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psychiatry in the movies

Fraud at the polls: Charles Foster Kane defeated

Peter Byrne

Jerry Seinfeld has no time for Olympic Silver winners: 'of all the losers, he was the best loser'. After 5 decades at the top of *Sight and Sound's* 10 yearly critics' poll, Orson Welles' first film has been beaten into second place. Ignore the hyperbolic (i.e. lying) headline above: *Vertigo* (1958) is a convincing winner, though not in the directors' poll where *Citizen Kane* achieves a respectable second place to Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. But leave talk of second best to Shakespeare's beds. A masterpiece has not been devalued and Welles' authority is undiminished. *Citizen Kane* grandstands the life of Charles Foster Kane – from boy to legend to lonely old man, though not in that order. The story unfolds through conventional dramatic scenes, stylish flashbacks, contemporary newsreel (many complained of its scratches and hisses – Welles deliberately dragged original prints of this section across the floor), 'talking heads' to reporter Thompson, and montages of headlines, stills and film. Many of the performances are at once film debuts and career bests. Alongside intense human interest, mysteries abound: Rosebud? Why the angry young man? Benevolent democrat (Democrat even) or demagogic narcissist? Does wealth corrupt him or the purposelessness of his power? Set aside its technical mastery, and the film still deserves repeated viewing to establish where the Truth lies. Its insights into the uses and abuses of media invoke the Leveson Inquiry.

Welles made his name with theatre productions of Shakespeare's better known tragedies, but his protagonist – as written and acted by him – owes much to *Coriolanus*. He is the patriarch who will speak for the people. Outside of Shakespeare, few dramas have successfully interwoven the political with the personal. The idea to pastiche the life of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst was co-writer Mank's (Herman J. Mankiewicz). Mank and Welles won the film's only Oscar. On Hearst's instructions, all nine of the film's nominations were booed at the Awards ceremony. Welles shared the final title credit as director with his cinematographer Greg Toland, where most stills from this film could hang proudly on a gallery wall. The fourth creative talent (of many) is editor Robert Wise, best known for directing the *Sound of Music* (1965). Conflicting claims about original ideas' ownership followed: Rosebud was Mank's first bicycle.

The question remains as to how a story this sad can be projected so beautifully. A voiceover tells us Kane loses his estranged wife and only son in a car accident. Feel-good cinema trades on nostalgia, but Kane explores attachment and loss, and the lies we tell ourselves before acting them out. Kane channelled his frustrations into Kane the Art Collector. The abandoned Art pieces of his Xanadu Palace are among the closing visual images, recalling Yeats:

'Players and painted stage took all my Love
And not those things that they were Emblems of.'

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