

Herman J. Mankiewicz—Screenwriter of *Citizen Kane*

Herman Jacob Mankiewicz was born in New York City on November 7, 1897. The eldest of three children (the youngest of whom, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, would also grow up to become a legendary screenwriter, director and producer) of German-Jewish immigrants, Herman was raised in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and later attended Columbia University.

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Scenes from *Citizen Kane*



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He graduated in 1917 and, after spending several years in the military, became the director of the American Red Cross press service in Paris. After leaving that position, Mankiewicz joined the *Chicago Tribune* as a Berlin-based foreign correspondent and acted as a press agent for legendary dancer Isadora Duncan. Returning to the U.S. in the early 1920s, Herman became a reporter for the *New York World*, contributed pieces to *Vanity Fair*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and other magazines, and began working in the theatre, co-writing a revue called *Round the Town* with (among others) Dorothy Parker

and Robert E. Sherwood, as well as the plays *The Good Fellows* (with George S. Kaufman) and *The Wild Man of Borneo* (with Marc Connelly). From 1923 to 1926, he was a drama critic at *The New York Times* and was the theatre critic for the newly founded *The New Yorker* magazine from June 1925 to January 1926. Possessed of a sardonic sense of humor, “Mank” earned a reputation as an expert raconteur with a riotously acid tongue.

In 1926, Mankiewicz was hired to work on the screenplay for *The Road to Mandalay*, a Lon Chaney-starrer being produced at MGM. The picture was a hit, and soon after

Herman was hired as a contract writer, first at Paramount and then later at MGM, Columbia, and other studios, concocting stories and titles for films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1928) and *The Canary Murder Case* (1929). When sound arrived, Herman’s sharp wit served him in good stead as he created scintillating dialogue for films such as *The Royal Family of Broadway* (1930), *The Lost Squadron* (1932), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *It’s a Wonderful World* (1939), and (uncredited) *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Comrade X* (1940). He also served as a (uncredited) producer on the Marx Brothers classics *Monkey Business*

(1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *Duck Soup* (1933), as well as W.C. Fields' *Million Dollar Legs* (1932).

Although he was initially quite successful, Herman's career suffered as he wrestled with a passel of personal problems, including an addiction to alcohol and gambling, that cost him a number of jobs. Mank's wicked sense of humor also got him in trouble on more than one occasion. (Most famously, he once lost a gig at Columbia when, after hearing studio head Harry Cohn say that he could tell if a movie was good or not based on how much he squirmed in his seat while watching it, Mankiewicz couldn't help but crack "Imagine, the whole world wired to Harry Cohn's ass.") By 1940, Herman was down on his luck and looking for work. Taking a huge cut in pay and prestige, he accepted an offer to write for *The Campbell Playhouse*, the successor program to *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, the radio arm of the renowned Mercury Theatre, a revolutionary theatrical company headed by producer John Houseman and his partner—a young actor, director and magician named Orson Welles.

Only 25, Welles had already taken Broadway by storm with his innovative productions of *Macbeth* (with an all-black cast), *Julius Caesar* (with an anti-fascist theme), and Marc Blitzstein's pro-labor opera *The Cradle Will Rock*. Welles, also the star of the popular radio series *The Shadow*, had recently created a nationwide sensation with Mercury Theatre's October 30, 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*. The program, structured as a series of news bulletins interrupting a music program, was mistaken for reports of a real invasion by a large portion of the listening audience. The panic and publicity generated by the broadcast caught the attention of Hollywood, and RKO President George Schaefer offered Welles an unprecedented two-picture contract that gave him complete artistic control over his productions. In 1939, Welles moved to Hollywood to undertake the contract and brought most of the Mercury Theatre company and the production of *The Campbell Playhouse* with him. Although Welles was the credited author of all of the program's episodes, they were actually written by a number of other writers, including Houseman and future *Casablanca*

co-scripter Howard Koch (who wrote *The War of the Worlds*). Welles and Mankiewicz had met several years earlier in New York. When Welles arrived in Hollywood, he brought Herman in to write for the show.

