in an effort to dissect the craft behind its production, and when asked to name his cinematic influences, he once [gave the following answer](http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/71643%7C0/Behind-the-Camera.html): "The old masters, by who I mean John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford."

**5. WELLES’ EATING AND DRINKING HABITS IMPACTED HIS HEALTH DURING PRODUCTION.**

Though he was not yet famous for the excesses that would [make him notorious](http://mentalfloss.com/article/63782/celebrate-orson-welles-100th-cold-glass-paul-masson-champagne) later in life, Welles nonetheless had some peculiar eating and drinking habits during the production of *Citizen Kane*. His habit of consuming more than 30 cups of coffee each day led him to succumb to caffeine poisoning. He switched to tea, believing that the time it took to make each cup would slow him down, but having an assistant make it for him meant that he drank so much his skin changed color. In addition, Welles would sometimes simply not eat for long stretches, then sit down to a meal that included [“three large steaks with side items.”](http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/71643%7C0/Behind-the-Camera.html)

**6. THE MAKEUP EFFECTS WERE MADE BY A NON-UNION EXPERIMENTER.**

Throughout the course of the film, Charles Foster Kane has to look, at various times, impossibly youthful and very, very old. Welles once recalled that, for the scenes of Kane’s early years, his face was “yanked up with fish skin” to give him a youthful look, even at 25, that’s “impossible in real life.” For the scenes of Kane’s later years, he turned to Maurice Seiderman, an aspiring (non-union) makeup artist who was, at the time, sweeping the floors in the RKO makeup department. Welles noticed that Seiderman was using his spare time experimenting with latex to create artificial face appliances and, impressed with his ingenuity, asking him to work on *Citizen Kane*. Latex face appliances are now common practice in movie makeup effects.

**7. THE CINEMATOGRAPHY WAS REVOLUTIONARY.**

If any name can rival Welles’ in discussing the making of *Citizen Kane*, it is that of Gregg Toland, the iconic cinematographer who turned the film into an exercise in cinematic innovation. According to Welles, Toland actually approached him and volunteered to shoot the film. When Welles said “I don’t know anything about movies,” Toland replied: “That’s why I want to do it, because I think if you’re left alone as much as possible, we’re going to have a movie that looks different. I’m tired of working with people who know too much about it.”

So, the pair got to work, and Toland was given the freedom he so craved. He modified cameras and lenses to create the film’s famous [“deep focus”](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/89/Citizen-Kane/articles.html#02)shots. He worked with visual effects expert Linwood Dunn to create masterful composite shots (the scene in which Kane discovers Susan Alexander’s suicide attempt, for example, isn’t just one shot, but [three shots stacked atop one another](https://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1203-Summer-2012/Screening-Room-William-Friedkin.aspx)). He stretched muslin over the tops of sets to allow the ceilings to be visible while microphones could also be placed above the actors, and he and Welles famously chopped holes into the floors to allow for even lower camera angles. All of these elements combine to make *Citizen Kane* a master class in cinematography, and an example of every camera trick of the era finally combined into a single film. As Welles would later put it: “In this case I had a cameraman who didn’t care if he was criticized if he failed, and I didn’t know that there were things you couldn’t do. So anything that I could think up in my dreams, I attempted to photograph.”

**8. WELLES WAS INJURED TWICE DURING FILMING.**

Welles’ commitment to his performance as Charles Foster Kane meant that he poured tremendous energy into the role, sometimes at the risk of his own wellbeing. During the scene in which Kane rampages through Susan’s room, smashing furniture and ripping things off the walls, he badly [cut his left hand](http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/71643%7C0/Behind-the-Camera.html). Then, during the scene in which Kane confronts Boss Jim Gettys (Ray Collins) on a staircase, Welles fell and injured his ankle so badly that he was forced to reschedule certain scenes and direct the film from a wheelchair for several days.

**9. WELLES DID MAGIC TRICKS TO DISTRACT STUDIO EXECUTIVES.**

Though he’d been granted incredible creative freedom to make the film, Welles still had to answer to studio executives who wanted the film to turn a profit, and was apparently worried they wouldn’t approve of the often innovative nature of his production. For the “News of the World” newsreel sequence, he even went so far as to [claim the footage shot was just “tests,”](http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=27624) so the RKO office wouldn’t worry about it.

