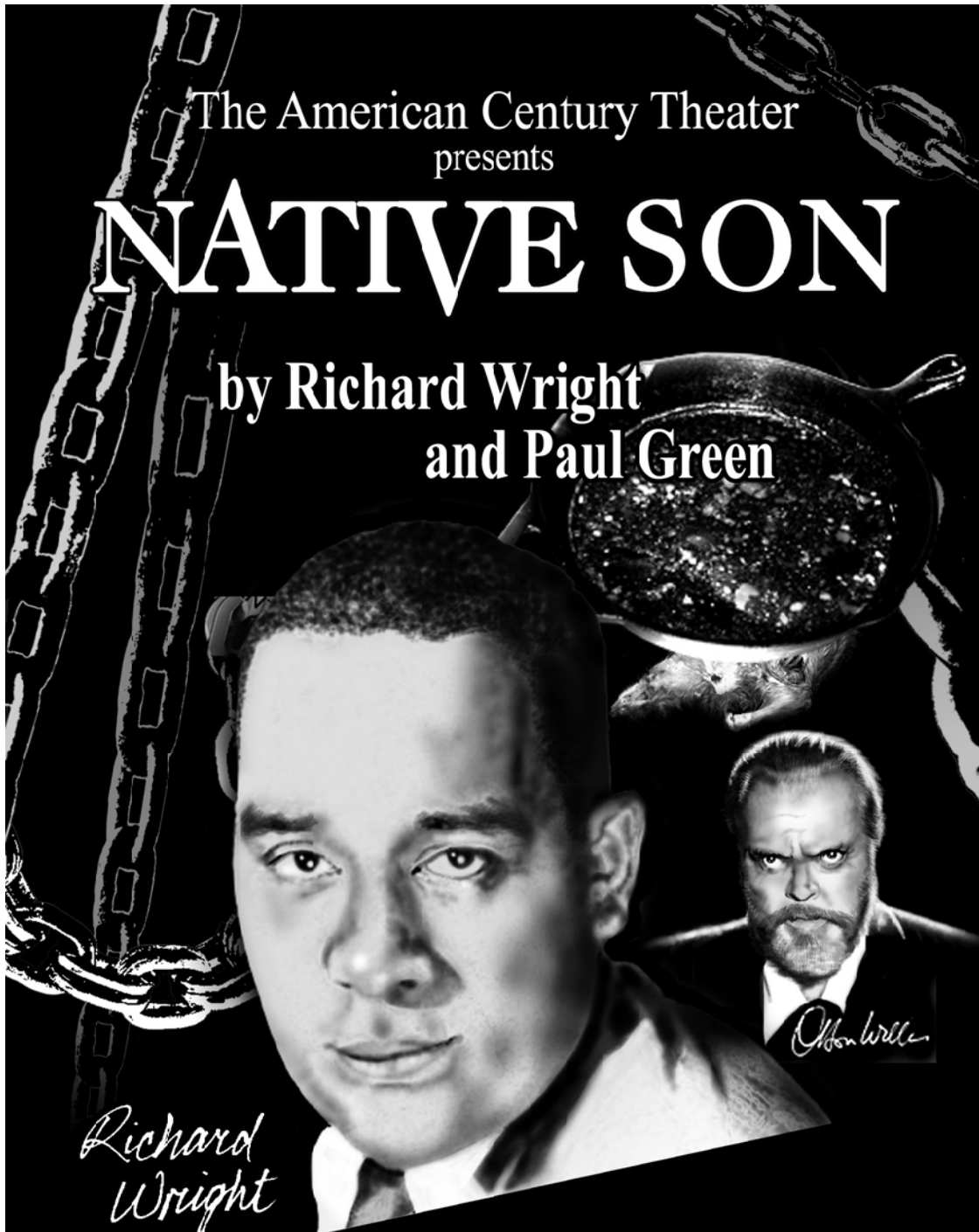


The American Century Theater
presents

NATIVE SON

by Richard Wright
and Paul Green



*Richard
Wright*

Olson Willis

AUDIENCE GUIDE

Compiled and edited by Jack Marshall

April 14–May 9, 2009 • Theater II, Gunston Arts

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and worthy American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins, and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is supported in part by Arlington County through the Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources and the Arlington Commission for the Arts.

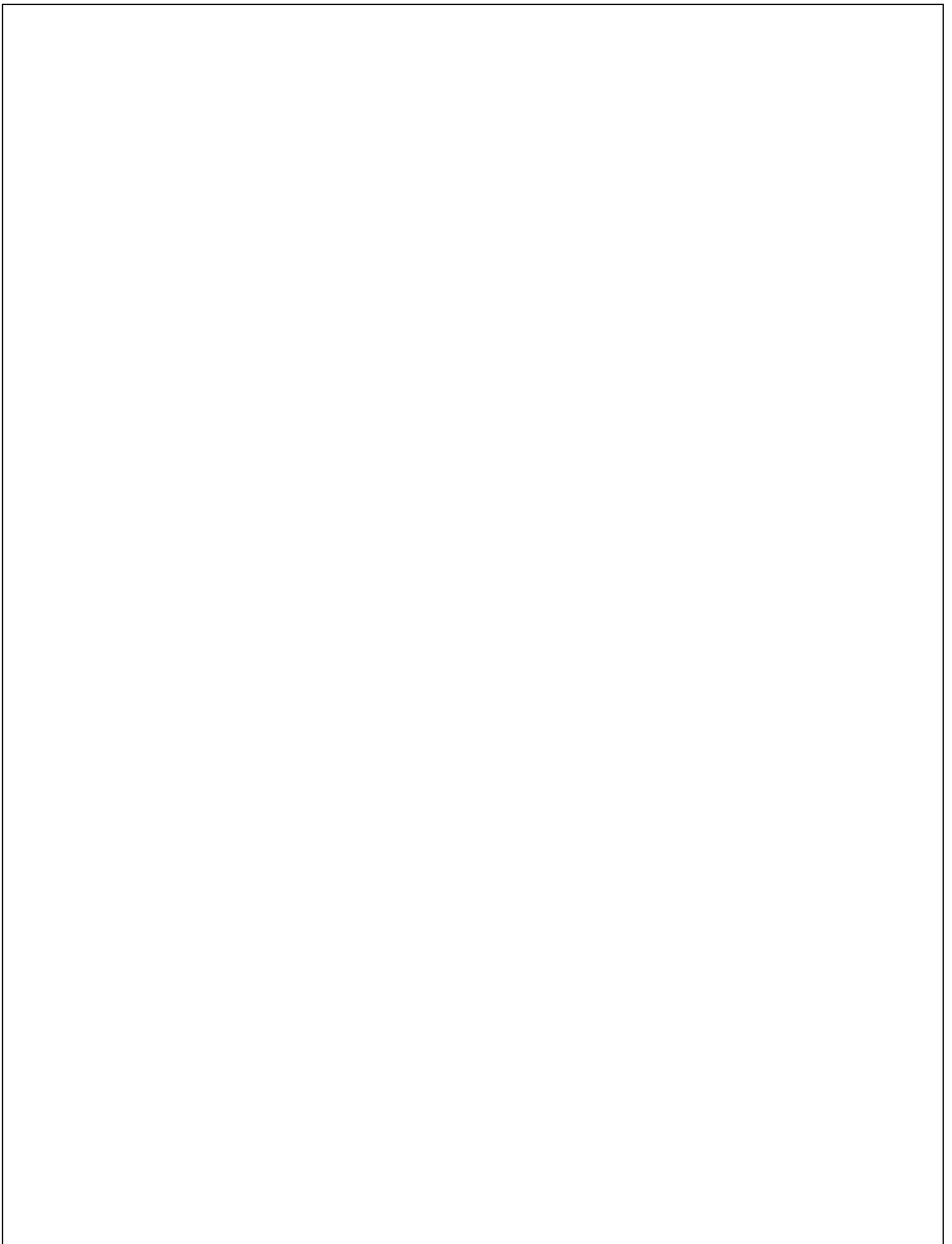
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Orson's Farewell: The Remarkable First Production of *Native Son*

—*Jack Marshall*

It is hard to believe, observing the current state of live theater, literature, and mass entertainment in America, that there once was a time when critical, culture-altering ideas regularly reached the public through published works of fiction and when the stage was among the most powerful tools for igniting such ideas into public debate, political action, and social movements. But there was such an era, and it peaked in the 1930s, when the stress and turmoil of the Great Depression created a hothouse for provocative artistic expression. And at the tail end of this period came one of the most remarkable examples of what the dynamic interaction of revolutionary thought, artistic innovation, literature, and theater could achieve.

It was the stage production of Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*.

