

their search for commodified nirvana by spending an evening in a tacky, echt-Vegas honeymoon suite. As David slumbers obliviously, Linda loses almost all of the nest egg during a manic early-morning sojourn at the casino's roulette table. David's idiotic plan to retrieve the lost money from the bemused casino owner (played with deadpan flair by the late producer Garry Marshall) is one of the film's comic highlights. Doing his best to channel his talents as an advertising whiz at a time of crisis, David argues that a billboard announcing that the casino has repaid the squandered money might prove to be a brilliant promotional gimmick. Quite logically, the casino boss replies that he's in the business of extracting money from customers, not returning it to them. Even the smallest details of David's frantic pitch turn out to be inept. When he insists that he's smarter than the "schmucks" in Las Vegas who idolize Wayne Newton, Marshall's casino honcho is offended by his guest's snobbery and informs him that he likes Wayne Newton. The absurdity of the Howards' plight reaches a climax at Hoover Dam as David explodes at his wife, who tries to apologize for gambling away their savings, with righteous, if maniacal, anger: "You may not use that word. It's off limits to you. Don't use 'nest.' Don't use 'egg.'" The nest egg that once seemed as enchanted as the yellow brick road or the bluebird of happiness has become a curse that needs to be expunged.

As the undynamic duo continue their journey, with only a few hundred dollars left, this unsentimental road movie becomes a barbed commentary on the American class divide. With skills that are unmarketable in suburban Arizona, David is forced to become a crossing guard at a school (where a small child labels him a "Brillo Pad fat-head") and Linda swallows her pride and resigns herself to assuming the duties of an assistant manager of a fast food joint. She's awarded the job after the manager "sleeps on it"; in a cruelly comic sleight of hand, it's finally revealed that this judicious gentleman is actually a skinny teenage boy.

As a riposte to traditional road movies where the characters learn hard-won lessons after an arduous journey, Linda and David learn absolutely nothing during their travels—unless the realization that straying from the path of upward mobility is a stupid decision constitutes a lesson. David sheepishly apologizes to his boss, and Linda is more than glad to accompany him to New York to resume their old lifestyle. Their newfound contentedness as the film draws to its conclusion does not recall the picaresque bliss of *On the Road* but instead anticipates the agenda of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

In one of the Criterion disc's useful supplements, the director James L. Brooks emphasizes (Albert) Brooks's directorial talents. As much a "total filmmaker" as Jerry Lewis, Brooks manages to be relaxed behind

the camera despite being manic in front of it. James L. Brooks reminds us of the impeccably timed tracking shots that precede David's firing early in the film. A surprisingly austere director, Brooks is particularly fond of static shots that highlight his frequently intricate, frenzied monologues as well as his encounters with benighted strangers.

Although there are stellar moments in many subsequent Brooks films, particularly *Defending Your Life* (1991) and *Mother* (1996), *Lost in America* remains his most notable achievement. Still, given the dearth of astringent comedy at a time when it's desperately needed, is a plea for Albert Brooks to return to filmmaking an exorbitant request?—Richard Porton

The Stranger

Produced by S. P. Eagle; directed by Orson Welles; screenplay by Anthony Veiller; original story by Victor Trivas, adaptation by Victor Trivas and Decla Dunning; cinematography by Russell Metty; edited by Ernest Nims; production design by Perry Ferguson; music by Bronislaw Kaper; starring Orson Welles, Edward G. Robinson, Loretta Young, Philip Merivale, Richard Long, Konstantin Shayne, Byron Keith, Billy House, and Martha Wentworth. Blu-ray and DVD, B&W, 95 min., 1946. An Olive Films release, <https://olivefilms.com>.

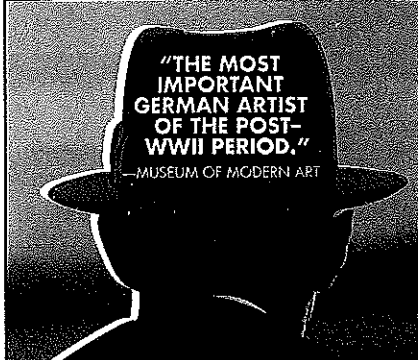
Any discussion of *The Stranger* must acknowledge its modest-at-best reputation. Championed by none, the film is commonly marginalized and occasionally vilified, even by the most devoted Wellesians. As André Bazin observed, properly and plainly, "*The Stranger* is less distinguished, less dazzling, than the other films of Orson Welles." Jonathan Rosenbaum declared it "the only one of Welles' thirteen released features that I actively dislike."

And there is much to criticize. Co-star Loretta Young (who does a fine job navigating the only complex role in the picture) is at times saddled with stilted lines that call attention to their artificiality ("It was I!," however grammatically correct, is an exclamation that is impossible to utter with credibility). Welles's own performance is not among his best. Eyes popping and hands clenching, these too-often and too-easy shorthand mannerisms obscure Welles's characteristically brilliant modulation of his mellifluous baritone. The score is clumsy and intrusive.

