

He Frightened Americans Out Of Their Wits

23-Year-Old Orson Welles Is The "Golden Boy" Of The American Theatre

- At Princeton, New Jersey, a man screamed imputently, "The world's coming to an end, and I have a lot to do..."
- At St. Louis three inebriates promptly fell on their knees and prayed for 20 minutes.
- Thousands of people ran into city parks screaming with terror, wet handkerchiefs and towels wrapped round their faces to counter Martian gas...
- Never in the history of the U.S., said observers, had such a wave of panic swept the continent...
- And all because a bright young man by the name of Orson Welles added a few too many realistic touches to a radio production of H. G. Wells's scientific fantasy "The War of the Worlds." To Orson Welles, rising young American actor-producer, must go whatever credit there is for that most amazing panic.

WHO is Orson Welles?
The other week was probably the first time New Zealanders had heard of

him, but in the U.S. and to a certain extent in England he is already, at the age of 23, a well-known figure in the American theatre.

In the 25 years prior to 1937 only four art, experimental or repertory theatres had survived adolescence in New York—the Theatre Guild, the Provincetown Playhouse, the Civic Repertory Theatre (leading light, Eva Le Gallienne) and the Group Theatre (leading light, Clifford Odets).

But, in 1937, a new repertory company, styling itself the Mercury Theatre, became famous overnight through a spectacular production of "Julius Caesar." Shakespeare's five-act drama was transformed into a fast-moving, one-act melodrama, wa performed on a bare stage in modern dress, given a modern meaning, and was a tremendous success.

Moving spirit in the production was 22-year-old Orson Welles, who directed the play, and played Brutus in a blue serge suit.

Next plays the Mercury Theatre produced were "The Cradle Will Rock," a bare-stage strike play, and Dekker's bawdy "Shoemaker's Holiday."

Then negotiations were commenced with Shaw for his "Heartbreak House" (Shaw's first cable inquired tersely "Who are you?" and, finally cabling permission, he announced vaguely that "terms would not be too unreasonable").

"Heartbreak House" also did well, and put the final seal of success, artistic and financial, on the Mercury Theatre.

George Orson Welles is the son of Richard Head Welles, a concert pianist and inventor, whose chief contribution to science was a mechanical dish-washer and a collapsible picnic set, which the U.S. Government bought in large quantities for the American expeditionary force, and which, according to Orson, "contributed greatly to the horror of the war."

At the age of 12, Orson staged his first production of "Julius Caesar" at a boys' school, and at 16 he set out on a painting tour of Ireland, ending up by acting in Dublin at the Gate, the Peacock and the famous Abbey Theatre.

With Cornell

BACK in America he was taken on tour by Katharine Cornell, who placed him in such roles as Mercutio in "Romeo and Juliet" and Marchbanks in "Candida." Soon after this he linked up with John Houseman, another young producer.

Houseman and Welles took over a negro unit of actors, and produced "Macbeth" as a jungle melodrama, with great success. Then Welles and Houseman launched the Mercury Theatre.

Meanwhile, Orson Welles had got

a start in radio, which still brings him more money than the theatre, netting him over 1000 dollars a week on an average.

Off-stage, Welles, who has a big, booming voice and a boyish giggle, plays lead with just as much verve as he plays lead on stage.

His rise to fortune has enabled him to indulge in little luxuries for which he is becoming famous, including a tremendous Lincoln town car and chauffeur. He lives 20 miles out of New York in a select little district where he has for neighbours Katharine Cornell and Dorothy Thompson (Mrs. Sinclair Lewis).

Welles, who is thick-set, with a round moon face, is troubled with asthma and flat feet.

At the Mercury, Houseman looks after the business end, while Welles attends to stagecraft and cutting and rewriting. In the latter department he is pretty drastic, and has even been known to help out "Julius Caesar" with lines from "Coriolanus."

A Mercury actor, asked when rehearsals on one of the season's classics would be commenced,

Orson Welles.

answered: "When Orson has finished writing it."

Future Plans

THIS coming season Welles plans several ambitious productions, including "Five Kings," a double-header omnibus, telescoping five of Shakespeare's chronicle plays. He also hopes to do a real mystery play, a real farce, a British pantomime, a fast revue and a Mozart opera.

After that, the sky seems the limit. His latest escapade, the radio adaptation of Wells's "War of the Worlds," which so panicked the United States, will probably serve only to increase his reputation.



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