The catalyst for the project was Orson Welles, then waiting for the release of the film that would transform into a Hollywood icon, *Citizen Kane*. Perhaps Welles knew that his next theatrical production would be his last as the Boy Wonder of Broadway. His Mercury Theater Company had been the most dynamic and surprising of many dynamic and surprising troupes in New York, and he was the company's resident genius and lightning rod. Welles had led the mob of first-nighters to an abandoned theater to improvise an opening night for the incendiary musical, *The Cradle Will Rock*; he had turned *Julius Caesar* into a hard-edged political tract, and transformed *Macbeth* into a voodoo spell. Now he was entranced by Richard Wright's newly published novel, *Native Son*, an unblinking examination of the consequences of white oppression and racism, portraying the black man in America as a ticking time-bomb, his fuse lit by centuries of abuse, ready to explode with violent results.

The book itself was a ticking bomb, and Welles—as always, equal parts idealist, visionary and showman—felt the stage, his stage, was the perfect place to explode it. Wright himself had described the book as “a special premiere given (to the reader) in his own special theater.” John Houseman, Welles' long-suffering partner who provided periodic ballast to Welles' erratic ways, was the first to read *Native Son* and realize its potential for Mercury and Orson, and took it upon himself to persuade Wright to adapt it into the theatrical script. Wright was dubious, and with good reason. Most of

the portrayals of blacks on stage and screen up to that point had been ridiculous at best and outrageously offensive at worst.

Houseman swore to Wright that he and Welles were “convinced that the material is capable of extension and development in the dramatic form” which was a medium in which a serious artist can directly and courageously express himself to audiences.” His entreaties did the trick. But Houseman was disappointed to discover that Wright had already made a commitment to playwright Paul Green that if *Native Son* were ever adapted for the stage, they would do it together. Now the embryonic project had four bona fide stars with strong personalities, Houseman, Wright, Green, and Welles, in the middle of it. It was combination as unstable as the fictional protagonist of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas.

Wright and Green were a genuine odd couple. Green was a Southern white progressive, dedicated to civil rights and other causes, including the abolition of the death penalty. He frequently wrote plays about black characters, and Wright, while working with Chicago’s Federal Negro Theater in 1936, had organized a staged reading of Green’s *A Hymn to the Rising Son*, an indictment of the cruelty of chain gangs. Wright was impressed with Green’s avoidance of black stereotypes, but his cast refused to perform the play, arguing that it did not present blacks in a sufficiently positive light. Thus it was ironic that when Green and Wright began working on the script for *Native Son*, Green worked to “lighten up” the portrayal of Bigger Thomas, and make him more sympathetic.

Wright, perhaps out of respect for Green’s playwriting accomplishments and because he was working in a new medium, yielded a lot of ground—so much, in Houseman’s view, that it threatened the integrity of the work. He wrote in his autobiography that Green tried “ ’til the day of the play’s opening, through madness, reprieve, suicide, regeneration, and other purging and sublimating devices, to evade and dilute the dramatic conclusion with which Wright had consciously and deliberately ended a book in which he wanted his readers to face the horrible truth “without the consolation of tears.”

Although Wright had invented the term “black power,” he seemed powerless against Green’s persuasion, and the draft given to Houseman had a sentimental ending that he regarded as dreadful. Houseman refused to produce it. Then he began working secretly with Wright to restore the book’s ending to the play, without ever informing Green. (Decades later, Paul Green had his version of the script produced in North Carolina. It was extremely well received by both critics and audience. Was Green right about the ending

all along? In the sense that it made a more commercially palatable play, perhaps. But Houseman was right in his assessment that his revised ending was truer to the spirit of the novel.)

The script was secondary anyway, once the Boy Genius got his hands on it. As usual, Welles pulled, tugged, and stomped on the text, using his astounding imagination and vast array of technical skills: he was a gifted set, lighting, sound, and costume designer in his own right and was uniquely able to coordinate the visions of his designers into a coherent whole.

Not without driving everyone crazy in the process, however. Welles was especially focused (for him: he was an undiagnosed sufferer from attention deficit disorder his whole life) during *Native Son* rehearsals because, for once, he wasn't in the cast. But like all Mercury Theater productions, the rehearsal schedule swung between erratic and dangerous. One tech rehearsal lasted 36 hours. Welles became obsessed with lighting, and kept demanding that more instruments be hung over the stage until the grid collapsed, nearly killing some members of the crew. To keep the pace of the intermission-free show seamless, Welles hired thirty-six stage hands, who were drilled mercilessly in set changes.

Houseman and others have commented that Welles displayed more than his usual level of intensity on *Native Son*, which is a little frightening to imagine. Welles biographer, Simon Callow, attributes some of this to Welles' growing rage over the delays in releasing "Citizen Kane," but it is also true that Welles was truly an ideological ally with Wright. His hatred of bigotry, racism, and segregation was genuine and heartfelt, and he was a committed civil rights activist all his life. And it appears that Wright trusted Welles implicitly. He was frequently present at rehearsals, but as far as anyone knows, gave the director free rein . . . which, Orson being Orson, was going to be the final result anyway.

Paul Green, in contrast, was kept away. When he finally saw the play, shortly before opening, he felt betrayed and returned with legal reinforcements, threatening lawsuits. Houseman's only reinforcement in the battle that followed was Welles, who simply berated Green until he left, saying, "It's yours." Green later explained that, while the experience upset him and he felt deceived and mistreated, ultimately the play was Wright's, for good or ill. According to Houseman, neither he nor Welles ever spoke to him again, nor he to them. But Green did not ask to have his name pulled from the play as co-author, perhaps because, by his account, every scene except the one written by Houseman was entirely his work.

Welles, meanwhile, as befit his ADD, was equally as occupied with freeing *Citizen Kane* from the studio as he was with *Native Son*. He even placed the iconic Rosebud sled on the *Native Son* set, which amused Wright no end. The publicity surrounding the *Kane* soap opera also built interest in *Native Son*.

Welles had taken a gamble in the casting the play's "make or break" role of Bigger Thomas. In 1935, Canada Lee, a former boxer, violinist, jockey, and nightclub owner who had just begun to act professionally, had been cast by Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Lifeboat*. Welles used him in 1936 in his voodoo *Macbeth* as Banquo, and Lee had continued to act professionally. But nothing in his résumé or experience as an actor prepared him to play a part as large and difficult as Wright's antihero. By some estimates, Welles spent so much time working with Lee that he neglected the rest of the cast—some reviews that raved about the play complained about the quality of the smaller roles. But Welles had used his time well. Lee's performance was unanimously hailed as brilliant, and the small film record of his few movie appearances suggest that he was indeed an actor of depth and presence.

Although reviews were unanimously positive, there was no agreement about which elements of the production were excellent other than Canada Lee. As is almost always the case with adaptation of iconic books, some felt the play wasn't sufficiently faithful to Wright's text, while others argued passionately that it was too faithful. While every reviewer was impressed with Welles' hypercreative and theatrical direction, some questioned whether Orson's style overwhelmed Wright's substance—a fair question and one that Welles encountered regularly throughout his theatrical career and his film career as well. Welles was artistically incapable of telling any story straightforwardly, perhaps because he was so easily bored himself. A Welles production had to keep the audience breathless. But the critical cheers easily drowned out the naysayers. Brooks Atkinson of the *Times* wrote: "Mr. Welles is a young man with a lot of flaring ideals, and when he is standing on the director's podium, he renews the youth of the theater."

As Welles biographer Cowell notes, *Native Son* was not the only show in town. Far from it: the spring of 1941 on the Great White Way featured the original productions of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Johnny Belinda*, *Pal Joey*, *Panama Hattie*, *The Corn is Green*, and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Business started well, but began falling off. The show was picketed by the Urban League, which found the play's grim ending offensive and "counter-productive," and the Communist Party, which regarded former member Wright as a traitor to the cause. The biggest problem, in the producer's view, was the lack of sufficient support from African American

audiences, who seldom ventured into Broadway theaters. This was especially vexing to Wright, who brainstormed with Houseman to find ways to engage the black press.

But in retrospect, it may have been unrealistic to expect a serious, politically controversial, and socially explosive show like *Native Son* to be a huge commercial hit, no matter how stylishly it was directed. Even in those days, New York audiences liked happy endings, music and yuks, and *Native Son* was no *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Nor is it likely that a majority of potential white ticket-buyers were receptive to Wright's harsh indictment or eager to experience it first hand. That *Native Son* ran 114 performances has to be judged a triumph.

The show was put on the road (in a stripped-down version) and had a successful tour, then returned to Broadway briefly, again to critical acclaim. By this time, Welles was gone, *Citizen Kane* having been released, and his transition from Boy Genius of Broadway to Star-Crossed Genius of Hollywood was in full swing. *Native Son* was to be the final gasp of the Mercury Theater, the end of Welles' partnership with Houseman, and in the view of some, the zenith of serious theater in America. It would be more than a decade before the signs of theater's decline in American culture became unmistakable, but Orson Welles was the one artist whose daring and energy might have sent it on a completely different path. Instead, he crossed over to the enemy.

