

During his later years, Orson Welles wryly quipped that, "I started at the top and have been working my way down ever since." Though still in his early twenties, Welles was already a star when he arrived in Hollywood during the late 1930s. He had established a reputation as an actor-director of note on both the stage and radio, to such a degree that he was able to wrangle a contract that gave the first-time director total control over whatever he came up with. The result was 1941's *Citizen Kane*, a masterpiece of intelligent, stylised filmmaking — one that also fatefully satirised powerful newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst.

As Hearst blustered and controversy raged, Welles started work on an adaptation of Booth Tarkington's acclaimed novel *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which Welles had previously adapted for radio. Tracing the decline of a once-great Midwestern family, it echoed Welles' own privileged upbringing. Indeed, Tarkington had known Welles' parents, and Welles liked to claim that one of the novel's main characters had been based on his own inventor father. By the time *Ambersons* was complete, though, the *Kane* controversy had dealt its damage, and after completing an almost two-and-a-half-hour cut of the film, Welles saw it wrestled away from him and hacked down to 88 minutes. Then, with the film-stock's nitrate needed for the World War II effort, the movie's studio, RKO, ordered the negative to be melted down.

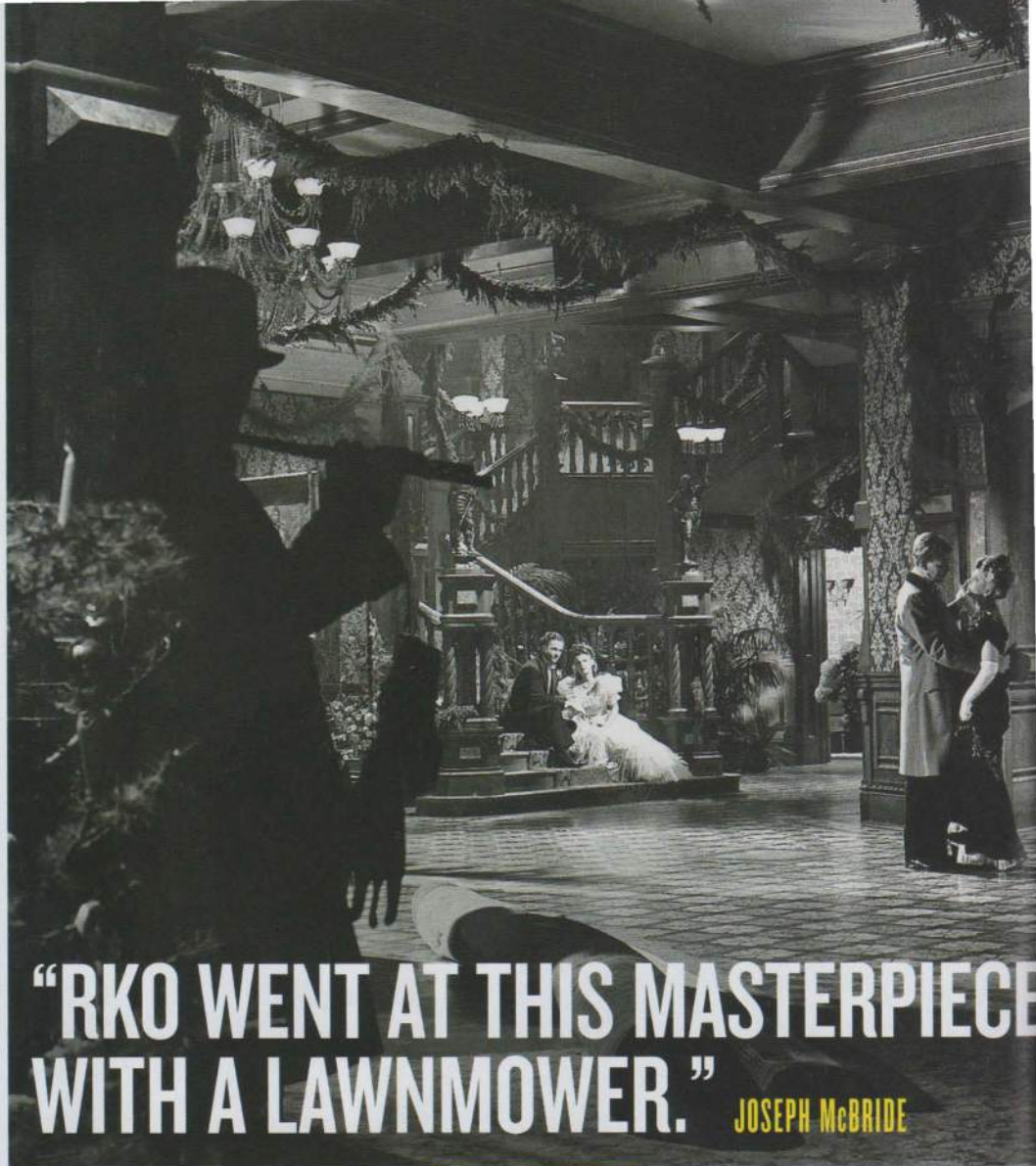
Today, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is widely regarded as one of cinema's great lost films. And it was a blow from which the man himself never recovered. "[The studio] destroyed *Ambersons*, and the picture itself destroyed me," Welles would tell the BBC years later.

