

# Orson Welles a captivating, confident speaker

*"My Lunches with Orson: Conversations Between Henry Jaglom and Orson Welles," by Peter Biskind. New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Co., 2013. 306 pages, \$28.*

"Although Welles was generous with his praise for people he respected, he invariably peppered his conversation with amusing if often unflattering anecdotes about those he didn't," Peter Biskind notes in the introduction to his current best-seller, "My Lunches with Orson: Conversations Between Henry Jaglom and Orson Welles."

"He was particularly biting when his attention was directed toward former friends and enemies," Biskind continues. "Welles's outsized personality, as well as his early, dazzling success in the theater, radio, and movies, made him the envy of everyone in the arts, and a target of more than a few."

What an understatement. "My Lunches with Orson" consists of (mostly) verbatim transcripts of conversations that took place between Welles and Jaglom, his good friend and confidant, at Ma Maison, a restaurant in Beverly Hills.

Most of what appears in the book is based on discussions that took place in 1983, although some material from 1984 and 1985 is also included. Jaglom is an actor and director who guest-starred in TV shows such as "Gidget" and "The Flying Nun" before pursuing a more serious career in feature films. His latest project is "The M Word," a romantic comedy due out this fall. His friendship with Welles was well-known in Hollywood circles.

The book provides an intimate look at a complicated man. Universally revered as a genius for his early work, he became somewhat of an enigma in his later years. "Citizen Kane," perhaps his best known and most acclaimed film, is still considered by many to be the greatest movie of all time. Personally, my first introduction to Welles was as a spokesperson for winemaker Paul Masson; I'm sure many of you remember the catchphrase: "We will sell no wine before it's time." My parents always associated him with "Citizen Kane," although my grandparents knew him primarily as the man who set off a panic with his infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast in 1938.

As is so often the case with those who achieve spectacular success at a relatively young age, it was difficult for Welles to live up to his initial accomplishments later in life. After an auspicious start to a career that also included "The Magnificent Ambersons," "The Third Man" and "Compulsion," he eventually settled into a role that consisted primarily of narrating documentaries and appearing on popular talk shows of the 1970s and '80s. Welles touches on all these experiences in his conversations with

Jaglom, often with a piercing honesty that illuminates the personal demons that seemed to follow him throughout his life.

"My Lunches with Orson" is comprised of 27 relatively brief chapters arranged in two major sections, "Part One: 1983," and "Part Two: 1984-1985." Once I started reading the book, I found it hard to put down. I have always been fascinated with complicated people such as Welles, and these unedited (for the most part) conversations are both immensely revealing and innately engaging. There is no subject, it seems, that Welles was not able to talk about – and talk about fluently, confidently and intelligently.

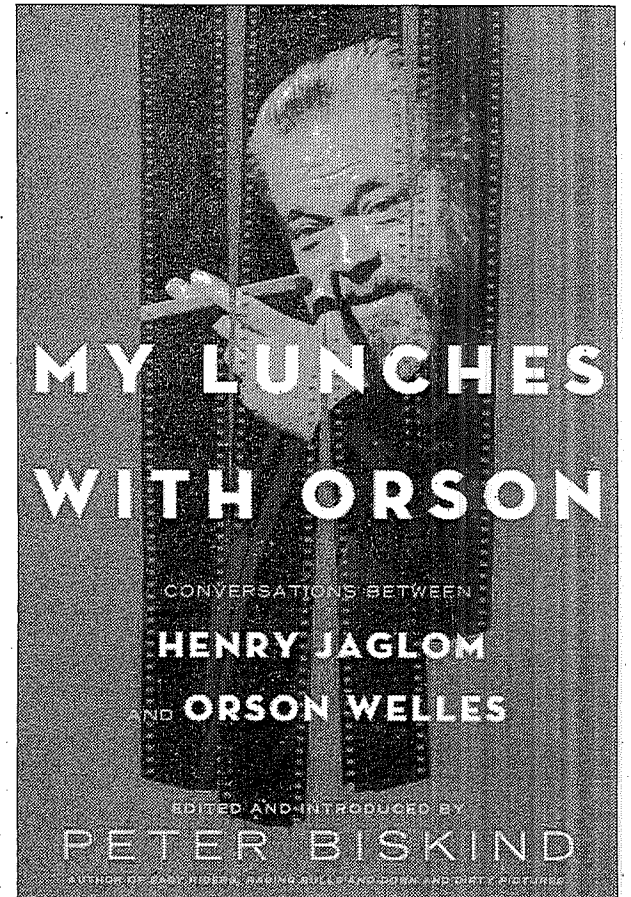
Reflect on this excerpt from "FDR used to say, 'You and I are the two best actors in America,'" the third chapter in the book: "It always struck me that the fact that some of our more progressive presidents – the Roosevelts and the Kennedys – came from wealthier backgrounds meant that they were less intimidated by other rich people, and therefore less susceptible to special interests. The poor kids are the more dangerous ones – Reagan is so impressed with rich people – it is such an important part of his life."

Although he could expound endlessly about serious subjects such as politics, economics and war, ultimately it was Welles' exceptional and somewhat unique sense of humor that I found most endearing. I usually do most of my reading late at night when there are fewer distractions. Unfortunately, I did manage to awaken multiple family members a couple of times (a true story) because I found myself literally laughing out loud at some of the passages. A prime example is this excerpt from "You either admire my work or not," chapter 25:

"One day I got a call: 'Jack (Barrymore) is in Chicago, dying. Get on a train and go there.' So I got on a train, went to Chicago. Went to the Ambassador East, where Jack was staying, but he wasn't there. But Ethel was there and Lionel was there. Ethel and Lionel and I went around Chicago looking for Jack.

We finally located him in a warehouse on the South Side. He wasn't dying, but God knows, we could see he was going to. And then all of us were stuck in his hotel for the weekend. I just sat there and listened to them talk, because they hadn't been together, the three of them, in 40 years. Or very seldom. They began reminiscing about their childhoods, and so on, these three extraordinary people with their gargoyles like creatures on the front of a cathedral. It was unbelievable."

For the record, Biskind is also an accomplished author and editor. His previous books include "Easy Riders,"



"Raging Bulls," "Down and Dirty Pictures," "Seeing is Believing" and "Star." A former editor-in-chief of American Film, he is a currently contributing editor for Vanity Fair. Further, he has written for the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Rolling Stone and The Nation.

Some people have said that Welles' greatest talent was as a storyteller. After reading "My Lunches with Orson," I have no choice but to agree. I recommend this book highly to anyone who wants to know what Welles was really like. You won't be disappointed.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.