Native Son became one of the rare Broadway shows that acquired the reputation of being unproducable without the original director and star. (The Gertrude Lawrence musical, *Lady in the Dark*, another legendary show of 1941, met the same fate.) It entered Broadway lore as a landmark, but exited the American stage repertoire. Today, Welles' Broadway adventures are barely recalled, and Canada Lee has been forgotten. John Houseman is remembered, if at all, as a TV pitchman for a defunct investment company and an elderly character actor whose last appearance was a cameo in *The Naked Gun*. Of Paul Green's many important plays, only his pageant *The Lost Colony* sparks recognition from the average theatergoer.

Only Richard Wright's novel, and its place in our political thought and social history, has endured. *Native Son*'s remarkable stage adaptation helped ensure that, and for that, it deserves a nation's thanks and respect.

Native Son

Opening: March 24, 1941 **Closing:** June 28, 1941

St. James Theatre, Broadway, NYC

Setting: Chicago, The Present

Opening Night Production Credits

Produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman

Written by Paul Green and Richard Wright

Based on the novel by Richard Wright

Directed by Orson Welles

Scenic Design by James Morcom

Opening Night Cast

<u>Jacqueline Ghant Andre</u>	A Neighbor
<u>Frances Bavier</u>	Peggy
<u>John Berry</u>	A Reporter
<u>C.M. Bootsie Davis</u>	Ernie Jones
<u>Philip Bourneuf</u>	Buckley, D.A.
<u>Eileen Burns</u>	Miss Emmett
<u>Anne Burr</u>	Mary Dalton
<u>Ray Collins</u>	Paul Max, Attorney for the Defense
<u>Evelyn Ellis</u>	Hannah Thomas
<u>Nell Harrison</u>	Mrs. Dalton
<u>Canada Lee</u>	Bigger Thomas
<u>William Malone</u>	Judge
<u>Helen Martin</u>	Vera Thomas
<u>Rena Joseph</u>	Clara
<u>Joseph Pevney</u>	Jan Erlone
<u>J. Flashe Riley</u>	Jack
<u>Don Roberts</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Stephen Roberts</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Erskine Sanford</u>	Mr. Dalton
<u>Wardell Saunders</u>	Gus Mitchell
<u>Everett Sloane</u>	Britten
<u>Paul Stewart</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Roderster Timmons</u>	G.H. Rankin
<u>Lloyd Warren</u>	Buddy Thomas
<u>George Zorn</u>	A Newspaper Man

Richard Wright's Life

—Ann Rayson

Richard Wright (September 4, 1908–November 28, 1960) was born Richard Nathaniel Wright on Rucker's Plantation, between Roxie and Natchez, Mississippi, the son of Nathaniel Wright, an illiterate sharecropper, and Ella Wilson, a schoolteacher. When Wright was five, his father left the family and his mother was forced to take domestic jobs away from the house. Wright and his brother spent a period at an orphanage. Around 1920, Ella Wright became a paralytic, and the family moved from Natchez to Jackson, then to Elaine, Arkansas, and back to Jackson to live with Wright's maternal grandparents, who were restrictive Seventh Day Adventists. Wright moved from school to school, graduating from the ninth grade at the Smith Robertson Junior High School in Jackson as the class valedictorian in June 1925. Wright had published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in three parts in the *Southern Register* in 1924, but no copies survive. His staunchly religious and illiterate grandmother, Margaret Bolden Wilson, kept books out of the house and thought fiction was the work of the devil. Wright kept any aspirations he had to be a writer to himself after his first experience with publication.

After grade school, Wright attended Lanier High School but dropped out after a few weeks to work. He took a series of odd jobs to save enough money to leave for Memphis, which he did at age seventeen. While in Memphis he worked as a dishwasher and delivery boy and for an optical company. He began to read contemporary American literature as well as commentary by H. L. Mencken, which struck him with particular force. As Wright reveals in his autobiography, *Black Boy*, he borrowed the library card of an Irish co-worker and forged notes to the librarian so he could read: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?" Determined to leave the South before he would irretrievably overstep the bounds of Jim Crow restrictions on blacks, Wright took the train to Chicago in December 1927.

In Chicago, Wright worked at the post office, at Michael Reese Hospital taking care of lab animals, and as an insurance agent, among other jobs. There, in 1932, he became involved in the John Reed Club, an intellectual arm of the Communist party, which he joined the next March. By 1935, he found work with the Federal Negro Theater in Chicago under the Federal Writers' Project. He wrote some short stories and a novel during this time, but they were not published until after his death. In 1937, Wright moved to New

York City, where he helped start *New Challenge* magazine and was the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker* as well as coeditor of *Left Front*. Wright's literary career was launched when his short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), won first prize for the *Story* magazine contest open to Federal Writer's Project authors for best book-length manuscript. Harper's published this collection with "Fire and Cloud," "Long Black Song," "Down by the Riverside," and "Big Boy Leaves Home." In 1940, the story "Bright and Morning Star" was added, and the book was reissued. *Native Son* followed in 1940, the first bestselling novel by a black American writer and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by an African American writer. It sold 215,000 copies in its first three weeks of publication. *Native Son* made Wright the most respected and wealthiest black writer in America. He was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's prestigious Spingarn Medal in 1941. After *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright declared in "How Bigger Was Born" that he needed to write a book that bankers' daughters would not be able to "read and feel good about," that would "be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." *Native Son* is uncompromising.

In *Native Son*, Wright presents his guilt-of-the-nation thesis. His main character, Bigger Thomas, is a nineteen-year-old, edgy, small-time criminal from Chicago's South Side ghetto. The novel races with no stops in between the three parts: Book I, Fear; Book II, Flight; and Book III, Fate. When Bigger is offered a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, he imagines himself in various fanciful scenarios, including sexual ones with the daughter. Lines that referred to Bigger's sexual interest in Mary Dalton were taken out in 1940 and only restored fifty-three years later in the 1993 Library of America edition edited by Arnold Rampersad and copyrighted by Wright's second wife, Ellen Wright. Bigger's first driving job requires him to take Mary to pick up her Communist lover, Jan Erlone, then eat with the couple in a black diner on the South Side. They drink themselves into oblivion on the ride home and invite Bigger to join them. Jan leaves, and Bigger must take Mary home and put her in bed. Terrified to be in Mary's bedroom and afraid to be caught as he is kissing her, he puts a pillow over her face when her blind mother walks in. Realizing he has accidentally murdered her, he drags her in a trunk to the basement and burns her in the furnace. Bigger rationalizes, correctly for a while, that the whites will never suspect him because they will think he is not smart enough to plan such a crime.

As it begins to snow, Bigger leaves the Dalton house and returns to his mother's tenement feeling like a new man. Bigger now sees that everyone he knows is blind; he himself is filled with elation for having killed a white girl, the ultimate taboo, and gotten away with it. To seal his guilt, Wright has Bigger murder his girlfriend Bessie in a brutal and premeditated way in Book II. As the snowfall becomes a blizzard, Bigger is surrounded by the white world, whose search closes in and captures him. At the trial in Book III, Bigger is never convicted for Bessie's murder but only for the assumed rape of Mary, deemed to be a more serious crime than even Mary's murder. Boris A. Max, a Communist Party lawyer, undertakes Bigger's defense because Bigger has implicated Jan and the party in a kidnap note to the Daltons.

While Wright made blacks proud of his success, he also made them uncomfortable with the protagonist, Bigger, who is a stereotype of the “brute Negro” they had been trying to overcome with novels of uplift by the “talented tenth” since the Gilded Age. Wright's argument is that racist America created Bigger; therefore, America had better change or more Biggers would be out there. At the end, when Max fails to understand Bigger, who cannot be saved from the electric chair, Wright is faulting the Communist Party for not comprehending the black people it relied on for support. (Personally disillusioned with the party, Wright left it in 1942 and wrote an essay published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944 called “I Tried to Be a Communist,” which was later reprinted in *The God That Failed* (1949), a collection of essays by disillusioned ex-Communists.) *Native Son* continues to be regarded as Wright's greatest novel and most influential book. As a result, he has been called the father of black American literature, a figure with whom writers such as James Baldwin had to contend.

To divest himself of Wright's influence, Baldwin wrote a series of three essays criticizing Wright's use of naturalism and protest fiction. In “Everybody's Protest Novel,” published in *Partisan Review* in 1949, Baldwin concludes, “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.” On the other hand, Wright has been credited with presaging the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, particularly in his protest poetry, much of which was published in Chicago in the 1930s. As Irving Howe said in his 1963 essay “Black Boys and Native Sons,” “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies . . . [and] brought

out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.”