But is that original version truly lost? Around the world are dotted a number of enthusiastic *Ambersons* hunters: people who have spent decades trying to track down that fabled director's cut, committed themselves to reassembling it, or otherwise simply piecing together exactly what it is that happened to this missing masterpiece.



THE ARCHIVE RAIDER

One of the earliest *Ambersons* hunters is Fred Chandler, today the Executive Vice-President of Post Production at 20th Century Fox. During the 1980s, Chandler was working at Paramount, which had bought out Welles' former studio, RKO.



"RKO WENT AT THIS MASTERPIECE WITH A LAWNMOWER." JOSEPH McBRIDE

He was tasked with clearing out a room at the studio, which had been found sealed up like a vault. It turned out to be the very room in which Welles had edited both *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

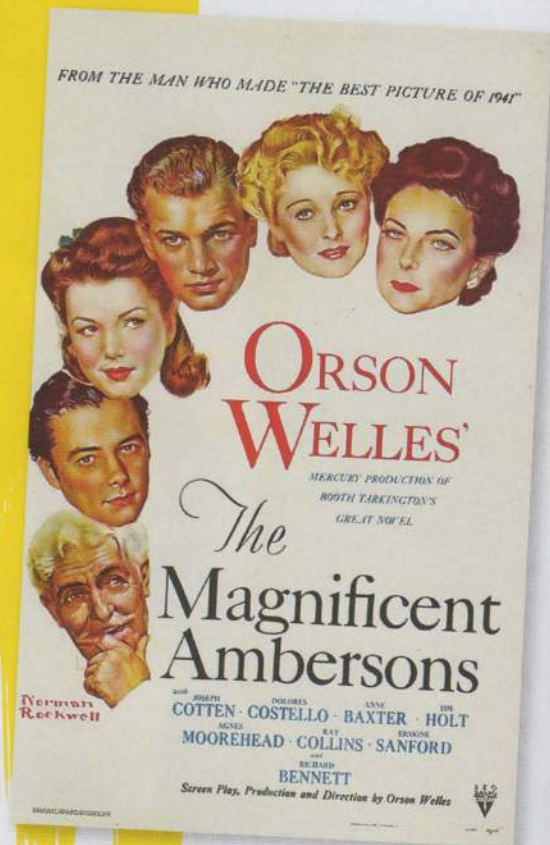
"I was told that everything needed to be cleaned up and tossed," Chandler says. "Only I found something immensely valuable in there. And that's how I came to be introduced to Orson."