While Mankiewicz was working on his radio scripts, Welles focused his efforts on developing his debut film project. He initially planned to adapt Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, but when RKO turned down the project for budgetary reasons, he began working on a cinematic version of Nicholas Blake's novel *The Smiler With the Knife* instead. When the studio vetoed that project as well, Mank told Welles about an idea he had been toying with for a number of years: to do a motion-picture biography of a recently deceased figure, told from multiple perspectives—primarily those of the people in his life who had known him best. Welles liked the idea and they began casting around for a suitably larger-than-life subject. They considered a number of people, including gangster John Dillinger and evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Mankiewicz then suggested publisher William Randolph Hearst.

Born in 1863, Hearst was the heir to a vast mining fortune. In 1887, his father was given the ownership of the *San Francisco Examiner*, a struggling newspaper, as payment for a gambling debt. Having just been expelled from Harvard, the 24-year-old Hearst was looking for something to do with his life and asked his father to let him run the paper. His father agreed and Hearst soon made the *Examiner* a success by featuring sensational stories and crusading reporting with a decidedly populist slant. Upon moving to New York, Hearst began building a massive publishing empire that eventually consisted of 28 newspapers, a number of magazines and book companies, news services, and syndicates. Looking to increase his power, he served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York City and governor of New York State. Notoriously acquisitive, Hearst assembled a massive collection of art and treasures from all over the world which he housed in a spectacular castle built on the California coast near San Simeon called La Cuesta Encantada. Mankiewicz was friendly with Hearst's mistress, actress Marion Davies (for whom Hearst had founded Cosmopolitan

Pictures, an independent production company affiliated with MGM and Warner Bros.), and had attended a number of parties at Davies' Beverly Hills home and at La Cuesta Encantada at which he met and got to know Hearst, whom he found to be a fascinating figure. Welles—whose ex-wife Virginia had married Davies' nephew, screenwriter Charles Lederer—was also intrigued by Hearst and immediately sparked to Mank's suggestion that they make the publisher the subject of their "prismatic" biopic.

It was a risky choice. At the time, Hearst was one of the most powerful men in America. A pioneer of yellow journalism, Hearst—through his numerous, wide-reaching publications—wielded enormous influence over public opinion and political discourse in the United States in the first decades of the 20th century. (Many held Hearst responsible for pushing the United States into the Spanish-American War by publishing inflammatory—and at times wholly fictional—reports about Spanish atrocities in Cuba in order to pressure anti-war President McKinley into intervening in the island nation's attempts to free itself from Spain's colonial shackles.) And Hearst did not hesitate to use his considerable power to attack people he considered his enemies. Still, both Mank and Welles were excited by the prospect of tackling such an ambitious subject and decided to press on.

To keep Herman (who was notorious for losing interest in projects after a few weeks of work) focused and sober, Welles asked John Houseman to take Mankiewicz to the Campbell Ranch, a vacation resort located in the San Bernadino Mountains just outside Victorville, California. Mankiewicz and Houseman spent 12 weeks in relative seclusion at the ranch, during which Mank would spend his days working out the story with Houseman (who acted as Herman's editor and occasional co-writer—the "March of Time" material that opens the film is mostly his) and his nights dictating action and dialogue to his secretary. After 10 weeks of intensive work, Mankiewicz had produced a 400-plus-page first draft about a fictional publishing tycoon named Charles Foster Kane. The script, which Mank had titled *American*, combined Hearst's life story with bits and pieces taken from the biographies of other famous tycoons, as well as a few choice items culled from

the life of Orson Welles. (Like Kane, Welles had been unofficially adopted and raised by a wealthy guardian, and the scene in which a raging Kane destroys his wife's bedroom after she leaves him is based on a similar fit that Welles threw in front of Houseman.) Mankiewicz and Houseman spent another two weeks whitening the script down to an acceptable length, after which they returned to Hollywood and handed it over to Welles, who made a number of changes, additions and edits of his own (both with and without Herman) and then put his name on the script as co-author, with his name in first position. (Welles made a habit of claiming writing credit on all original Mercury productions even though, according to many of the people he worked with, he usually did little or no writing at all.)