As Wright was rising to prominence, his personal life was going through changes as well. In 1939 he had married Dhimah Rose Meadman, a Russian-Jewish ballet dancer. Wright moved her, her son, her mother, and her pianist to Mexico for a few months and then realized the marriage was not a success. He returned to New York and divorced Dhimah in 1940. On the trip back to New York, Wright stopped to visit his father for the first time in twenty-five years. In *Black Boy*, he describes his father during this visit as “standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands . . . when I tried to talk to him I realized that . . . we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality.” In 1941 he married Ellen Poplar, a white woman and Communist party member with whom he had worked and been in love before he married Dhimah. A year later their first daughter was born. Their second daughter was born in Paris in 1949.

During 1940 to 1941, Wright collaborated with Paul Green to write a stage adaptation of *Native Son*. It ran on Broadway in the spring of 1941, produced by John Houseman and staged by Orson Welles. Simultaneously, Wright published his sociological-psychological treatise *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), with photographs collected by Edwin Rosskam. The book was well received. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, came out in 1945, again a bestseller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection, although the U.S. Senate denounced *Black Boy* as “obscene.” The later section about his life in Chicago and experience with the Communist Party was not published until 1977, under the title *American Hunger*. Wright's publishers in 1945 had only wanted the story of his life in the South and cut what followed about his life in the North.

There have been numerous biographies of Wright, but all must begin with *Black Boy*, Wright's personal and emotional account of his childhood and adolescence in the Jim Crow South. In a famous passage in the autobiography that has bothered critics and set Wright apart from the African American sense of community, he asserts the “cultural barrenness of black life”: “. . . I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair.” He

found an “unconscious irony” in the idea that “Negroes led so passionate an existence”: “I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.” Statements like these are contradicted by others that describe a caring community. For example, when Wright's mother suffers a paralytic stroke, “the neighbors nursed my mother day and night, fed us and washed our clothes,” and Wright admits to being “ashamed that so often in my life I had to be fed by strangers.”

In 1946, Wright was invited to France. After he returned to the United States, he decided he could no longer tolerate the racism he experienced even in New York City. Married to a white woman and living in the North, he still was not able to buy an apartment as a black man; furthermore, he hated the stares he and his family received on the streets. And he was still called “boy” by some shopkeepers. So in 1947, he moved permanently to France and settled in Paris. Wright never again saw the United States. He worked during 1949 to 1951 on a film version of *Native Son*, in which he himself played Bigger. Wright, forty years old and overweight, had to train and stretch verisimilitude to play the nineteen-year-old Bigger. During filming in Buenos Aires and Chicago, the production was fraught with problems. The film was released briefly but was unsuccessful. European audiences acclaimed it, but the abridged version failed in the United States and the film disappeared.

Wright did not publish a book after *Black Boy* until 1953 when his “existential” novel, *The Outsider*, was published to mixed reviews. Cross Damon, the main character, is overwhelmed by the demands of his wife, his mother, and his mistress. Seizing a chance opportunity during a train crash, he leaves his identity papers with a dead man and disappears. He ends up committing three murders to save himself, then is himself murdered by the Communist Party in the United States for his independence. *Savage Holiday* followed in 1954, a “white” novel whose main character, Erskine Fowler, exemplifies the dangers of repressed emotion. Fowler has been obsessed with desire for his mother. He marries a prostitute, then murders her; the graphic murder scene disturbed some readers. The novel is an exception to Wright's work in that it has no black characters. *Savage Holiday* was not even a mild critical success.

During the mid-1950s Wright traveled extensively—to Africa, Asia, and Spain—and wrote several nonfiction works on political and sociological topics. He had helped found *Présence Africaine* with Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Alioune Diop during 1946 to 1948. He spent some time in Ghana and in 1954 published *Black Power* (a term coined by Wright) to

mixed reviews. *Black Power* concerns itself with the color line in Africa and the new “tragic elite,” the leaders of the former colonies. Ghanaian writer Kwame Anthony Appiah said later that Wright failed to understand Africans when he urged Africa to leave tribal custom behind and join the technological era. In April 1955, Wright attended the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the first meeting of twenty-nine new nations of Africa and Asia. He published his account as *The Color Curtain* in 1956 (after the French edition of 1955).

Throughout his international political activities, Wright knew correctly that he was being shadowed by the Central Intelligence Agency. His paranoia was later justified when evidence about his surveillance was made available under the Freedom of Information Act. After Wright made two trips to Franco's Spain, he published a book of his observations, *Pagan Spain* (1956). Here Wright, with his “peasant” understanding, exposes the dark side of violence and moral hypocrisy beneath the national adherence to Catholicism. In 1957, he put together a collection of his lectures given between 1950 and 1956 in Europe, *White Man, Listen!*, which includes “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” an important overview. Wright's books published during the 1950s disappointed some critics, who said that his move to Europe alienated him from American blacks and thus separated him from his emotional and psychological roots. During the 1950s, Wright grew more internationalist in outlook. While he accomplished much as an important public literary and political figure with a worldwide reputation, his creative work did decline.

The last work Wright submitted for publication during his lifetime, *The Long Dream*, a novel, was released in 1958. Here he portrays his strongest black father, Tyree Tucker, and treats the black middle class in the setting of Clintonville, Mississippi. This was the first novel in a planned trilogy about Tyree Tucker and his son Fishbelly. Wright did finish the second novel, *Island of Hallucinations*, about Fishbelly's escape to Paris, but it was not published. *The Long Dream*, taking place in the long-gone South of the 1940s, seemed out of date to readers. Critics faulted Wright for being away from the source of his material for too long, and *Time* magazine criticized him for “living amid the alien corn.” Subsequent critics, however, have regarded his late fiction more seriously. In 1959, Wright's *Daddy Goodness* was staged in Paris in collaboration with Louis Sapin, and a 1960 Broadway stage version of *The Long Dream*, produced by Ketti Frings, was unsuccessful.

During his last year and a half, Wright suffered from amoebic dysentery acquired during his travels to Africa or Asia, and he died suddenly of an apparent heart attack while recuperating at the Clinique Eugène Gibeze in Paris. There have been recurrent rumors that Wright was murdered, but this has not been substantiated. After his death, his wife Ellen submitted for publication his second collection of short stories, *Eight Men* (1961), which Wright had completed eight years earlier. She then published his novel *Lawd Today* in 1963, generally considered to be the least powerful of Wright's works, although William Burrisson has argued for its sophistication and artistic merit (“Another Look at *Lawd Today*,” *CLA Journal* 29 [June 1986]: 424–41). *Lawd Today*, clearly influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses*, presents one day in the life of Jake Jackson in Chicago. Wright had finished this manuscript in 1934, titled it *Cesspool*, and had it repeatedly rejected by publishers before *Native Son* was released.

The unexpurgated 1993 edition of *Native Son* saddles readers with an even less sympathetic Bigger Thomas, ensuring this novel's role in confronting future generations of complaisant Americans about the scourge of race and fulfilling W.E.B. Du Bois' prophecy in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”



Paul Green: The Innovator

American playwright Paul Green (1894–1981) would be an apt symbol for the American Century Theater's mission, for in many ways he personifies the passionate, ground-breaking, thoughtful, and inclusive 20th century stage works that this company is dedicated to presenting to 21st century audiences. He also is an artistically, politically, and historically important figure who, like many of his contemporaries, is largely unknown to a large segment of the public. Paul Green's prolific career and accomplishments deserve more recognition, respect, and gratitude.

Paul Eliot Green was born on March 17, 1894. He grew up on a cotton farm in rural Harnett County, North Carolina, and quickly learned to appreciate hard physical labor as well as history, literature and music. He read books as he followed a mule-drawn plow. He taught himself to play the violin, and was an accomplished musician: he would later compose music for his dramas. After high school, Green supported himself by teaching and playing

semi-professional baseball until he earned enough money to go the University of North Carolina.

His collegiate education was interrupted by World War I, but the war was an education too. Green left the military as a passionate opponent of war and inhumanity of all kinds. He finally graduated from the University in 1921 and began to write plays. His writings reflected his passionate hatred of racial discrimination, capital punishment, military conflict, and abuse of power. The play that launched his career, *In Abraham's Bosom*, was a powerful statement about the plight of the black man in the South and earned the young firebrand the 1927 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The same year, Green's tragic depiction of the decline of an old Southern family, *The House of Connelly*, became the newly formed Group Theatre's inaugural production—a major historical achievement for Green, as the Group Theater went on to become one of the transforming forces in American theater.