What he discovered wasn't *The Magnificent Ambersons*, rather the fine-grain negative for a later Orson Welles film, *The Trial*. Chandler contacted cameraman Gary Graver, who'd worked with Welles at the time, and told him that he wouldn't give the negative to anyone except Orson himself. A meeting was arranged.

"It was very mysterious," Chandler remembers. "I was given a place to go to, and when I got there Gary was waiting, and he took me in a separate car to meet Orson, who was in his editing room."

Welles was impressed, and asked Chandler if he might be able to find *Ambersons*. Chandler returned to the Paramount lot and continued his search.

It was painstaking work, since many films were mislabelled or stored in the





wrong canisters, but six months later he unearthed another Welles creation: 309 cans filled with lost footage from an unreleased Welles documentary called *It's All True*. Then Chandler hit upon a promising lead, finding the contact details for a former RKO employee named Hazel Marshall. Only for her to tell him that it was she who'd incinerated the *Ambersons* negative and that she knew of no other. For Chandler, this signalled the end of the hunt.

"We were sitting in the editing room and I said, 'Orson, I've got something to tell you.'" Chandler speaks slowly as he relives a painful memory. "Orson immediately knew what it was about, but he said, 'Tell me.' I said, 'Orson, it doesn't exist. The *Magnificent Ambersons* was incinerated. I went through every vault, every can, every outtake. It's gone.' And he cried."

Even decades after the film was taken from him, Welles talked about going back and shooting an entirely new ending that would set right everything the studio got so grievously wrong. "Everyone's got their one personal story," says Chandler. "The *Magnificent Ambersons* was Orson's. I truly believe it would have been his greatest film."



THE BRAZIL BOYS

There is another intriguing strand to the *Magnificent Ambersons* mystery. After Welles wrapped the film on January 22, 1942, he and editor Robert Wise headed to Miami. Over an exhausting three days and nights, they edited together a rough cut which ran to three hours. Welles then headed to Rio for his next job, directing *It's All True* for the US State Department.

The plan was for a copy of the *Ambersons* negative to be sent there for him to work on. It arrived on March 15, 1942.

More than half a century later, a pair of preppy American students named Josh Grossberg and Dominic Ow flew to Brazil on their own dime, determined to track down this still AWOL negative. "The lost print of *The Magnificent Ambersons* is one of the greatest mysteries in the history

• Above left: Tim Holt, Anne Baxter, Joseph Cotten and Dolores Costello in the studio cut of the sweeping family epic.

• Above: Costello and Holt as mother Isabel Amberson and meddling son George.

• Left: The poster for the RKO release, which was in fact far from "Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*".

of cinema," says Grossberg, today a writer and filmmaker himself. "How could we *not* go and look for it?"

For five days, the friends lodged with Brazilian film director and *Ambersons* fan Rogério Sganzerla, who introduced them to an archivist who worked for 30 years in the Rio Cinemateca archives. He recalled seeing original film canisters during the 1960s, belonging to Orson Welles. The label on them had read "RKO Films".

"Although it's been reported that the film canisters were shipped back to RKO, one of the things we were told was that in Brazil, private collectors would often make copies of the different prints that came into the country," Grossberg remembers. He and Ow were given the names of three prominent film collectors in the area who might fit the description. Two of them are now dead, while the other appears to have never existed in the first place. The students returned to the United States empty-handed, but they still don't feel their search is over. "It's possible that *The Magnificent Ambersons* was spirited away to some collector's vault," says Grossberg, "and that even today they don't realise what they have." >

THE GREATEST FILMS NEVER MADE

THE OTHER WELLES MOVIES THAT REMAIN (MOSTLY) MIA

HEART OF DARKNESS

Before *Citizen Kane*, Welles planned a movie adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* novella, which later formed the basis for Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The 24-year-old Welles planned to shoot the whole film in a single, continuing shot, from a first-person perspective, but the project fell apart — partially over budgeting issues.

