

ORSON WELLES and the

BY TERRY BAKER

It's hard to believe that fifty years have passed since Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater played their own Halloween prank on our nation, causing thousands of Americans to flee to the streets in panic.

"The War of the Worlds" was one of, if not the most remembered radio program in history. Just what was it about this broadcast that caused such an impact? The story certainly wasn't new. H.G. Wells had written it some forty years previous. But oftentimes it's not necessarily the story but when and how it's told that determines one's reaction.

On this occasion all the elements were in place and the results were incredible. In October of 1938, America was a nation unsure of itself, unsure of where the world was heading. Too many events were happening that we were unable to control. Economic conditions in the country were slowly improving but 10 million Americans were still out of work. In September mother nature showed us how vulnerable we are as a violent hurricane pummeled the East Coast without warning, causing 600 deaths and \$400 million in damages. Then of course there was that madman in Europe who seemed to be grabbing all the news headlines those days.

All throughout September, Americans listening to their radios constantly heard their programs interrupted by bulletins bringing the latest news from Europe. We heard our allies give in and allow Hitler to annex Czechoslovakia without a shot being fired. We still felt that any war in Europe should remain "over there" and not concern us but it was apparent to many that Hitler was not going to stop there. He had plans for world domination and though

we didn't want to fight him, we might not have a choice. Americans were scared about their future and now Orson Welles would make them scared about the present.

Welles made his first mark in radio in 1935 performing on the CBS series "The March of Time". The show sounded just like a Movietone newsreel as actors dramatized current news events. Orson was often called on to portray several different characters in each episode. Other actors were amazed at Orson's range as he could go from playing a 20 year-old man one minute to a 60 year-old man the next and sound convincing in both roles.

Orson continued with "The March of Time" until 1936 and the following year took the role of Lamont Cranston in the Mutual drama series "The Shadow". A show about a man who could make himself invisible to fight villains was not meant to be taken seriously and it afforded Welles and the other actors a chance to ham it up just a bit. This made the show fun to do and also gave it a different sound that made it quite popular with listeners at home.

Besides the money (about \$1,000 a week) and the artistic challenge of radio, Orson liked it because it didn't take up much time from his theater work. It was not uncommon for Orson to do a radio show, go to the theater for his evening performance and return in costume to the studio for the show's West Coast broadcast.

The Mercury Theatre had also been doing quite well. Orson's reputation as an actor/director had continued to grow. When Welles left "The Shadow" after one season, CBS executives sought to capitalize on his popularity and offered him his own program.

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The show would be called "The Mercury Theatre On the Air" and Welles would produce, direct, narrate and star in a series of one-hour dramatic presentations. To assist him, Orson called on several members of his theater cast. They included Kenny Delmar, Agnes Moorehead, Joseph Cotton, Karl Swenson and Ray Collins. John Houseman became the show's editor and Howard Koch (later to be co-author of "Casablanca") was soon added to write the programs initial scripts.

CBS would have final approval of these scripts but Orson would have the freedom to put on any performance he chose. But CBS also wanted Orson to be completely responsible for any trouble that might result from one of his broadcasts. Orson's attorney, Arnold Weissberger was shocked when he saw the contract that CBS wanted Welles to sign. Orson should be respon-

sible for any case of liable or plagiarism but since CBS had final script approval, they, not he, should be responsible for any other problems that might arise. CBS wanted Orson bad enough to agree to this change. How important this would be to become apparent in a few months.

The show made its debut on Monday night, July 11, 1938. Orson chose Bram Stoker's "Dracula" as the work for the initial broadcast. Welles not only narrated the story but also played the lead and one other character as well. The show was well received and after its nine-week trial run, CBS renewed the program for another year.

The show returned on September 11 with a new time slot. CBS had given them the worst spot on the schedule, Sunday night going against Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, the nation's number-

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one rated show. With such stiff competition they couldn't attract a sponsor so they had to go on the air as a sustaining program.