Rather than continue on the clear path to becoming an influential Broadway playwright, Green moved from the success of *The House of Connelly* into a unique new area. He began experimenting with developing a new dramatic form, the symphonic drama, a form of historical pageant usually set on the very site depicted in the action and embodying music, dance, pantomime, and poetic dialogue. From 1927 to 1936, Green wrote folk plays designed for local audiences in Iowa, North Carolina, and other states; several never received a professional production. He was lured back to Broadway briefly in 1936 to write the book and lyrics for *Johnny Johnson*, an anti-war operetta with music by Kurt Weill. Green wrote 32 songs for the show, which broke with all convention by being an American musical with little or no comedy.

By 1937, Green was ready to unveil the first of his symphonic dramas, *The Lost Colony*, recounting the tale of Sir Walter Raleigh's doomed colony on Roanoke Island. It was an immediate sensation, and the production has been regularly remounted in North Carolina every year since its debut. Green wrote sixteen more symphonic dramas, spanning many states and historical landmarks. Today more than fifty symphonic dramas are regularly produced around the country. Indeed, many commentators credit Green with inventing one of the two significant American contributions to dramatic form, the other being the American musical.

Paul Green's huge creative output included not only symphonic dramas, but other plays of various types, essays, books of North Carolina folklore, several novels, and a number of cinema scripts for such prominent stars of the 1930s

as Will Rogers, Bette Davis, Janet Gaynor, and others. In 1941, Green was called upon by Richard Wright to help him adapt Wright's novel *Native Son* for the Broadway stage. In the end it was not a happy collaboration: Wright and Green were well matched politically, but Green's strong sense of hope and optimism as well as his playwriting style clashed with the novelist's objectives and the harsh tone of the novel. Many of Green's contributions to the script were surreptitiously removed in rehearsal by director Orson Welles and producer John Houseman, and Green, understandably, felt mistreated and ill used. But without Green's early involvement, the play may well have never been produced.

After *Native Son*, Green concentrated on local dramas and his outdoor pageants, returning to Broadway only sporadically, as with his adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1951. Throughout his long career, Paul Green supported human rights causes in person, in print, and financially. He wrote on and spoke out against political oppression, war, lynching, chain gangs, prejudice, and superstition. He was particularly committed to ending the death penalty in North Carolina and many times waged letter campaigns on behalf of condemned men, urging new trials, commutations, or pardons. Through the 1920s and 1930s, Green was not an absolutist regarding the death penalty but came to believe that it ought to be abolished, arguing that "no absolute punishment should be based on less than absolute knowledge."

Green taught philosophy and drama at Chapel Hill until 1944, when he retired to devote his time to writing. He was a lifetime participant in the cultural life of North Carolina, one of the co-founders of the North Carolina Symphony and the Institute of Outdoor Drama, which supports the nationwide community of symphonic dramas that evolved using the model of Green's *Lost Colony*.

Green traveled the world on behalf of UNESCO, lecturing about drama and about human rights. In addition to his early Pulitzer Prize, he was awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, the National Theatre Conference Award, and nine honorary degrees.

Paul Green died on May 4, 1981, when he was eighty-seven years old. He was posthumously inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in New York in 1993 and the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 1996.



John Houseman: The Mercury Theater's Forgotten Man

—*Jack Marshall*

John Houseman, the producer of *Native Son*, deserves far greater fame and credit for his important contributions to American theater than his memory, as it currently exists in popular culture, would suggest. He spent more than a half century in the theater as an influential producer and director, but only achieved fame when, at the age of seventy-one, he portrayed an imperious Harvard Law School professor in the film, *The Paper Chase*, and its subsequent television series.

The role of Professor Kingsfield led to another well-known part—that of a haughty spokesman for a brokerage house in its television commercials, delivering the once-famous motto, “They make money the old-fashioned way. They *earn* it.” (Houseman’s pronunciation of “earn” was fodder for comedians long after the commercials had been discontinued.) But there was much more to John Houseman than that. “Almost every major theater in America is run by a Houseman protégé,” director James Bridges, who cast Mr. Houseman in *The Paper Chase*, said upon Houseman’s death in 1988. Indeed, John Houseman is a major figure in the history of American theater, though today a dimly remembered one.

John Houseman was born on September 22, 1902, in Bucharest, several years before his British mother and his Alsatian father, a successful grain trader, were married. Young Jacques Haussmann, as he was then called, celebrated two of his first four birthdays on board the Orient Express between Paris and Bucharest. He came to the United States in 1924, but his resident status was not regularized until he was admitted as a legal immigrant in 1936.

“I was making a very bad living as an adapter, translator, and hanger-around in the theater,” Houseman recalled during an interview in 1986. “I became a director by pure accident.” At a cocktail party he was introduced to the composer Virgil Thomson, who needed someone to work on his opera and impulsively offered Mr. Houseman the job. “There was no reason why he should have done that,” Mr. Houseman said. “I didn’t know anything about anything.”

Four Saints in Three Acts had a libretto by Gertrude Stein (“Pigeons on the grass, alas”) and an all-black cast, whose members were chosen because of their voice quality and because Mr. Thomson thought they moved with

dignity. It opened in Hartford in 1934, was brought to New York, and then toured the country. The opera was a critical success, but the production marked Houseman as a maverick and a highbrow, Houseman said later, and did not lead to immediate offers of directing jobs.

The Works Progress Administration's Federal Theater Project created an opportunity. In 1935, Houseman and Orson Welles organized the WPA's Negro Theater Project, which made theater history with its production of a version of *Macbeth* set in Haiti, with voodoo priestesses playing the roles of Shakespeare's witches. Welles also imported a real Haitian witch doctor to spice up the cast. This was the beginning of what was to become a fruitful but stormy partnership in which, Houseman wrote, Welles "was the teacher, I, the apprentice." Houseman was both an eager student of Welles' genius and a calming influence on Welles' erratic, unpredictable nature. After ten months with the Negro Theater Project, Houseman wrote that he was faced with the dilemma of risking his future "on a partnership with a twenty-year-old boy in whose talent I had unquestioning faith but with whom I must increasingly play the combined and tricky roles of producer, censor, adviser, impresario, father, older brother and bosom friend." He took the chance and, in 1936, with Welles created the Classical Theater, another WPA project, for which Welles directed and played the title role in Marlowe's *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*.

Mr. Houseman and Welles defied the government and in effect rang down the curtain on federal financing for their theater with their production of Marc Blitzstein's agitprop musical, *The Cradle Will Rock*. The production became a Broadway legend when the cast members, caught in a political dispute that closed their theater, led their audience in a parade uptown to a hastily rented space and, prohibited by court order from going on the stage, performed their roles from their seats.

The Mercury Theater was the direct offspring of the publicity this stunt achieved. "On the broad wings of the federal eagle, we had risen to success and fame beyond ourselves as America's youngest, cleverest, most creative and audacious producers to whom none of the ordinary rules of the theater applied."

The creative magic was sustained in the Mercury's first commercial production, *Julius Caesar* (1937), which became another success. Houseman called the decision to use modern dress "an essential element in Orson's conception of 'Julius Caesar' as a political melodrama with clear contemporary parallels." The Mercury Theater became an instant legend in

the Broadway theater lore with its innovative, sometimes antic productions of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, *Heartbreak House*, *Five Kings*, and, of course, the stage adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The success on the stage led to the Mercury Theater of the Air, a series of hour-long radio programs on CBS dramatizing classic novels with the same actors who populated the stage shows: Welles, Agnes Morehead, Everett Sloan, Joseph Cotton, Ray Collins, and George Coulouris, among others. Houseman wrote most of the scripts.

The most famous of their adaptations, and probably the most famous radio broadcast of all time, was "The War of the Worlds," a clever version of the H. G. Wells story presented as a newscast. The show's "news flash" version of a fictional invasion of Earth by creatures from Mars was so believable that it created panic along the East Coast. As usual, Welles, who had little to do with the script, got all the publicity, fame, and credit. But it had been Houseman who convinced writer Howard Koch to do the adaptation as a fake radio news broadcast.

The Welles-Houseman collaboration continued to Hollywood, with the Mercury Theater Players making up the bulk of the cast of *Citizen Kane*. When Welles, as usual, claimed credit for the screenplay after the film was hailed as a masterpiece, Houseman stated publicly that the credit properly belonged to Herman J. Mankiewicz. Houseman also, for once, took some credit himself for the general shaping of the story line and for editing the script. The absence of his habitual willingness to let Welles hog the accolades was symbolic of a long-growing rift between the two, and the partnership was shattered irreparably, with Welles furious at his mentor's betrayal. But Welles needed Houseman more than Houseman needed Welles. While the more celebrated half of the partnership began to see his career devolve into well-publicized chaos, Houseman accumulated an impressive body of work.

