

Citizen Welles



The news of Orson Welles reached me when I was in Moscow. He had appeared on the New York scene in *Panic*, a play written by Archibald McLeish and directed by John Houseman. According to the letters of my more faithful friends (the less faithful being under the impression that the mere act of writing letters to anyone living in Moscow carried with it some dark and nameless risk), and the press-clippings they enclosed, *Panic* was a fine play and Houseman a great director, but Orson Welles was the wonder of the New York theatrical world. Leaving aside the judgments on the play and the director, they seem to have been right about Welles.

Moscow is a curious place in which to hear such things. Wonders are plentiful there—theatrical ones being very definitely not excluded, and I received the news with moderate interest. But it left an impression that something very personal had happened in the American theatre, and it is from this impression that I now write of him and his work.

To create this personal impact is one of his special gifts. That he has acquired an almost violently professional mastery of it is an even greater gift. No pretentiously shy Saroyan courtship of an audience about Welles! He really loves his relation to the public. He doesn't flirt with it.

The public was developing a lively sense of this relation when I returned to America in 1935. He and Mr. Houseman had seized upon the interest they had aroused by their collaboration in *Panic*, and by various means—radio was one of them—had provoked and strengthened it to a point where their every move in the theatre was preceded and followed by a positive, if disturbing, reaction. Before long, they had marched into the arena of the Federal Theatre in full battle array, and when it was announced that they would direct and produce *Macbeth* for this vigorous organization, with a Negro cast, at least one event in the New York theatre promised to be as dramatic as the theatre everywhere should be.