Each week's production was brilliantly done but very few people knew about them. They just could not attract an audience and after just seven weeks into the new season they trailed Edgar Bergen in the ratings by roughly an 11 to 1 margin. Things were not looking up when Welles chose to do an update of H.G. Wells, "The War of the Worlds" for their Halloween Eve broadcast.

H.G. Wells' story about a Martian invasion of the English countryside did not lend itself well to adaptation. Except for the invasion itself, there was very little writer Howard Koch could use in his version. He would have to write virtually an entirely new radio play in six days. He called Houseman asking if he could do another story. Houseman checked with Orson (who was in rehearsal for a play) and phoned back. The answer was no, this was Orson's pet project. Houseman did offer to come over and help Koch if needed.

To give listeners something to identify themselves with, Koch decided to have the story take place in New Jersey. The Monday before the broadcast as Koch was driving to see relatives he realized that he had no knowledge of the state's layout. To give the story credibility he would have to use the names of actual cities and towns. He quickly pulled into a gas station and picked up a map.

When he returned to New York the next day, he laid out the map on his desk, closed his eyes and dropped a pencil. Wherever it landed would be the sight of the invasion. If fell on the small town of Grover's Mill. Koch was pleased. Not only did the name sound real but also the town was just a few miles from Princeton University. Princeton had an observatory which would play a key role in the story that Koch began to develop.

Koch had chosen to tell the story as though it was an actual event. A program of live music would be interrupted by news bulletins. First reports would tell of unusual occurrences on the planet Mars. The scene then shifted to Princeton where noted astronomer Professor Richard Pierson (played by Welles) gave his explanation of these events. Next would come eyewitness accounts describing the Martian landing craft and the destruction that they were causing. Both Koch and actor Frank Readick (who would portray reporter Carl Phillips) looked to Herb Morrison's broadcast of the Hindenburg disaster as the model that they would try to emulate.

The story moved quickly from here. The Martians started by splitting New Jersey in half, cutting communication and transportation lines along the way. Naturally the surrounding counties were placed under martial law and the entire CBS network gave control of their broadcast facilities over to the state militia. What followed was the worst military defeat in American history. Within a matter of minutes our nation's entire defense system was wiped out by a handful of Martian machines!

Invaders were now landing in all the major cities and there was nothing to stop them. The broadcast returned to New York where the announcer described the panic unfolding on the streets below until he succumbed to the poisonous gas floating over the city. The final act had Professor Pierson (who somehow survived the attack) walking through the streets, observing the destruction and wondering what was left of the world. He closed the story by revealing how the Martians were finally defeated (they were killed off by earth bacteria).

Koch nearly had a nervous breakdown working on this script. Both he and Houseman worked 36 hours straight to finish the initial draft the Wednesday before the broadcast.

The next morning the entire cast (except for Welles) got together for their first



rehearsal. As was customary, the rehearsal was recorded and played back for Orson that evening at his office. No one was pleased with the results. The story was just plain dull. Welles and crew worked throughout the night, intensifying news bulletins and increasing the use of names and details to give a greater sense of realism to the broadcast.

On Friday afternoon, CBS censors approved the revised script with some twenty-seven minor changes. They mostly concerned substituting phony names and places for real ones such as using the Park Plaza instead of the Hotel Biltmore. There was only one change that Welles did not completely comply with.

One point in the story called for President Roosevelt to address the nation. CBS would not allow this but would let them use some lower ranking government official such as the Secretary of the Interior. No one knew what he sounded like and since Kenny Delmar had been working on his FDR impersonation for days, Welles let him do it on the air. Although the announcer clearly stated the Secretary of the Interior was speaking, listeners heard

the voice of their President. Houseman would say later that he thought "this was the one naughty thing they did" during the broadcast.

