

DAILY NEWS • MONDAY • DECEMBER 14, 1998

L.A. LIFE

HEALTH & FITNESS

Revitalized RKO digs for Welles

After finding director's lost script, studio aims to turn it into a movie

By Michael Fleeman
Associated Press

Buried deep among the hundreds of old scripts in RKO Pictures' archives was a 1941 melodramatic gem about an amnesia-stricken man who wakes up in the middle of a revolution in Mexico:

Never produced, the screenplay for "The Way to Santiago" is credited to Orson Welles. A quick look at the text leaves no doubt it was the work of the "Citizen Kane" filmmaker when he was at the peak of his arrogant brilliance.

The script begins: "My face fills the frame."

Abandoned by RKO after Welles' epic fall from grace, "The Way to Santiago" was finally gotten the green light nearly six decades later and is being produced by a rejuvenated RKO.

"This script caught everything about Welles," said RKO chairman and CEO Ted Hartley, citing the screenplay's action, suspense and jungle romance. "It reflected his greatness in storytelling."

Proving that ideas never die in Hollywood, RKO is mining its storied past for tomorrow's films.

In one week, the RKO-produced "Mighty Joe Young," an updated version of its 1949 gorilla picture, will be released. The studio is also working on new takes of its 1943 thriller "I Walked With a Zombie," and the 1948 John Ford western "Fort Apache," among many others.

It is a delicate time for RKO to be tinkering with Hollywood's past. Controversy surrounds Universal Studios' scene-by-scene color remake of the Hitchcock classic "Psycho." Critics called the project sacrilegious.

Hartley insists RKO will pick its projects judiciously. That means no remakes of "Citizen Kane" or "It's a Wonderful Life." But it's open season on other films.

"The kinds of movies that you want to reinvent or adapt are those where the story and screenplay were sound, but the movie either didn't fully realize the script or things have changed so much that you can take the script and bring it up to date," Hartley said.

The Welles script was known to film historians for years, but it wasn't easy to find. When Hartley and his investors took over RKO in 1990, the company's archives were a mess, with scripts and correspondence stored in warehouses all over the country and no cataloging system.

Researchers hired by RKO from UCLA took months to make some sense out of the paper, which had been piling up for decades.

RKO, (for Radio-Keith-Orpheum), has

existed in one form or another for nearly as long as moving pictures. It can trace its roots back to a single nickelodeon that opened in Milwaukee in 1909, and over the decades the studio has undergone many corporate reconfigurations under countless executives, wreaking havoc on the bookkeeping.

"When I came to RKO, the company was in the kind of disarray that any company goes through when it's having hard times," Hartley said.

It was a shell of its former selves. The theatrical and television rights to most of its movies had been sold off to Ted Turner years earlier. All that remained were the RKO name, the famous radio tower logo and copyrights on all the material, produced or not.

Like other production houses, the new RKO develops new material for film and television, but the copyrights entitle it to remake its movies and shoot its old scripts.

The turmoil that Hartley found at RKO was nothing new. As James Naremore pointed out in the book "The Magic World of Orson Welles," the company had six different production heads from 1926 to 1933 and by the mid-1940s had gone through six more.

Into all this stepped a young Orson Welles, the radio wonder boy from New York, who was lured to the pictures in 1939 by RKO with a contract promising great artistic freedom as long as he stayed within tight budgets.