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Not one of Welles' major unfinished works but among his most intriguing, *The Life Of Christ* was one possible project to follow *Citizen Kane*. It would have drawn all its dialogue from the New Testament, but the setting moved to the Old West. Welles wrote a script and scouted locations for his Jesus Western — although it never materialised.

IT'S ALL TRUE

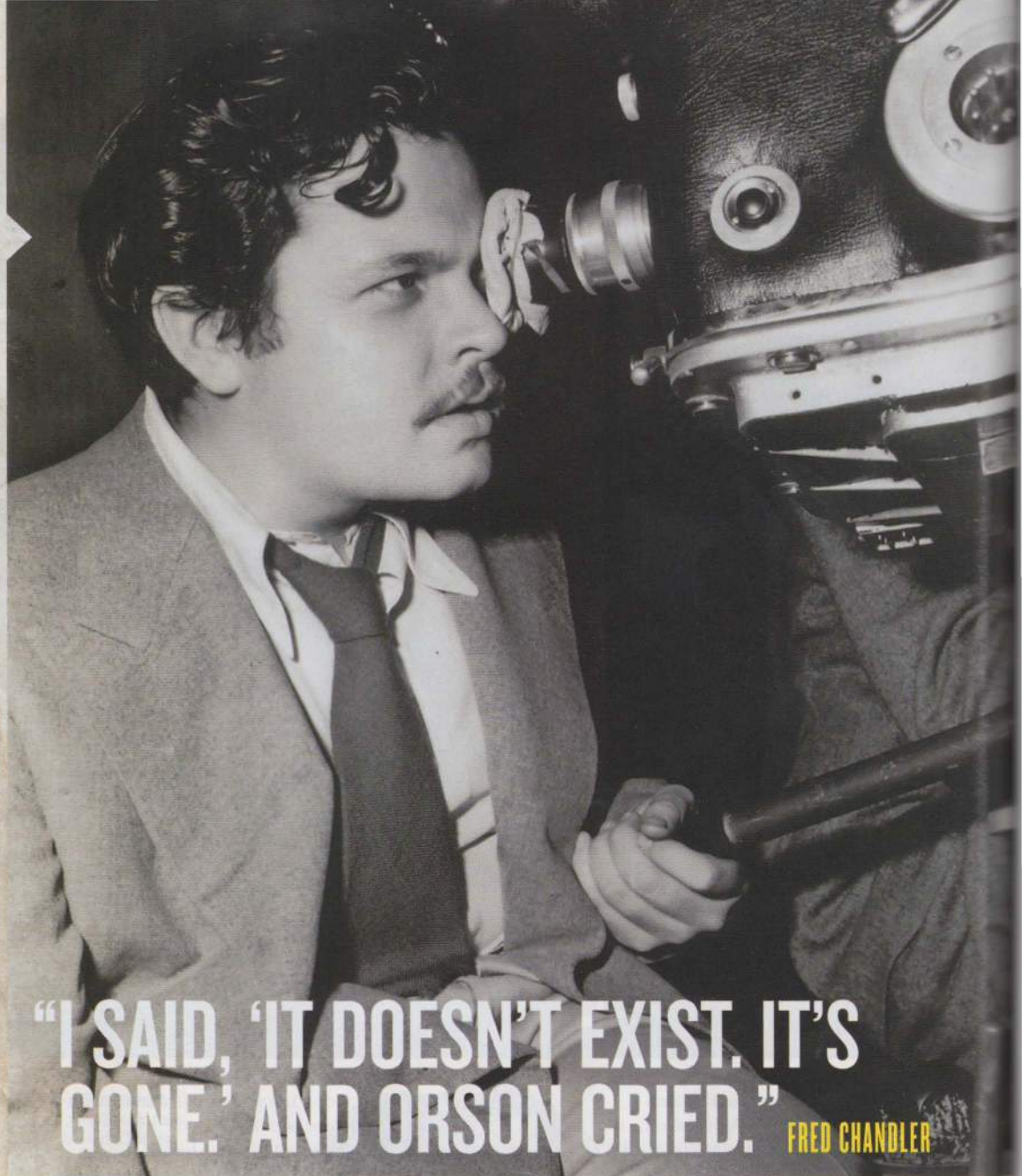
Welles left *Ambersons* during post-production to work on this South American documentary, which was itself never completed. Years later, some of the surviving footage was made available in the 1993 documentary *It's All True: Based On An Unfinished Film* by Orson Welles.