Between 1945 and 1962, Houseman produced eighteen films for Paramount, Universal and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, including *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Letters From an Unknown Woman* (1948), *They Live by Night* (1949), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *Executive Suite* (1954), *The Cobweb* (1955), *Lust for Life* (1956), *All Fall Down* (1962), and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962). His films were nominated for twenty Academy Awards and won seven, five of them for *The Bad and the Beautiful*, which starred Kirk Douglas and Lana Turner.

When he was not making movies, Mr. Houseman returned to the theater. Notably, he directed the Broadway productions of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Lute Song* with Mary Martin in 1946, *King Lear*, and

Coriolanus. On the West Coast in 1947 he staged the world premiere of Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*, starring Charles Laughton, and Thornton Wilder's *Skin of Our Teeth*. In 1941, he directed *Anna Christie* with Ingrid Bergman.

He also directed opera productions like *Otello* and *Tosca* for the Dallas Opera Company and was the resident director of opera for the Juilliard Opera Theater in New York. Television, too: Houseman won three Emmy Awards. From 1956 to 1959, he was artistic director of the American Shakespeare Festival and, in 1960, became artistic director of the Professional Theater Group at the University of California at Los Angeles, which became part of the Mark Taper Forum.

Houseman contributed articles and book reviews to national publications, and wrote five sets of memoirs, which are a chronicle of an era: *Run Through* (1972), *Front and Center* (1979), *Final Dress* (1983), *Entertainers and the Entertained* (1986), and *Unfinished Business: Memoirs, 1902 to 1988*. Toward what looked like the end of a long career, when he was sixty-six years old, Houseman helped establish the school of drama at the Juilliard School and also became the co-founder and longtime artistic director of the Acting Company, the touring repertory group whose alumni include Kevin Kline and Patti LuPone.

Houseman wrote that he was about to retire into what he called “a life of fairly restricted options” when, through “pure luck,” Bridges, one of his former assistants at the Professional Theater Group at UCLA, who was directing *The Paper Chase*, asked him to take the part of the formidable, slightly sadistic Professor Kingsfield. The role in the 1973 movie led to an Academy Award for Houseman (an honor Orson Welles never achieved) in 1974, to the re-creation of the role in a television series, and ultimately to television commercials and a far more comfortable old age than he had anticipated. “I became rich through this incredible accident of *Paper Chase*,” he said.

In addition to his life-changing *Paper Chase* role—which he liked to say made him “the second most credible man in America after Walter Cronkite”—Houseman acted in *Seven Days in May* (1964), *Rollerball* (1975), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *The Cheap Detective* (1977), *Ghost Story* (1981), *Scrooged* (1988), and other movies and played leading roles in a number of television programs.



Canada Lee: The First “Bigger Thomas”

—Jack Marshall

Of all the talented individuals involved in *Native Son*, none was more impressive than the man who created the role of Bigger Thomas, Canada Lee.

He was born Lionel Cornelius Canegata on May 3, 1907 in New York City’s San Juan Hill district, to West Indian parents. Canegata studied the violin at the age of seven, and by the age of twelve was a concert violinist. When he was fourteen, Canegata ran away to the Saratoga Race Track in upstate New York to become a jockey. After two years of riding, he grew too large for the job and became a horse exerciser for prominent racehorse owners. Then Canegata changed course again and set out to become a boxer.

He won 90 of 100 fights and the Metropolitan Inter-City and Junior National Championships as well as the national amateur lightweight title. Before one match, an announcer butchered his name and called him “Canada Lee.” Lee liked it and kept it.

In 1926, he turned professional, and by 1930 he was a leading contender for the welterweight championship. Lee fought in over 200 fights as a professional boxer, losing only 25. But a punch to the right eye detached his retina and ended his career just as it was getting interesting and profitable. So it was back to music. Canada Lee formed a fifteen-piece orchestra at a nightclub in Harlem, *The Jitterbug*, which he also managed. Both the band and the nightclub were wiped out by the Depression. By the mid-30s, Lee was broke, and once again looking for a profession. Characteristically, he had other talents he hadn’t even used yet.

While applying for a job as a day laborer, Lee stumbled upon an audition in progress at the YMCA and, on a sudden impulse, read for a role. He earned a supporting part in Frank Wilson’s 1934 production of *Brother Moses*, which played to a crowd of over ten thousand in Central Park. In the first acting job of his life, Lee received rave reviews, and decided that acting would be his new career.

He worked with the Federal Theater Project in a play called *Stevedore* in 1934 and was seen by Orson Welles, then the life-force of Broadway, who cast him as in the so-called “voodoo” *Macbeth* (1936) at the American Negro Theater. That production was a major turning point in director Welles’ career as well as a legendary Broadway “happening.” Lee played Banquo in this

controversial production, which featured a Haitian setting, *Emperor Jones*-style drumming and a cast of over *two hundred* black actors. Lee reportedly rescued Welles from angry protesters twice during the run, among the many reasons Welles remembered Lee later.

For two years, Lee worked in various black theater and Theater Project productions, including the lead role in *The Big White Fog*. He also made his film debut, playing, appropriately, a boxer, in 1939's low-budget *Keep Punching*. Then Welles gambled on Lee to play the central role of Bigger Thomas in the stage adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. When the 1941 production was a hit, Lee was briefly the toast of Broadway. *The New York Times* called him "the greatest Negro actor of his era and one of the finest actors in the country." Wright also applauded the performance, noting the contrast between Lee's affable personality and his intensity as Bigger Thomas. (Ironically, it was Wright, not Lee, who played Bigger in the ill-conceived film adaptation of the play. Canada Lee's performance today exists only in the memories of a few and the accounts of the time.)

Lee was as committed to social justice and civil rights as the other progressive figures involved with *Native Son*, and his activities quickly took on a politically controversial character. Playwright Langston Hughes wrote two brief plays for Lee, but their criticism of racism in America was seen as too controversial and uncommercial, and neither was ever staged. Lee spoke to schools, sponsored various humanitarian events, and began lecturing directly against the segregation in America's armed forces. But Lee also was a prominent supporter of the war effort. He appeared at numerous USO events and received an award from the United States Recruiting Office and another from the Treasury Department for his help in selling war bonds.

During World War II, Lee continued to act in plays and in films. In 1942, he played in two Broadway comedies by William Saroyan, earning good reviews even as the plays failed. In 1943, he took a lead role in a production of the race-themed drama *South Pacific*, directed by Lee Strasberg, and in 1944, he became the first African American to play Caliban in a Broadway production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. More milestones were to come: director George Rylands cast him as Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*, one of the first occasions in which a black actor portrayed a white character in a major Broadway production. In 1946, Lee became the first African American producer on Broadway with *On Whitman Avenue*, a drama about racial prejudice in which he also played a leading role. The play addressed the need

for fair housing laws and was praised by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote weekly columns encouraging readers to see it.

Lee also continued to act in films, though the good roles were rare. He refused to accept parts that he believed were demeaning to his race. Perhaps his most famous film role was in Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), in which he played the role of a stevedore named Charlie. According to some critics, *Lifeboat* was the first major Hollywood movie in which a black character was not handled in stereotypical fashion. This appears to have been Lee's influence, for he insisted on changing his dialogue, which had been originally written in the "Stepin Fetchit" dialect that was routine for black characters in the 1930s.

In 1947, he played a supporting role in another boxing picture, the John Garfield classic *Body and Soul*. In 1949, he took another supporting role in *Lost Boundaries*, a drama about "passing" as white.

By the late 1940s, the rising tide of anti-Communism had made many of Lee's earlier contacts during his Broadway period toxic to his career. His name had appeared in some FBI files that were made public in the course of the spy trial of Judith Conlon, and suddenly Canada Lee—artist, thinker, patriot, humanist—was suspected of being subversive. Lee condemned the effort to implicate him at a press conference in 1949, calling it racially motivated. "I am not a Communist! I shall continue to help my people gain their rightful place in America," he declared defiantly.

But the forces allied against him and other blacklisted artists were strong and not to be denied. When Canada Lee came up for a TV role shortly thereafter, he was barred by the sponsor, the American Tobacco Company. Over the next three years, it has been estimated, Lee lost forty roles.

The FBI reportedly offered to clear Lee's name if he would publicly call singer/actor/ activist Paul Robeson a Communist. Lee refused, saying, "All you're trying to do is split my race!" Unable to get work in America, Lee was cast in a British film, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. (He and Sidney Poitier were admitted to South Africa for the location filming only after director Zoltan Korda applied for permits to bring them along as his indentured servants.) But it was to be his last film role. Returning to the United States, Lee found himself still blacklisted and unemployable. Impoverished and despondent, he told Walter White of the NAACP, "I can't take it any more!"