When RKO executives actually did visit the production, Welles used his natural flair for showmanship to distract them. According to Seiderman, the crew was told during these occasions: “Don’t do anything. Smoke cigarettes and talk.” Meanwhile, Welles would perform card tricks for executives until they left.

“He would invite us over but he’d keep us outside the screening and then do tricks and stuff to amuse us,” George Schaefer’s then-assistant Reginald Armour recalled.

**10. IT CONTAINS PTERODACTYLS.**

Though he had massive creative freedom on the film, Welles also still had a budget, and as a result certain creative shortcuts were used to reduce cost on *Citizen Kane*. In one instance, a scene between Kane and Susan that was originally intended to take place in an ornate Xanadu living room was instead shot in a redressed hallway. In another, the production got even more creative: For the scene in which Kane and his entourage visit the beach, the large birds flying in the background are actually a [previously created shot of pterodactyls](http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/71643%7C0/Behind-the-Camera.html) from either *King Kong* (1933) or *Son of Kong* (1933).

**11. IT LAUNCHED MANY FILM CAREERS.**

Because he had worked for many years with the Mercury Theatre Company (which he co-founded with John Houseman), it was Welles’ natural inclination to include his theatrical collaborators in *Citizen Kane*. Among the actors making their cinema debuts are Mercury players Joseph Cotten (Jedediah Leland), Everett Sloane (Mr. Bernstein), Agnes Moorehead (Mary Kane), and Ray Collins (Jim Gettys).

**12. WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST TRIED TO KEEP IT OUT OF THEATERS.**

Even before its release, rumors swirled that Charles Foster Kane and his life story were based on the life of media baron William Randolph Hearst, one of the most powerful men in America at the time. Like Kane, Hearst built a massive California palace and stocked it with exotic animals. Like Hearst, Kane fell in love with a performer and became a sort of patron to her (in the film it’s Susan Alexander; in real life it was Marion Davies). One Kane line in particular—“You provide the prose poems; I’ll provide the war”—seemed to be directly lifted from a famous Hearst quote: “You furnish the pictures. I’ll furnish the war.” There’s even [a popular legend](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/89/Citizen-Kane/articles.html#02) that the film’s inciting MacGuffin, “Rosebud,” was inspired by a pet name for a portion of Davies’, um, anatomy.

Though he denied the film was based on Hearst at the time, Welles would later say: “I thought we were very unfair to Marion Davies, because we had somebody very different in the place of Marion Davies, and it seemed to me to be something of a dirty trick, and does still strike me as being something of a dirty trick, what we did to her. And I anticipated the trouble from Hearst for that reason.” He would later [effusively praise Davies in the foreword to her memoir](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/89/Citizen-Kane/articles.html#02).

Louella Parsons, a Hearst columnist and tremendously influential media figure at the time, requested a private screening of the film prior to its release. According to post-production sound engineer James G. Stewart, Parsons left, “outraged,” before the film even ended. (Her chauffeur, who stayed until the end, called it a “very good picture.”) Parsons then began demanding to speak to Schaefer, claiming that RKO Pictures would face “the most beautiful lawsuit in history” if the film was released. Editor Robert Wise was then asked to screen the film for the heads of all the other major studios of the day, as they all feared Hearst’s influence and worried that the film’s release would impact all of Hollywood if it incurred the full measure of his wrath.

Hearst’s vast newspaper empire banned all advertising of *Citizen Kane*, and numerous theater chains refused to show it, contributing to its eventual financial failure at the box office. Welles once claimed that the retribution grew so vicious that he was warned by a policeman that “an underage girl, undressed, and photographers” were waiting for him in his hotel room, so he simply abandoned the room and left town.

**13. STEVEN SPIELBERG OWNS “ROSEBUD.”**

The film hinges on the word “Rosebud,” and on a group of reporters attempting to find out why it was Charles Foster Kane’s last word. It’s eventually revealed that “Rosebud” was... (Sorry kiddos) This plot device is among the most iconic in cinema history, and has been parodied in everything from *The Simpsons* to *Family Guy*. In 1982, one of the “Rosebud” ??? was put up for auction at Sotheby’s in New York City. [The buyer was director Steven Spielberg.](http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/89/Citizen-Kane/articles.html#02) Though some of the -- were burned during the *Citizen Kane* production as part of the final scene, it’s still unclear if Spielberg’s copy is the only one remaining.

Additional Sources:  
*The Complete Citizen Kane* (1991) *The Making of Citizen Kane*, by Robert L. Carringer