DON QUIXOTE

Rather like Terry Gilliam more recently, Welles spent years trying to bring the story of chivalrous dreamer *Don Quixote* to the screen. The film was initially conceived in 1955, and Welles worked on it intermittently for the remaining 30 years of his life. At one point he got so fed up of being asked about it, he considered renaming the film *When Are You Going To Finish Don Quixote?*

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WIND

A mockumentary about the death of Old Hollywood and the arrival of the avant-garde directors of the 1970s, *The Other Side Of The Wind* was meant to mark Welles' comeback as a filmmaker, but legal problems stopped its release... Until soon as, excitingly, it is finally set to come out this year.



"I SAID, 'IT DOESN'T EXIST. IT'S GONE.' AND ORSON CRIED." FRED CHANDLER



THE RECREATIONIST

Not every *Ambersons* hunter has taken the same approach. "I became a fan of Welles in my early teens because of the showmanship displayed in his films," says filmmaker and Welles aficionado Roger Ryan. "The tracking camera, the expressionistic lighting, the dynamic edits and the overlapping dialogue felt akin to a magic act." Growing up outside Detroit, Michigan, Ryan could easily relate to *Ambersons'* story of a Midwestern US city changed forever by the arrival of the automobile and industrialisation.

But Ryan didn't realise how much *Ambersons* itself had been changed until one Christmas he was given a book about Welles featuring the film's original editing instructions. "What shocked me was that, contrary to my belief at the time, it wasn't just the ending of the film that got changed," Ryan says. "If you look at the cutting instructions for the complete version, and you compare it to what we have on screen in the publicly released version, only nine out of a total of 48 scenes in the released edit are exactly as Welles intended them. The film just got mutilated."

Ryan had editing equipment, but obviously no access to the original workprint of *Ambersons*. So he figured he could do the next best thing: reconstruct it to Welles' specifications. He called in a group of friends who helped him perform the dialogue from the shooting script. Then he obtained a copy of composer Bernard Hermann's original score,



EMPIRE

an official release impossible, although the film has been shown at festivals. The result is, by definition, amateur — but the fact that it plays so well regardless is a testament to the power of Welles' vision.

"Roger did an amazing job of integrating stills, dialogue and music from the missing scenes to give us a fuller sense of how dark and disturbing and rich this film was before RKO went at this masterpiece with a lawnmower," says film historian Joseph McBride, author of *What Ever Happened To Orson Welles*. "As a result, Roger is a hero of mine and should be to all lovers of film history."



THE EXPERT

"We joke that we're still working for Orson Welles, because he left so much unfinished business for us to take care of," says Joseph McBride. "Right now I'm working on several Orson Welles projects. And perhaps the biggest of those is trying to find *The Magnificent Ambersons*."

Most *Ambersons* hunters are motivated by the sheer mystery of the original cut's disappearance, or by their appreciation of Welles himself, whose legend looms large even today. But McBride's passion is located in something quite different. His great uncle was producer Bryan Foy — known at Warner Bros. as "the keeper of the B's" — who played a significant part in *Ambersons*' destruction. Although not an employee of RKO, Foy had been called in to advise on how *Ambersons* could be salvaged. His answer? Chop it in half. "He said it was 'too fuckin' long'," McBride recalls, sadly. "You could say I feel a family obligation to make amends for that event."