Retitled *Citizen Kane*, the film went into production at the end of July 1940. As filming proceeded, Welles decided that he wanted to claim sole authorship of the screenplay. Some sources indicate that when Mankiewicz objected, Welles offered him \$10,000 to take his name off the script. Herman refused and threatened to take the fight to the Screen Writers Guild. Eventually, Welles backed down and the two agreed to share credit, with Mank in first position. The battle left a bitter taste in both men's mouths. For decades afterward, Welles would claim that he did most of the writing on *Kane*, minimizing or denying outright Mankiewicz's contributions to the project. As for Mank, he retaliated in characteristic fashion by making Welles the target of his vicious sense of humor. (He nicknamed Welles "Monstro" and once remarked, upon seeing Welles pass by, "There but for the grace of God, goes God.")

As expected, the finished film proved to be extremely controversial. When Hearst learned (after Mank, for reasons unknown, gave a copy of the script to his friend Charles Lederer, Marion Davies' nephew) that he was the basis for *Citizen Kane*, he threatened (through his intermediaries, most specifically gossip columnist Louella Parsons whose column ran in Hearst's papers) to expose the scandals and secrets of Hollywood's top stars and talent if the film were released. To avoid antagonizing the publishing magnate, a group of studio heads led by MGM's Louis B. Mayer offered RKO \$800,000 (most of which was allegedly

put up by Hearst himself) to burn all prints of the film along with its negative. When RKO President George Schaefer refused, Hearst ordered his papers not to mention *Citizen Kane* or accept any advertising for it. Since Hearst's papers covered more than half the country, this put a major crimp in RKO's ability to promote the film. Making matters worse, the other studios would not allow their theater chains to book the film. Since RKO had relatively few theaters of its own, the studio had to arrange for *Kane* to be shown in a small number of independent theaters. Because of all these problems, the film was released several months late and, while it received many good reviews, proved to be a financial disappointment. *Citizen Kane* was nominated for nine Academy Awards®, but by the time the award ceremony rolled around, the Hollywood community had so soured on the film that it won only one—for Best Original Screenplay, which Mank and Welles shared. The film soon disappeared from theaters and was quickly forgotten.

Following *Kane*, Mank went forward with his career, working on the screenplays for films such as *Rise and Shine* (1941), *The Enchanted Cottage* (1945), and *The Pride of St. Louis* (1952) and winning a second Oscar® nomination (shared with Jo Swerling) for *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942). He also continued to struggle with his personal demons, as well as with some belated retaliation from Hearst. (Following a 1943 traffic accident that the screenwriter caused, the Hearst papers mounted a smear campaign against him that was so intense that Mank finally had to appeal to the American Civil Liberties Union for relief.) Herman J. Mankiewicz died on March 5, 1953.

RKO finally re-released *Citizen Kane* in 1956, and it began appearing regularly on television and in revival houses after that. Rediscovered by audiences, critics and scholars, the film was eventually recognized as a masterpiece and has since been consistently hailed as the finest American film ever made. Simply having written the script for such a film would be reason enough to celebrate Herman J. Mankiewicz. But, the powerhouse talent and skill that allowed him to create such an amazing work—its startlingly original and complex structure, its deft characterizations,

and its brilliant dialogue—in the first place, and turn what could have been just a simple exposé into a work of art, make "Mank" a true screenwriting legend.

From Herman J. Mankiewicz's *Citizen Kane*:

INT. KANE'S OFFICE — LATE DAY

Kane, in his shirt sleeves, at a roll-top desk in the Sanctum, is working feverishly on copy and eating a very sizeable meal at the same time. Carter, still formally coated, is seated alongside him. Leland, seated in a corner, is looking on, detached, amused. The furniture has been pushed around and Kane's effects are somewhat in place. On a corner of the desk, Bernstein is writing down figures. No one pays any attention to him.

KANE

I'm not criticizing, Mr. Carter, but here's what I mean. There's a front page story in the "Chronicle," (points to it) and a picture -- of a woman in Brooklyn who is missing. Probably murdered. (looks to make sure of the name) A Mrs. Harry Silverstone. Why didn't the "Enquirer" have that this morning?

CARTER

(stiffly)

Because we're running a newspaper, Mr. Kane, not a scandal sheet.

Kane has finished eating. He pushes away his plates.

KANE

I'm still hungry, Brad. Let's go to Rector's and get something decent. (pointing to the "Chronicle" before him) The "Chronicle" has a two-column headline, Mr. Carter. Why haven't we?

CARTER

There is no news big enough.

KANE

If the headline is big enough, it makes the news big enough. 