



Hollywood, California. 10 October 1985. Evening. Orson Welles, the American actor, activist, filmmaker, visual artist, director, and writer, creator of perhaps the greatest film of all time, *Citizen Kane*, is alone in his home. His heart has stopped.

We enter his mind in this moment, on the threshold between life and death. In the bardo Orson's thoughts unspool as a stream of consciousness that loops back on itself, like a mobius strip. Those thoughts are articulated by three avatars: the first (Omar Mulero) represents the past, the memory of his youthful wunderkind self; the second (Robert Frankenberry) represents Welles' vestigial self-image as a swashbuckling mid-career artist, bemused to find himself crumpled on the floor in his bathrobe, dying; the last (Robert Orth), represents Welles' spirit, "out of time"—what Heidegger called an "ecstase."

We sit beside Welles as he weighs his life and gradually comes to terms with his own death. The 60-minute narrative arc is a psychological, emotional, and spiritual one that begins in the echoes of his heart's final beats and ends with the sound of his footsteps as he makes his existential exit. We hear what he hears, and, in the filmed and staged versions of *Orson Rehearsed*, we see what he sees—three sixty-minute films counterpoint the onstage and filmic action of his avatars' monologues. The final result is *Orson Rehearsed*, a film within a staged opera within the film called *Orson Rehearsed* taking place within Orson Welles' dying mind.

On its face, the piece consists of a series of essays about how opera and film overlap. Digging deeper, it examines the relationship between an actor and the roles he inhabits—Falstaff, Othello, Brutus, Ahab, Kane, Quinlin, and, in his "greatest prestidigitation," himself.

Deeper still, it is a survey of the real and imagined failures of Welles' life: from the loss of his mother at the age of eight to the accidental drowning of Manuel "Jacaré" Olimpio Meira during the filming of *It's All True*; the pain of his repeated loss of creative control in the editing of *Magnificent Ambersons*, *Touch of Evil*; his humiliation in "starting at the top" with *Citizen Kane* and ending up earning "grocery money" doing wine commercials.

Deeper still, there is the consolation of a life fully lived—the giddy joy of careening across Manhattan in a rented ambulance (to better cut through traffic) at the top of his game on his way to the War of the Worlds radio broadcast, the tender recollection of his wife Rita Hayworth, and fatherhood.

A passionate social activist, Welles' last thoughts are of the future: with the foresight available only to the dead, he mourns his country as the words of a xenophobic reality television president are intercut with Emma Lazarus' paean to liberty. But the body gives out even though the spirit's still willing: it is no longer Welles' problem, it is ours. His avatars join together in a secular hymn: "Our songs will all be silenced," they sing, "but what of it? Go on singing. Go on. Go." And he does. We do.

## ORSON REHEARSED

*The Final Thoughts of Orson Welles*

Duration: 60 minutes

Release: 2020/21

Color and Black and White

Starring Robert Orth, Robert Frankenberry, Robert Orth

Producers: Burning Sled Media & The Chicago College of the Performing Arts

A New Mercury Collective Production

Conceived, Composed, Written, and Directed by Daron Hagen

Featuring The Fifth House Ensemble, conducted by Roger Zahab

Film Website: [www.orsonrehearsed.art](http://www.orsonrehearsed.art)

Producer Website: [www.burningsled.org](http://www.burningsled.org)

Soundtrack: NAXOS Records (February 2021 release)

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