Orson Welles's Subversive Genius:
The Third Man, Film Noir, and The Cold War

By Jonah Raskin

By the time that I began to screen *The Third Man* (1949) for college students in 1990, Orson Welles (1915-1985) was already a largely forgotten director and film noir — one of the genres at which he excelled — was a kind of cinematic curiosity in popular American culture. Such are the vicissitudes of fame, perhaps especially in Hollywood where stars rise and fall and disappear. By the 1990s Welles was underground and the undergraduates I taught didn't understand what made him tick or the motives behind his movies, including *Citizen Kane (1941)* and *Lady from Shanghai* (1947) in which he plays the fall guy and his estranged wife, Rita Hayworth, plays the femme fatale. If they didn't get *Kane* and *Lady*, they also didn't get *Touch of Evil* (1958) in which Welles plays a bloated policeman who straddles the border between the U.S. and Mexico and treats it as his own private backyard.

In the movies that he made in the 1940s and 1950s, Welles specialized in borders and in evil — and more than just a touch of it. Evil oozed off the screen and into the aisles. The characters he played — whether the newspaper mogul, Kane, in *Citizen Kane*, the white-collar gangster, Harry Lime, in *The Third Man*, or the seedy cop, Hank Quinlan, in *A Touch of Evil* — are all immensely evil, but they also have a sense of innocence and vulnerability about them. First and foremost they're Americans who have gone astray from playful youngsters to adult monsters out of control. From Lime's point of view, good people and ordinary citizens are fools to be squished like mosquitoes.

"In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance," Lime says in one of the film's most dramatic scenes which takes place at the Vienna Ferris Wheel — the Wiener Riesenrad. He adds, "In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock." Those lines aren't in the screenplay. Welles added them on the set and on the spur of the moment and thereby injected verve into the character of Harry Lime, a flesh-and-blood creature of the Cold War.

Of course, the cynical, manipulative characters that Welles plays in *Citizen Kane, The Third Man,* and *A Touch of Evil* don't survive their own searing ordeals. They certainly don't live happily ever after; by the end of each picture they're undone by their own machinations, caught up in the webs of intrigue they spin. On his deathbed, Kane misses the freedom of lost boyhood. Quinlan feels sentimental about the intimate evenings he spent in the company of the wry, seductive Tanya, played superbly by Marlene Dietrich. Quinlan and Kane and Lime all have a past that they're running from and yet are unable to escape. Like the figures in Shakespearean tragedy — like Lear, Hamlet and Macbeth — they're the authors of their own fate and their own fall. Terrible and terrifying, they teach us to love to hate them as they go down from high and mighty places.

Throughout the 1940s and well into the 1950s, Welles disturbed viewers by getting under their skin and poking away at psychological wounds until they were in emotional pain, sometimes laughing (appropriately) at the same time.

Tragedy and comedy clash and co-exist. For Welles, every scene mattered. Every gesture counted; nothing extraneous figured in the un-formulaic cinematic forms he shaped and reshaped.

Teaching film noir, *The Third Man* looked to me to be among the most accessible of his pictures, though *The Lady from Shanghai* wasn't far behind in my scheme of things. Both are fairly short and compact, without the epic sweep of *Citizen Kane*. Both are in black-and-white and both of them offer love stories without wedding bells at the end. In *The Lady from Shanghai,* Michael O'Hara (Welles), the main character — a sailor — as well as the narrator who provides the voiceovers outwits and outlasts the shark-like humans who try to destroy him. The innocent fish in a sea of evil, O'Hara escapes the traps set for him and remains a free man.

In *The Third Man*, evil taints everyone and everything. No one is really free of it, except perhaps the heroine who walks alone and keeps her own company. Welles did not, of course, direct the picture, though when I first saw it in the 1950s on late night TV I assumed he had. It seemed so much like Welles — over-sized, ironic, and capricious with visual puns and jokes, odd camera angles, and stark lighting that creates an ominous atmosphere. The British filmmaker, Carol Reed, directed it and was awarded a knighthood three years later, becoming Sir Reed. Reed had real talent and made several superb movies including *Odd Man Out* (1947), *The Fallen Idol* (1948), which was based on a Graham Greene short story, and *Outcast of the Islands* (1951), inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel of the same name. Reed was a hot director in the 1940s. Greene was a hot writer and provided a well-crafted screenplay for *The Third Man*, though significant changes were made on the set.

Welles was just as hot as they; his influence on Carol is felt from the beginning to the end of *The Third Man*. The American director and actor, Peter Bogdanovich, noted, in the introduction to the DVD version, "that the look of *The Third Man*— and, in fact, the whole film—would be unthinkable without *Citizen Kane*, *The Stranger*, and *The Lady of Shanghai*, all of which Orson made in the '40s, and all of which preceded *The Third Man*." Having Welles in front of the camera influenced what went on behind the camera and in the editing room, too.