Welles continued to make script changes right up to air time Sunday night. Instead of emphasizing the news reports during the early part of the show, Orson stretched out the musical portions. He wanted the show to start slowly. Listeners would no sooner hear a news flash than the orchestra would resume playing and the tension would begin mounting. Once the Martians landed the story would speed up dramatically and Welles would rush it to the finish. These changes made the script appear even duller than it was but the results proved otherwise.

The cast started the broadcast with no inclination of the havoc they were about to cause. It wasn't until the show was twelve minutes old that things started to happen. Each week at about this time, Edgar Bergen would introduce a guest performer on his program and several million listeners would tune to other stations to see what else was on. Welles had not been able to keep any of that audience in the past but tonight, some 3-6 million listeners heard of a Martian invasion and stayed put. These listeners had not heard the opening disclaimer and though some knew of the program and others soon realized it was a play, it was estimated that one million people around the country believed the story to be real.

The panic it created was incredible. In Harlem hundreds packed churches holding prayer vigils. In New York railroad stations, hundreds more sought ways to leave the city. And in Pittsburgh a woman was stopped from taking poison by her husband. There were countless other stories like these including some that thought these invaders were not Martians, but Germans. All the while Welles and his crew continued the broadcast, oblivious to what was happening outside the studio.

The first indication of trouble did not come until the program was some thirty

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minutes old. Davidson Taylor, who supervised the broadcast for CBS received an urgent phone call from the front office. CBS affiliates were sending through reports of accidents and suicide attempts all supposedly caused by the broadcast. Davidson was ordered to go on the air with another disclaimer so he told actor Ray Collins to include one at the station break which would be coming up at the forty-minute mark. By this time the damage was already done. Those who had believed the broadcast were no longer listening at this point.

As Orson continued the program, policemen and guards began appearing in the control room. Welles closed the broadcast by stating this was the Mercury Theatre's way of "dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying 'boo'". As the closing theme played, Orson received a

call in the control room from the mayor of a midwestern city. He strongly chastised Welles for the broadcast and even threatened to come to New York and beat him up.

When the program ended the entire cast was rushed downstairs into a back office. Network officials gathered up all the scripts and recordings of the show and locked them up. Some reporters who had converged on CBS, found out where the cast was and began asking for their reactions about the deaths and riots that were occurring around the nation. Several members of the crew became convinced that they were murderers. In reality many accidents did occur but there were no deaths.

It would be early the next morning before Welles and company were released. One person who missed all the excitement was Howard Koch. He was so exhausted from his week of work that he stayed

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ORSON WELLES MEETS THE PRESS ON THE MORNING AFTER

home, listened to the broadcast and went straight to bed. It wasn't until the next morning when his barber showed him the morning headlines that Koch learned of the turmoil of the night before.

It seemed that Orson's career would be finished. Welles took the brunt of the criticism that came out during the next few days. CBS chief William Paley was under severe pressure to discipline his star to help quell the threat of lawsuits that were building. But Paley stood by Orson throughout.

Lawsuits totalling close to one million dollars were filed against CBS and the Mercury Theatre. But since Orson had that special clause in his contract absolving him of any damages that occurred because of his broadcast, no legal action could be taken against him. In fact no suit was ever settled because there was no legal precedent for such an action.

There were Congressional calls for greater governmental control of radio. Some even advocated out and out censorship but Washington wisely decided against such actions. Instead, CBS and the

other networks reached a joint agreement not to broadcast any dramatic work that would include news bulletins or impersonations of government officials when these would cause uneasiness or concern among listeners.

Instead of ruining his career, "The War of the Worlds" lifted Welles' career to new heights. His name was now known nationwide, not solely by theater patrons. With all this publicity the radio ratings improved and within two weeks, Campbell Soup bought the program and became its sponsor.

The Campbell radio series ended in 1940 but Welles' talents remained in great demand. He had plenty of radio and theater work and was about to embark on a brilliant movie career. Orson's first film, "Citizen Kane" is considered by some to be the greatest film ever made and while none of his films were great commercial successes, they were all examples of great movie-making. He continued to work both in front of and behind the camera until his death in 1985.