The inclination to give Welles a mulligan for *The Stranger* derives from the fact that he did not have creative control over the enterprise—he answered to producer Sam Spiegel (credited as S. P. Eagle), executive producer William Goetz, and, most vexingly, to editor Ernest Nims. It was made clear to Welles (and specified in his contract) that in both pre- and postproduction he was subordinate to Nims, who had a reputation for cutting any action that did not appear to advance

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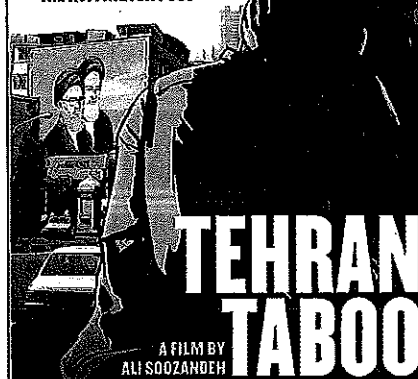


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the story. Welles was willing to work under these hamstrung conditions because his goal was to show Hollywood's money men that he could shoot a straight picture, and lay to rest his (wildly exaggerated but widely held) reputation for profligacy and irresponsibility. And this, his most conventional picture, was indeed brought in on time, under budget, and turned a healthy profit. It did not, alas, rehabilitate his reputation.

A new Blu-ray edition from Olive Films presents an opportunity to look at the orphaned and unloved *Stranger* with fresh eyes. Sparkling and sharp, it is a welcome release, as for many years the film, having fallen into the public domain, had been circulating in shoddy prints (although Kino Classics did issue a very fine special edition Blu-ray in 2013). A notable, even daring, politically sensitive early postwar noir, the film boasts an unabashedly absurd premise: that little-known, publicity-shy Nazi mastermind Franz Kindler (Welles) awaits the next Reich in a sleepy New England town as Professor Charles Rankin, who has taken up a teaching post at the Harper School for Boys and, more subversively still, has won the heart of Mary Longstreet (Young), daughter of a U.S. Supreme Court justice. On his tracks is the intrepid Nazi hunter Mr. Wilson (the effortlessly reliable Edward G. Robinson—Welles wanted Agnes Moorehead for the part, but Spiegel rejected the notion). Wilson sets the film in motion, if implausibly, by arranging the release of awaiting-execution Nazi war criminal Konrad Meinike (Konstantin Shayne) in the hope that Meinike might lead him to Kindler. But he leads him only as far as Harper, where Meinike shakes Wilson, only to be murdered by Rankin. The drama then reduces to this: Mary knows that Meinike wished to speak to her husband, which would establish Rankin as Kindler. Wilson

must convince the dutiful and trusting wife to reveal this information; Rankin's life depends on her silence.

Despite its limitations, *The Stranger* remains very much an Orson Welles film. Working with cinematographer Russell Metty (who would also shoot Welles's spectacular *Touch of Evil*), *The Stranger* boasts brooding noir and gothic imagery, with glorious angles, silhouettes, and shadows—especially in the first five minutes but notable more generally throughout the film—that are as good as it gets. The four-minute tracking shot that culminates in Meinike's murder is justly celebrated, but there are other neatly Wellesian pieces of business: another impressive long take in which Rankin invents a cover story to assure Mary's silence, a well-framed front-porch confrontation in which she is pressured from all sides, the smart cut from a kicked dog to Wilson startling awake, the kinetic montage of the final scene, and more subtle moments, including a stunning, dangerous shot in which Rankin (Welles himself) with one arm lifts a vulnerable Mary, dangling over an abyss, to (momentary) safety. *The Stranger*, commonly compared with Hitchcock's own foreign-malevolence-visits-small-town-Americana *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), here with its perilous climb up a church tower anticipates elements of *Vertigo* (1958).

The Stranger also belongs to Welles in that he wrote much of it. From a treatment by John Huston affiliate Anthony Veiller (who would receive sole screen credit for the screenplay), the 164-page shooting script hewed closely to a draft produced in August 1945 credited to Welles and Huston. (Huston, still attached to the armed forces, could only contribute in an unofficial capacity.) It is not easy to disentangle who wrote what, but Welles does take credit for the numerous drugstore sequences featuring Mr. Potter (Billy House),

which he says were mostly written on set. Many passages certainly sound Wellesian, and it is hard not to imagine Kindler's dismissive, god's-eye view of the townsfolk "looking like little ants" anticipated the similar "little dots" line uttered by Welles's Harry Lime in *The Third Man* (1949).