Today, McBride refers to *Ambersons* as not only his favourite Welles film, but his favourite film, period. He has spent decades not only trying to get to the bottom of the missing print mystery, but also educating people about Welles and his lost masterpiece. He has not only guided other *Ambersons* hunters, but has traced most of the weird tangents that plagued the picture's rediscovery. For instance, during the 1970s, McBride was one of the first people to see the publicity stills that would later prove so useful to Roger Ryan. At the time there were more than 50 of them. Today, there are far fewer. Many have disappeared — including the original final scene of the film: an overhead shot of one of the principal characters'

cars driving down a road, banked on both sides by enormous factories, belching acrid black smoke into the sky. It is a sombre and hellish ending, showing how the *Ambersons*' idyllic slice of America succumbed to industrialisation. At this point, Welles' voice would appear on the soundtrack, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, that's the end of the story."

If the director's cut couldn't be found, McBride resolved to find these, at least, for posterity's sake, and he tracked them to a storage locker in Los Angeles, where he found them amid a pile of junk. But it turned out that the locker had recently been broken into. The missing items: a few surfboards, and the last shot of one of the greatest films never released. "It's just another tragedy in the history of *Ambersons*," McBride sighs.

Today, *The Magnificent Ambersons* isn't Welles' only lost — or, indeed, 'complicated' — movie (see sidebar, facing page). Throughout the rest of his career, he found himself at loggerheads with Hollywood and distributors, with films unceremoniously sliced and diced as a result. But there is hope. Occasionally Welles enthusiasts will be rewarded by some fresh discovery. A few years ago, the unfinished nitrate workprint of one of Welles' earliest lost films — shot several years before *Citizen Kane* — was found in an Italian warehouse by the staff at a local cinema. Titled *Too Much Johnson*, the short film starred a 23 year-old Welles, and was intended to be part of a stage play that flopped. Then, this year, audiences will finally get their chance to see *The Other Side Of The Wind*: a mammoth unseen project which consumed Welles from 1971 until his death in 1985.

This is the dream for *The Magnificent Ambersons*: the possibility that, one day, a complete copy may turn up in some sealed vault in the Hollywood hills, or in a *favela* in Brazil. Strangely, Welles' reputation has only grown through his status as an artist wronged by the Hollywood machine. The digital age has made us expect 'findability'. In an age of Amazon, iTunes, eBay and YouTube, nothing feels rare anymore. And with so many DVD extras, deleted scenes and directors' commentaries on offer, that an hour of a movie by such a lauded director should disappear seems almost impossible.

"Orson Welles continues to enthrall anyone who loves movies," says Fred Chandler, who today keeps a framed photo of the man, circa *The Magnificent Ambersons*, above his desk at 20th Century Fox. "He was an absolute master of the medium. A genius. Is it any wonder that people wouldn't want to give up on finding what could have been his greatest movie?"

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The last shot of AMBERSONS
as I remember seeing the
frame enlargement in 1970:



NIGHT - Eugene's car drives around
the corner (in the distance,
right). Factory buildings
to left and right. Elevated
train above roadway.
Lots of smoke fills the sky.

Joseph McBride
7/29/08

• Left: Orson Welles on the *Ambersons* set.

• Top: Welles with cinematographer Gary Graver in 1972.

• Above: Historian Joseph McBride sketches out his memory — from '70s publicity stills — of the original version's last shot.

which had been pulled from the film after a disagreement with the studio. In lieu of footage, he gathered a number of unseen publicity stills which had been produced for the picture and which revealed almost every scene that had been cut. He then pieced it all together to create an impressionistic approximation of *Ambersons* as its creator had imagined it. "It was just a homemade project," he says, modestly. "My idea was only ever to make something that I could watch myself."

However, word got out about Ryan's project and he was soon inundated with requests to screen it. Copyright laws make