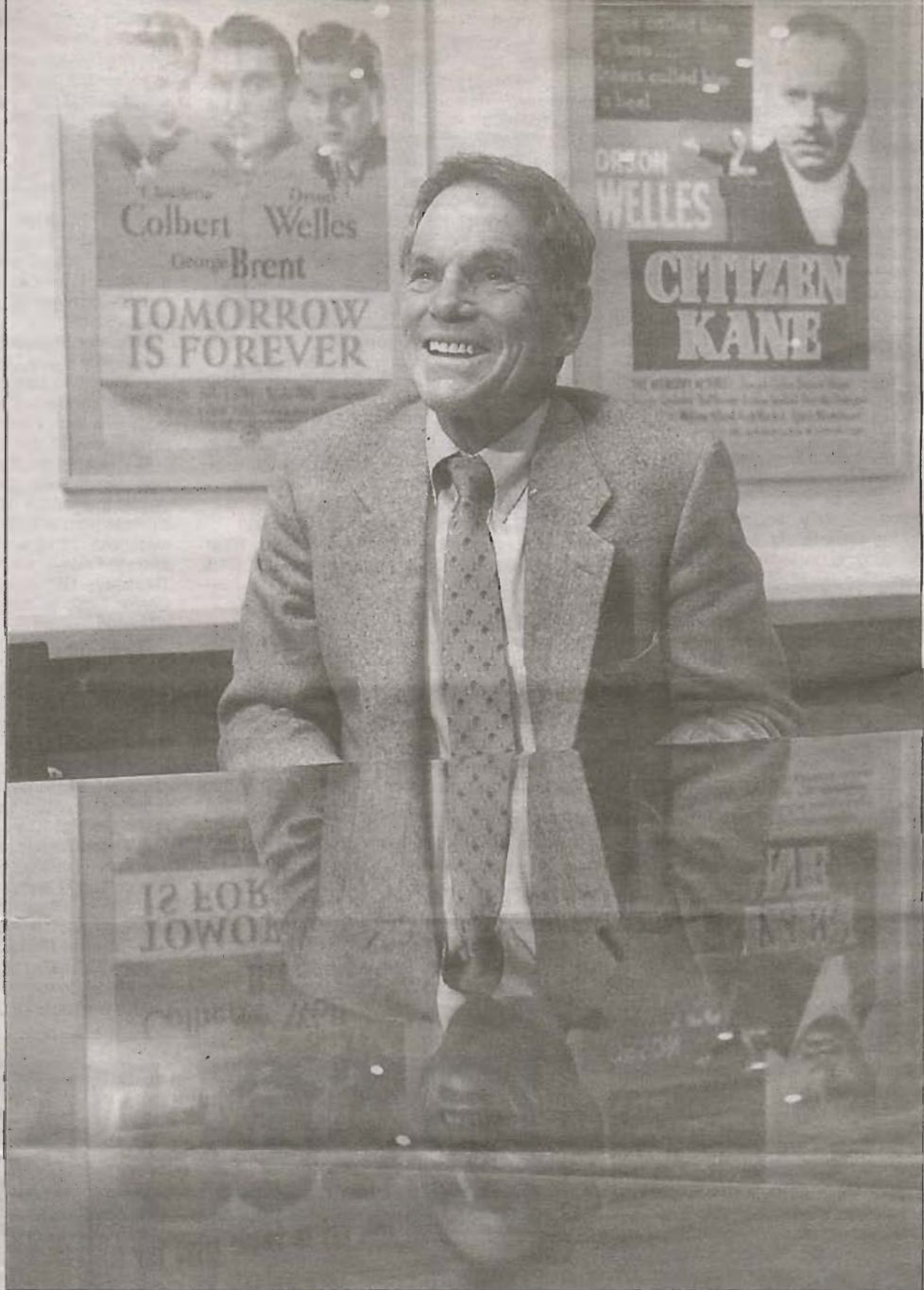
His first movie for RKO was "Citizen Kane." It is now widely considered the greatest American film of all time. But in early 1941, it was a picture in trouble. RKO was going to release it in February, but faced immense opposition from powerful publisher William Randolph Hearst, on whom the film was partly based, and his allies in Hollywood. "Kane" would be released several months later.

Against this backdrop, Welles was trying to get RKO to produce "The Way to Santiago."

"Santiago" tells the story of a man who wakes up in Mexico with no idea of who he is or how he got there. The twist is that he has an uncanny resemblance to a notorious figure. The story follows the man's search for his own identity while evil forces try to kill him.

Welles intended to direct and star in the film, as he had done in "Kane," so the name of the main character is simply "Me" in the script.

In a letter on file in RKO's archives, Welles writes from New York to studio production



Chris Pizello/Associated Press

RKO chairman and CEO Ted Hartley is giving the green light to "The Way to Santiago," a 1941 Orson Welles script that never made it to the screen.

head George Schaeffer on Feb. 2, 1941, that he's eager to get started, assuring Schaeffer "we are going to successfully avoid a lot of the things that cost us time and money in the making of 'Kane.'"

"The only way to achieve the results we all urgently want is for those in responsibility to understand, finally, that even if they don't like my way of doing things, they must do it my way just the same... (and most important) without making an effort to prove in the process that my way is wrong," Welles wrote.

In a 1941 memo, a studio executive described the "Mexican Melodrama" script as "enormously interesting" and "exciting" with a good start, lots of suspense, though it "lets down a bit in the middle portion."

"With Welles' flair for casting, his fast-moving direction and his amazing, if recently acquired, knowledge of what can be done with a camera, I should be tempted to let him

work out his own problems on this one," the memo said.

The studio did express some concern about relations with the Mexican government over the subject matter of the film. This was at a time when RKO was co-owned by Nelson Rockefeller, who had oil holdings in Latin America.

But "The Way to Santiago" never got made because of a corporate shake-up that cost Welles his main supporter, Rockefeller; problems with Welles' second film, "The Magnificent Ambersons"; and Welles' own self-destructive behavior.

The script was filed away until the new RKO found it and gave it a second look. And while Hartley hails the script, he says it isn't without flaws. The search is on for a script doctor unafraid to take on a Welles screenplay.

"It needs some work," Hartley said. "Among other things, it kind of drifts off near the end."