I'm going to get a shoeshine box and sit outside the Astor Theater. My picture is playing to capacity audiences and, my God, I can't get one day's work!"

A few months later he was dead, of kidney failure and uremia, at forty-five.

Because a rumor (vindictively circulated by right-wing columnist Walter Winchell) held that Lee had indeed turned against Robeson, his legacy was stained for many years, and his important place in the struggle for civil rights was neglected and nearly forgotten. But Canada Lee deserves recognition as an important trailblazer for his race, a brave and resolute warrior for racial progress in America, and, not least of all, an amazingly versatile and talented man. Like the character he is best known for, Bigger Thomas, Canada Lee was crushed by the pressures of deep-seated bigotry that crippled his career and destroyed his health. But in his short life, he made a real difference in his country and helped lay the foundation for the changes that were to come.

As we celebrate *Native Son*, we owe it to Canada Lee, a brilliant and courageous man who made important contributions to our society and culture, to celebrate him as well.



Wright's Troubling Novel: Shifting Critical Views of *Native Son*

Richard Wright's goal in writing *Native Son* was to present honestly, directly and without sentiment the complex and disturbing status of racial politics in America. The volume of criticism that the novel generated, and continued to generate, as well as its continued vitality after more than sixty years, demonstrate how thoroughly Wright succeeded.

Early reviewers, especially African American critics, recognized the book's significance. Charles Poore, in the *New York Times*, declared that "few other recent novels have been preceded by more advance critical acclamation." *Native Son* was seen as a novel of social protest, typical of works from the 1930s, when writers who lived through the Great Depression created works critical of the American dream. Thus, Wright was easily subsumed in the category of "protest novelist" along with John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, and others.

In the decade that followed its publication, the novel's reputation was often attacked. Writers like James Baldwin, in his 1948 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," and Ralph Ellison, in the *New Leader*, soundly criticized Wright for being harsh, pessimistic, and impatient, his portrait of the black man in America far too hopeless. Baldwin argued that the protest novel did not advance the cause of equality by straining relations between the races. Ellison attacked the novel aesthetically and politically, declaring it crude and excessively Marxist in perspective.

In his 1963 article, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe defended Wright as a sterling representative of the protest tradition in black literature. The "black power" movement took inspiration from *Native Son*, with many of its members declaring a kinship with Bigger, who they felt was doubly useful as a symbol of what white racism had wrought and a threat of the racial violence that was sure to come. Theodore Solotaroff stated in his *The Red Hot Vacuum & Other Pieces on the Writings of the Sixties*, "We came to our own yearly confrontation with the algebra of hatred and guilt, alienation and violence, freedom and self-integration and in the struggle for what is called today 'civil rights' the meaning of Bigger Thomas and of Richard Wright continues to reveal itself."

By the 1980s, Wright's reputation was firmly established in American literature, and *Native Son* became required reading in high schools and colleges. New questions were being posed about his work. For example, an aspect of the novel previously unexamined was Wright's attitude towards women. Marie Mootry discussed this in her 1984 article, "Bitches, Whores, and Woman Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright." She was not alone in criticizing Wright's novel for its view of women, although she was more direct than some. She found that Bigger's inability to see women as human beings, with the same rights to expression that he claimed for himself, restricted his view of humankind and made his self-destruction a foregone conclusion.

David Bradley, a *New York Times* critic, admitted to hating the novel on his first reading, finding Bigger to be a despicable sociopath. However, upon reading it for the fourth time years later, he believed the book to be "a valuable document—not of sociology but of history. It reminds us of a time in this land when a man of freedom could have this bleak and frightening vision of his people."

In *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero*, Robert Butler offered a contemporary interpretation of Wright's work: "The novel is much more than the 'powerful' but artistically flawed piece of crude naturalism that many early reviewers and some later critics mistakenly saw. It is a masterwork because its formal artistry and its revolutionary new content are solidly integrated to produce a complex and resonant vision of modern American reality."



The Harlem Renaissance

Richard Wright was an important intellectual force during the Harlem Renaissance, and his novel, *Native Son*, was both a product of it and one of its important engines of controversy.

From approximately 1919 to 1940, there was an explosion of African American literature, art and political thought in a period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Also known as the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance was a result of several factors. Thousands of blacks migrated from the South to Northern industrial cities, following the employment opportunities that became available during World War I. A thriving and dynamic black middle class began to develop. More educational and cultural opportunities became available to blacks, who eagerly strived to make up for centuries of opportunity lost to slavery and oppression.

A new radicalism among black thinkers helped spark the Harlem Renaissance. The publication of black magazines such as A. Phillip Randolph's *The Messenger* and the NAACP's *The Crisis* (edited by W.E.B. DuBois) led to the development of what was referred to as a "new consciousness" of racial identity. Marcus Garvey's radical ideas of an independent black economy, racial purity, and the creation of societies in Africa were catalysts for debate, controversy, and pride, opening doors to creative thought and sending political and philosophical discourse in exciting new directions. These included the need for economic and social equality as well as political power. New York's Harlem neighborhood became a magnet for black intellectuals, writers and artists, and was soon the cultural center of a black Renaissance movement that was national in scope.

A Chronology of Important Events and Publications in the Harlem Renaissance, 1919–1940

1919

- February: the 369th Regiment marched up Fifth Avenue to Harlem
- February: First Pan African Congress organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, Paris
- June–September: Race riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Charleston, Knoxville, Omaha, and elsewhere.
- September: Race Relations Commission founded.
- Marcus Garvey founds the Black Star Shipping Line.
- Benjamin Brawley publishes *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*.

1920

- August: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Convention held at Madison Square Garden.
- November: O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, starring Charles Gilpin, opens at Provincetown Playhouse.
- James Weldon Johnson, first black officer (secretary) of the NAACP, appointed.
- Claude McKay publishes *Spring in New Hampshire*.
- Du Bois' *Darkwater* published.

1921

- *Shuffle Along* by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the first musical revue written and performed by African Americans (cast includes Josephine Baker and Florence Mills), opens May 22 at Broadway's David Belasco Theater.
- September: Marcus Garvey founds African Orthodox Church.
- Second Pan African Congress.
- Colored Players Guild of New York founded.
- Benjamin Brawley publishes *Social History of the American Negro*.

1922

- First Anti-Lynching legislation approved by U. S. House of Representatives.
- Publications of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited by James Weldon Johnson; Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows*.

1923

- *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* is founded by the National Urban League, with Charles S. Johnson as its editor.

- May: the National Ethiopian Art Players stage *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by Willis Richardson, first serious play by a black writer on Broadway.
- June: Claude McKay speaks at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in Moscow.
- October: The Cotton Club opens.
- Marcus Garvey arrested for mail fraud and sentenced to five years in prison.
- Third Pan African Congress.
- Publications of Jean Toomer, *Cane*; Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinion of Marcus Garvey* (two vols.).

1924

- March: Civic Club Dinner, sponsored by *Opportunity*, brings together black writers and white publishers. This event is considered the formal launch of the New Negro movement.
- May: O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, starring black singer/actor/activist Paul Robeson, opens.
- Countee Cullen wins first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Competition.
- Publications of Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*; Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*; Marcus Garvey, "Aims and Objects for a Solution of the Negro Problem Outlined"; Walter White, *The Fire in the Flint*.

1925

- March: *Survey Graphic* issue, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," edited by Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, devoted entirely to black arts and letters.
- October: American Negro Labor Congress held in Chicago.
 - Dr. Ossian Sweet and ten other blacks defended by Clarence Darrow and the NAACP are acquitted of murder by an all white jury in Detroit.
- *Opportunity* holds its first literary awards dinner. Winners include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston.
- The first Crisis Awards ceremony held at the Renaissance Casino. Countee Cullen wins first prize.
- Publications of Cullen, *Color*; Du Bose Heyward, *Porgy*; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds. *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*; Alain Locke, *The New Negro*; Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (a novel portraying life among American blacks).

1926

- Countee Cullen becomes Assistant Editor of *Opportunity*; begins to write a regular column, "The Dark Tower."
- March: Savoy Ballroom opens in Harlem.

- Publications of Wallace Thurman, *Fire!!*; Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*; Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*; Eric Walrond, *Tropic Death*; W. C. Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*; and Walter White, *Flight*.

1927

- May: *In Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green, with an all-black cast, wins the Pulitzer Prize.
- July: Ethel Waters first appears on Broadway.
- Marcus Garvey deported.
- Louis Armstrong (Chicago), Duke Ellington (New York) begin their careers.
- Harlem Globetrotters established.
- Charlotte Mason decides to become a patron of “The New Negro.”
- A'Lelia Walker opens a tearoom salon called “The Dark Tower.”
- Publications of Miguel Covarrubias, *Negro Drawings*; Cullen, *Ballad of the Brown Girl*, *Copper Sun*, and *Caroling Dusk*; Arthur Fauset, *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro*; Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*; James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse and The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (reprint of the 1912 edition)*; Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory, eds. *Plays of Negro Life*.