In *The Third Man*, Welles plays to perfection the part of Harry Lime, the American black marketer against the backdrop of seedy Vienna in the aftermath of World War II — a border city divided between the Russians, the British, and the Americans. Crossing back and forth covertly from East to West, from the communist controlled zone to the territory under the supervision of the "free world," Lime doesn't make an appearance until the film is well under way and at first only as the shadow of a man. Out of sight and out of reach — an invisible, intangible and yet intense force — he haunts the picture, the other characters, and the audience, too. When he's in front of the camera, he fills the whole screen; paradoxically, his lengthy absences add power to his presence when he appears from out of the shadows of the city. Less is more, Welles showed lavish Hollywood producers.

Alida Valli performs brilliantly in the part of Lime's sad, lonely, loyal lover, Anna Schmidt. Joseph Cotton's acting in the role of Lime's buddy, Holly Martins, helps immensely, too, in part because he and Welles had collaborated on *Citizen Kane*. Martins's divided feelings for Lime add a layer of psychological depth to the picture. In a way, Lime (and Welles) play a kind of cat-and-mouse

game with the motion-picture camera and with Martins, the goofy, amateur sleuth — and writer of pulp westerns — who searches for his missing friend, finds him, loses him, finds him again, and loses his naivete, or so one hopes.

A classic about lost illusions, *The Third Man* gave the cold, heartless Cold War a memorable name and an unforgettable face — the face and the name of Harry Lime who would sell his own mother, his own country, and his own soul. A movie about a time and a place as well as a movie about a man rotten to the core, it didn't translate well to students in the 1990s when the Cold War seemed to be a relic of history and when divided cities such as Vienna were footnotes in textbooks.

Maybe the film is far too rooted in a specific albeit pivotal moment in the twentieth century; maybe it is indeed dated, but it's also a timeless work of art, as British film critic David Thomson — who is often stingy with accolades — noted. "*The Third Man* has one of the most intense atmospheres the screen has ever delivered," he writes in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. Thomson also argues that Welles "was not the best casting" for the part of Lime and that he gave the part "more charm than Greene intended." Noel Coward who was in the running for the role would have been a better choice, Thomson suggests. By adding charm to Lime, Welles made him a complex and fascinating character. If he were merely a crook we wouldn't care.

Moviegoers might not notice, when they first see *The Third Man,* that it's constructed around three scenes that take place in a Viennese cemetery, appropriately enough since Lime deals in batches of deadly, diluted penicillin that kill and maim infants. The symmetry of the movie gives it a sense of universality and amplifies the themes of friendship, love, and betrayal. Lime, the human rat, dies in the city's underground sewers, but his friends and lovers don't and can't forget him. Welles invites the audience to feel sympathy for an American devil. A lowly rat and yet a vulnerable human being, Lime is curiously absent and yet oddly present in the life of the city. An invisible and elusive fellow, he disappears from the crowd and reappears in the most public of places. He's a modern Till Eulenspiegel, the trickster, who figures in German folklore and who evades the gallows again and again until he's finally caught and hung – or does he escape yet again?

Watch *The Third Man* again. Or see it for the first time. It creates a spell, exudes a kind of magic; the soundtrack with the hypothetic zither music written and played by Anton Karas helps immensely, of course. The cinematographer, Robert Krasker, won an Oscar for *The Third Man* and well he should have. Carol Reed also deserves credit as the stunning director. But it's Welles's bravery that carries the picture. *The Third Man* came out near the height of the anti-communist crusade in Hollywood when directors deemed subversives were sent to jail and forced into exile. The time of *The Third Man* was the same time that the Hollywood "Ten" — including Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk and Ring Lardner, Jr. — were investigated and incarcerated.

No one inside or outside Hollywood had the gumption Welles had to play an insidious American when Hollywood was fixated on evil Russians and demonic Chinese, and when American characters who appeared in movies often smacked of star-spangled-banner-sentimentality. Harry Lime gave those portraits the lie. (Of course, not every Hollywood movie from 1949 was an exercise in patriotism. *All the King's Men* showed that little dictators grew on

American soil). To the role of Lime, Welles brought an American voice that resonated globally. Into the picture, he injected a cocky, audacious style that reflected the nuclear madness of the Cold War. Welles gave Lime cinematic immortality and put him alongside the map of iconic figures he'd brought to life: Charles Foster Kane, Hank Quinlan, and Michael O'Hara. "The Third Man" — a modern Everyman — with his diabolical schemes and underground escapades, lives everywhere in the hearts of noir movie lovers.