And *The Stranger* is ultimately a Welles film in that, even in his most conventional studio picture, there is a requisite tantalizing and frustrating "what might have been" story to be told. Editor Nims redlined pages and pages of the shooting script ahead of principal photography—and he also took the 115-minute version Welles submitted, and cut it down to ninety-four. By all accounts he took out the best stuff: two full reels at the very beginning—a long, ambitious, expressionistic chase through South America—that Welles described to Peter Bogdanovich as "the stuff I liked the best." The remnants of these lost reels are visible in those early five bravura minutes following Meinike that still survive, and they suggest that those missing reels (no known copies survive) reflect a loss as great as any of the many we associate with Welles this side of *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

The Nims cut thus leaves a mutilated, compromised, and, in many places, unnecessarily disjointed film. A longer version would have included more backstory on how Kindler became Rankin; introduced Mary's fear of heights (which would have given her final trip up the precarious church tower ladder, and subjective look down that accompanies it, much more dramatic meaning); and attended with much greater elaboration the clock analogy, an essential element of the Welles/Huston script. Clocks stopped and brought to life are at the metaphorical heart of the story, and the psyche of Rankin/Kindler. As Clinton Heylin observes in *Despite the System: Orson Welles Versus the Hollywood Studios*, "whenever [Rankin] is required to maintain the greatest self-control, he looks to clocks" (repairing or tending to them) to calm his nerves.

Welles's longer version of *The Stranger* might have more fully developed something that has apparently never been discussed in the Welles literature: hints of incest in the relationship between Mary and her father, Justice Longstreet (Philip Merivale). With one early exception, Mary invariably (and incongruously) calls her long-widowed father by his first name, Adam. One family interaction is particularly provocative, as Mary enters, hugs her brother ("Hello, honey") in a very maternal way (and Loretta Young was a full fifteen years older than Richard Long, who played her brother Noah), before moving on to embrace her father ("Hello, Adam") with a kiss that was fairly lush by the screen standards of 1946. In these exchanges Mary appears like wife and mother, as opposed to daughter and sister. Schoolboy Noah also explains that he is accustomed to referring to his brother-in-law as "Mr.



Federal agent Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson) confronts Nazi war criminal Konrad Meinike (Orson Welles) and his wife Mary (Loretta Young) in *The Stranger*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Rankin" rather than Charles; and in one outburst, Mary yells at Adam accusatorily, "You're against him, you've never liked him," which would code Rankin as coming between father and daughter—a sentiment that is paid off with the film's final image.

More consequential is how the Nims mutilation undermines the purpose and coherence of *The Stranger*. Welles's original intention was to open the film with a flash-forward to the moment when Mary awakens from a dream, takes her eerie walk through the cemetery, and then cut to the concluding moment of the narrative (though in this iteration seen from below rather than above). From there the movie would have jumped back to the familiar start of the story, adding the twenty lost minutes of Meinike in South America. Welles described these as "a whole series of very wild, dreamlike events," and the invocation of dreams was not accidental—dreams, and awakening from them, were at the heart of the film Welles wanted to make.

When I first saw this film years ago, hipsters in the revival house laughed out loud at Wilson's sudden declaration, "We have only one ally, her subconscious," in the hope that Mary might betray her husband. Wilson's pronouncement comes across as absurd not because it is a dated expression of the postwar Freudianism that infused so many films noir of the Forties, but because of its apparent incongruity, as the version of *The*

Stranger that survives only has scattered, often vestigial remnants of the dream motif that was so central to Welles's conception of the film. Most obvious among these is Mr. Wilson's final "pleasant dreams," which does come across as a rather ridiculous farewell, as it no longer plays off the central role of Mary's dreams in the film. Rankin's looming shadow over the sleeping Mary, her description of her disturbing dream (a second nightmare was to have been discussed at length as well), shots of Mary sleeping fitfully, Mary's fainting and regaining consciousness, Rankin's trip to the drugstore to buy sleeping pills—in the version Welles intended, all these surviving elements and other moments would have fit together neatly.

They would have also served his overall purpose in making the film. As Jennifer Lynde Marker explains, in her thoughtful essay that accompanies the Olive Blu-ray, *The Stranger* is an "examination of American complacency about...the possibilities of a renascent fascism nurtured by innocence and fear in the mythical heart of idyllic small town America." Both Mary and the impossibly well-mannered town of Harper (and by extension, postwar America) are naive about this continuing threat. It is a town where dinner guests are dismissive of troubling overseas reports about German revanchists, and a place where Mary can walk home alone late at night because "in Harper there's nothing to be afraid of."

Welles saw things differently. In the mid-1940s, the crusading antifascist emerged as a prominent champion of progressive causes in barnstorming public speeches, columns for the *New York Post*, and weekly commentaries on ABC Radio, where he repeatedly warned of American complacency and ignorance about such still-pressing threats. Simon Callow in *Orson Welles. Volume 2: Hello Americans*, saw in *The Stranger* Welles's desire to provide "another of his wake-up calls to America." Famously, to stir Mary's subconscious (and to unsettle American moviegoers), Wilson screens footage from recently liberated concentration camps—the first time such images were seen in a commercial film. And Mary, who "has never so much as seen a Nazi" (except for the one she unwittingly married), is, with Harper, awakened, due in part to Rankin's repair of the long-dormant clock tower, leading some to fret about how anybody will be able to sleep. "Harper was a nice quiet place" before the clock was repaired—now, as Wilson observes, "the chimes have awakened Harper."

Seen as the film that might have been—many extraordinary elements of which still survive—this release by Olive Films, which also features a well-informed (if invariably laudatory) commentary by Nora Fiore, is an opportunity to reassess *The Stranger* as an important element in Welles's oeuvre.

—Jonathan Kirshner

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