

Cover Story:

ORSON WELLES

Shoppers in a Chicago department store at Easter, 1925, did not know that the child playing Peter Rabbit was ten year old Orson Welles from Kenosha, Wisconsin, earning his first professional fee as an actor.

Orson received \$25 a day for his "performance."

At the age of 12 he staged a school production of *Julius Caesar* and, naturally, he played three major roles in the show.

By the time he was 22, Orson Welles had gained much theatrical experience and was preparing to open his own theatre, The Mercury, in New York.

Along the way, he became involved in radio.

He had appeared frequently on the March of Time (as early as 1931) and on the Cavalcade of America and the Columbia Workshop. In the summer of 1937 Welles and a group of actors who would soon join him in the Mercury Theatre, presented a seven-part dramatization of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* over the Mutual Broadcasting System.

Earlier that year he had become the unbilled, but mysterious voice of The Shadow, radio's crimefighter who had the ability "to cloud men's minds so that they cannot see him." He was earning a considerable salary from his radio efforts.

When the Mercury Theatre opened and continued with successful theatrical productions, the Columbia Broadcasting System asked Welles to produce, in the summer of 1938, a series of Mercury

APRIL - MAY, 1984



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Theatre *radio* productions and was offered a full hour on the network every Monday evening. It was an offer he couldn't refuse.

He drew talent from his stage company and also gathered many of radio's best talents to produce a nine-week series of dramas, beginning on July 11 with a chilling version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

When the fall season began, the Mercury Theatre on the Air became a regular part of Columbia's schedule and Welles settled into a series of excellent radio dramas in which he starred, narrated, produced, directed and wrote.

The milestone broadcast, of course, for the series came on October 30, 1938 when the Mercury Theatre production of H. G. Wells' *The War of The Worlds* was broadcast.

Orson Welles' version was the story of the invasion of Martians as a *happening event*, with newsmen covering the action as it unfolded. The rest is history. Listen-

ers believed that men from Mars had indeed landed in Grover's Mill, New Jersey and that the world was doomed to die at the hands of the invaders.

There was panic during the program and public uproar after the broadcast when America learned that it was only a radio drama but, when the dust settled, the name Orson Welles was a household word and the sustaining series had a sponsor, Campbell Soups. The series continued until 1940 as the Campbell Playhouse.

A 30-minute version of the Mercury Theatre surfaced on CBS in 1941 for Lady Esther products as the Orson Welles Theatre and this continued until 1943. In 1947, the Mercury Players were on the air for Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in a summer series.

Over the years, Orson Welles contributed much to radio.

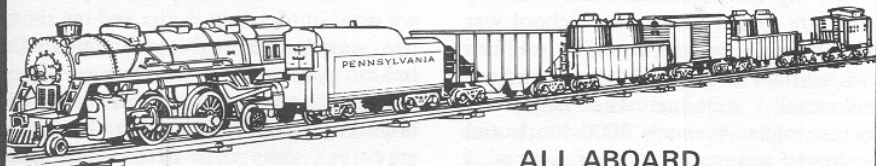
He was a frequent guest on many dramatic and comedy programs, often on radio's outstanding theatre of thrills, Suspense. During Columbia's This Is My Best series (1944-1946), Welles occasionally appeared as star and, for a brief period, as producer, director and narrator. In 1950 he starred as Harry Lime in The Third Man, a syndicated series; and in 1952 was heard over the Mutual Broadcasting System in the BBC production of The Black Museum.

In 1955, Orson Welles was heard on NBC as Professor Moriarty in the BBC production of Sherlock Holmes which starred Sir John Gielgud and Sir Ralph Richardson as Holmes and Watson.

A Salute to Orson Welles will be presented on Those Were The Days on Saturday, May 5th.

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