1928

- Countee Cullen marries Nina Yolande, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, April 9. Described as the social event of the decade.
- Publications of Wallace Thurman, *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*; Du Bois, *The Dark Princess*; Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*; Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*; Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun*; Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*.

1929

- February: Negro Experimental Theatre founded.
- Wallace Thurman's play *Harlem*, written with William Jourdan Rapp, opens at the Apollo Theater on Broadway and becomes hugely successful.
- June: Negro Art Theatre founded.
- September: National Colored Players founded.
- Black Thursday, October 29, Stock Exchange crash.
- Publications of Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems*; Claude McKay, *Banjo*; Nella Larsen, *Passing*; Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*; and Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch*.

1930

- *The Green Pastures* (musical) with an all-black cast, opens on Broadway February 26.
- Universal Holy Temple of Tranquillity founded. Black Muslims open Islam Temple in Detroit.
- Publications of Randolph Edmonds, *Shades and Shadows*; Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations*; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*; Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*.

1931

- Scottsboro Boys race trial, April–July.
- A'Lelia Walker dies August 16.
- Publications of Arna Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday*; Jessie Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree*; Langston Hughes, *Dear Lovely Death*, *The Negro Mother*, *Scottsboro Limited*; Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900*; George S. Schuyler, *Black No More*; and Toomer, *Essentials*.

1932

- June: Twenty young black intellectuals travel to Russia to make a movie, *Black and White*.
- Mass defection of blacks from the Republican party begins.
- Publications of Sterling Brown, *Southern Road*; Cullen, *One Way to Heaven*; Rudolph Fisher, *The Conjure Man Dies*; Hughes, *The Dream Keeper*; Claude McKay, *Ginger Town*; Schuyler, *Slaves Today*; Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*.

1933

- National Negro Business League ceases operations after thirty-three years.
- Publications of Jessie Fauset, *Comedy, American Style*; James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*; McKay, *Banana Bottom*.

1934

- Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman die within four days of each other, December 22 and 26.
- W.E.B. Du Bois resigns from *The Crisis* and NAACP.
- Apollo Theatre opens.
- Publications of Arna Bontemps, *You Can't Pet a Possum*; Randolph Edmonds, *Six Plays for the Negro Theatre*; Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*; James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Americans: What Now?*; George Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*.

1935

- Harlem Race Riot, March 19.
- *Porgy and Bess*, an opera with an all-black cast, opens on Broadway October 10.
- *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes, first full-length play by a black writer, opens on Broadway October 25.
- 50 percent of Harlem's families unemployed as a result of the Great Depression.
- Publications of Cullen, *The Medea and Other Poems*; Hurston, *Mules and Men*; Willis Richardson and May Sullivan, *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*.

1937

- Publications of McKay, *Long Way From Home* and Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

1938

- Richard Wright publishes *Uncle Tom's Children*.

1939

- Publication of Hurston, *Moses; Man of the Mountain*.

1940

- Wright's protest novel *Native Son* becomes the first bestselling novel and first Book-of-the-Month Club selection authored by a black American writer.
- Publications of Hughes, *The Big Sea* and McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*.



Orson Welles: The 1942 Biography

When Orson Welles directed Native Son in 1941, he was at the pinnacle of his artistic powers and reputation and universally regarded as being at the threshold of what bid fair to be the most spectacular career in entertainment history. He had just completed his first film, Citizen Kane, which was awaiting release, and was returning to Broadway where he was already legendary. He had conquered radio and the stage, and Hollywood was next.

Nothing could stop him. The sensational reaction to Citizen Kane . . . the stormy marriage to Rita Hayworth . . . the break with John Houseman . . . the abandonment of the Mercury Theater Players . . . the fiascos of It's All True and The Magnificent Ambersons . . . the battles with studios . . . the abandoned and half-realized projects on stage and film . . . the gluttony . . . the intermittent careers as a comic, a magician, and huckster . . . the exiles to Europe . . . the brilliant, not-quite-realized experiments like Moby Dick Rehearsed . . . the late career status as the epitome of an artist whose talent and potential were never fulfilled . . . all this and more lay ahead in an uncharted, unknowable future.

This is his biography through Native Son, as released by the Publicity Department of RKO Radio Pictures in 1942. This was Orson Welles when anything and everything was possible.

He was 24 years old.

* * * * *

The achievements of your ordinary man of 24 can be written on the head of a pin.

One needs a bigger writing surface than that for Orson Welles. At that age, when most young men are gunning for careers, Welles had enjoyed half a dozen.

He had, among other things, been a stage star in Ireland and the United States, had frightened a nation, had produced a Negro Macbeth, had put Julius Caesar in a Fascist uniform, had written pulp magazine stories and a school textbook Shakespeare, had put Shakespearean productions on phonograph records, had been the voice of chocolate pudding, the Shadow on radio, had organized the Mercury Theater and the Mercury Theater of the Air, and had been a pianist and a painter.

That record would satisfy any man. But not Welles. He then turned his attention to the cinema, signed a contract with RKO Radio Pictures and wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *Citizen Kane*. That was in 1940. And in 1941, at 26, he achieved his greatest ambition through formation of his own Mercury Productions, Inc.

Early Years

Movieland's new quadruple-threat man came into being in Kenosha, Wisconsin on May 6, 1915. From his father, Richard Head Welles, manufacturer and inventor, Orson derived the keen sense of original creation and disregard of the established order of things that has spotlighted his theatrical career. From his mother, Beatrice Ives Welles, a concert pianist, he drew his artistic perception and sensitivity.

Both parents were imbued with a love for travel, and as a child, Orson knew intimately the far stretches of his native America, ancient wonders of Europe and Asia. At the age of 11, in fact, he made a solitary walking tour of Europe.

The War of the Worlds

This bright effort, it will be remembered, involved a news-like treatment of a suppositious invasion of New Jersey by Martian monsters who spread death and destruction in their wake.

The effect was unpredictable and Wellesian to the extreme.

Frantic New Jersey suburbanites, who heard fragments of the broadcast, fled their homes in panic. Across the Hudson, thousands of New Yorkers began a mass exodus to Westchester and Connecticut for safety. In Flint, Michigan, a whole church congregation gathered to pray for deliverance from this terrible menace. Recruiting stations of the Army, Navy, and Marines throughout the nation were flooded by gallant young men anxious to fight to preserve their country. Chaos reigned.

Newspapers here and abroad seethed with the news for a week following. Congressmen, many of whom had been as frightened as the most gullible Jerseyite, issued scathing statements on the broadcast, calling for drastic action on the instant. The Federal Communications Commission became involved. And the fame of Orson Welles knew no bounds.

The widespread fanfare of publicity brought to the Mercury Theater of the Air a wealthy sponsor. Meanwhile, the Broadway company continued through the season of 1938–39, highlighted by the Shakespearean chronicle plays presented on tour by Welles through the *Five Kings*.

Future activity by this group was assured when Welles secured a clause in his RKO Radio contract permitting him to continue his interest in it.

Orson Welles in Hollywood

Welles turned to motion pictures because he felt that the possibilities of the screen were limitless. An indefatigable worker, he went to school at the studio for weeks before starting on his first production. His teachers were sound men, cameramen, electricians, grips, carpenters, special effects men, and prop men.

For the first few months in Hollywood, Welles flew back to New York each weekend to produce his radio show. Finally he moved the show to the West Coast.

Welles is a big man, well over six feet, who tips the scales around 200 pounds. He has no hobbies, considers working at his chosen professions enough to keep his mind occupied. He likes clothes and designs his own suits and dressing gowns. He is tremendously loyal to the members of the Mercury company and is using most of them in his pictures. It is his ambition to keep a permanent acting group. Great music inspired him, and in his office, he has a phonograph and a stack of fine recordings. He is an avid reader of comic strips and is particularly fond of "Terry and the Pirates." He believes comic strips mirror contemporary American life.

Welles knows he must do more than make a good picture—that he must make a great one. "I've been a movie fan all my life," he says. "That ought to help."

Welles married Virginia Nicholson, a stock actress in 1935 and she divorced him on February 1, 1940. They have one child, a girl named Christopher, born in 1938.

The Expansion of Mercury

On forming Mercury Productions, Inc., in partnership with Jack Moss, Welles announced that hereafter his activities would be centralized in Hollywood. In addition to the motion picture productions for RKO Radio, Mercury Productions embraces the Mercury Theater of the Air, Mercury Theater, Mercury Text Shakespeare, and the Mercury Text Records of Shakespeare. There are four of these already published and recorded.



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