Hollywood at Home and at War in the 1940s

As the 1930s gave way to the 1940s, Hollywood was luring stage talent like director Orson Welles and producer John Houseman to the movies to make *Citizen Kane* (1940). At the same time, it was enlisting all the studios in the war effort, resulting in a flood of patriotic propaganda fervor, from home front dramas, comedies, and cartoons to combat documentaries in the theaters of war on land, sea, and in the sky. William Wyler’s classic *The Memphis Belle* (1944) was perhaps the most distinguished of them; and participants in that film came together with filmmakers of the remake (1990) to examine fact, myth, and memory. For a standard treatment of the Second World War film, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

**Producer John Houseman: “It was a great magic act!”**

Park College, MO, 4 February 1984

Long before he gained late-career visibility on film and television portraying Professor Charles Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase* (1973), John Houseman (1902–1988) had amassed a formidable career as a stage producer with Orson Welles for the legendary Federal Theatre Project and the Mercury Theatre in the 1930s and later in Hollywood with classic films such as *Citizen Kane* (1940), *They Live By Night* (1948), and *Julius Caesar* (1953). From 1968–1976 he was the founding director of the Drama Division of the Juilliard School. Subsequently, he formed it into an independent touring repertory company, the Acting Company. He wrote a number of volumes of essays, including a trilogy of memoirs, *Run-through* (1972), *Front & Center* (1979), and *Final Dress* (1983).

At the time of our conversation, the 81-year-old Houseman brought the Acting Company to Kansas City, MO to perform his revival of *The Cradle
Will Rock. We talked about that and I seized the opportunity to also ask him about his work with Orson Welles.

JOHN C. TIBBETTS: I guess you and Orson Welles were just kids when you first met?

JOHN HOUSEMAN: Not exactly. That was in 1934. He was 18 or 19 and I was older, 32 or 33. I had seen him on stage as Tybalt in Katherine Cornell’s touring production of Romeo and Juliet.

Any first impressions?

Yes. He was dressed all in black and silver. I remember how flat-footed yet graceful he seemed; but there was energy and tension coiled up in him. And the voice! Ah, it was a voice of great clarity and power. I didn’t meet him at that time, but I couldn’t help but remember him.

People have come to describe him as a sort of improbable character. . .

And precocious! He had been a leading man to [Katherine] Cornell on her tour. He had also played Marchbanks in Candida and Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet. When they came to New York they decided they wanted Brian Aherne as Mercutio, so Orson was demoted to play Tybalt. And he was wonderful! He was so wonderful that I immediately asked him if he would come and play in a play-in-verse I was producing, which was by Archibald MacLeish called Panic. ¹ It was an anti-capitalist story about a tycoon who jumps to his death after the Wall Street Crash. We needed an actor for the 80-year-old financier. So I caught Orson backstage at the Martin Beck Theatre during the run of Romeo and Juliet asked him if he would like to do that and he said yes and it was the beginning of our professional association.

How would you assess the attraction or the dependence you both had for each other?

We were very useful to each other at that time. We were both breaking into the theater and it was I who happened to be head of the Negro Theater of the Federal Theatre of the WPA; and I invited Orson to come up and work there. Our active association was only about four and a half years, but we would spend many hours drinking coffee, our heads full of many schemes and many projects—some that succeeded and some that failed and some that never got off the ground. Each began as an improvisation rather than some formal execution of a plan. Despite our age difference, and in spite of my wider education, I often felt I was the student and he was the teacher!

Would you talk about the evolution of the Federal Theatre and the Mercury Theatre?

The two are not unrelated. I’ve always maintained that we would never have had the nerve or the ability to start the Mercury Theatre had we not had