

**College of DuPage Theatre Department  
Presents**

***War of the Worlds: The Panic Broadcast***

Inspired by and including  
The Mercury Theatre On the Air's  
infamous 1938 Radio play



**Directed by Amelia Barrett**

The College Theatre Department sincerely thanks the Library for research support for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director and production team, working on the project.

**Time:** Sunday, Oct. 31, 1948. With some action suggesting Studio One at CBS in Manhattan and other locations.

**Place:** A studio at WBFR, a metropolitan radio station. With some action suggesting Sunday, Oct. 30, 1938, and other periods.

**Characters**

WBFR Playhouse of the Air Actors and  
Freddie Filmore

Jake Laurents  
Harry Hayward

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College of DuPage Theater Department

*War of the Worlds: The Panic Broadcast* Study Guide 2021

1 | Page

Lana Sherwood

## There will be a 5 minute intermission

### Director's Note:

On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles broadcast his radio play *The War of the Worlds*, which is perhaps the most famous adaptation of H.G. Wells science fiction novel of the same name. Wells later told reporters his adaptation for the radio was crafted to sound like a real news broadcast about an alien invasion from Mars. People believed the play to be an actual event and a “panic” ensued. Our play, *War of the Worlds: The Panic Broadcast*, seeks to recreate the original production on its ten year anniversary, October 30, 1948, with a studio full of actors.

In 1930s America, fear and anxiety were a way of life. The Great Depression had devastated the economy, the mounting crisis in Europe threatened war, weeks earlier the Hurricane of 1938 devastated the country, and a year before, the Hindenburg disaster, which was broadcast over the airwaves, was still fresh in the country's collective memory. One of the nightly escapes for millions of Americans was to gather around their radios.

Our choice to produce this play, during our own unfortunate anniversary, seems frighteningly appropriate. As we pass the March 2020 marker, we are reminded where our collective lives were transformed by the pandemic into something almost unrecognizable. Our schools, arts organizations, entertainment, local businesses, travel, sports, visits to family and friends, and all traces of “normal” life were alchemized into a memory. Our political life has been fraught with conflict, and social justice has suddenly drawn a laser like focus. For many of us, our isolation has accompanied channel surfing, gathering news snippets from radio, social media, and stolen conversations. It's understandable how we could tune into the middle of an hour-long drama or conversation which might leave some believing that the country was under attack, without hearing the context of the story or having the ability to see a larger point of view.

It is within this context that, though our presentation is based in fiction, it is a fiction which is frighteningly reflective of our current reality. ~ **AB**

## Synopsis

Complete with vintage commercials and live sound effects, this radio-play-within-a-play is a thrilling homage to the form's golden age and timely reminder of what fear can do to a society.

## Background

### The Infamous “War of the Worlds” Radio Broadcast Was a Magnificent Fluke

Orson Welles and his colleagues scrambled to pull together the show; they ended up writing pop culture history



Orson Welles (arms raised) rehearses his radio depiction of H.G. Wells' classic, *The War of the Worlds*. The broadcast, which aired on October 30, 1938, and claimed that aliens from Mars had invaded New Jersey, terrified thousands of Americans. (© Between/CORBIS)

By [A. Brad Schwartz](#)

smithsonianmag.com

May 6, 2015

**citation:**

Schwartz, A. Brad. "The Infamous 'War of the Worlds' Radio Broadcast Was a Magnificent Fluke." *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 6, 2015. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/infamous-war-worlds-radio-broadcast-was-magnificent-fluke-180955180/>

"On Halloween morning, 1938, Orson Welles awoke to find himself the most talked about man in America. The night before, Welles and his *Mercury Theatre on the Air* had performed a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, converting the 40-year-old novel into fake news bulletins describing a Martian invasion of New Jersey. Some listeners mistook those bulletins for the real thing, and their anxious phone calls to police, newspaper offices, and radio stations convinced many journalists that the show had caused nationwide hysteria. By the next morning, the 23-year-old Welles's face and name were on the front pages of newspapers coast-to-coast, along with headlines about the mass panic his CBS broadcast had allegedly inspired.

**Related Content**

Welles barely had time to glance at the papers, leaving him with only a horribly vague sense of what he had done to the country. He'd heard reports of mass stampedes, of suicides, and of angered listeners threatening to shoot him on sight. "If I'd planned to wreck my career," he told several people at the time, "I couldn't have gone about it better." With his livelihood (and possibly even his freedom) on the line, Welles went before dozens of reporters, photographers, and newsreel cameramen at a hastily arranged press conference in the CBS building. Each journalist asked him some variation of the same basic question: Had he intended, or did he at all anticipate, that *War of the Worlds* would throw its audience into panic?

That question would follow Welles for the rest of his life, and his answers changed as the years went on—from protestations of innocence to playful hints that he knew exactly what he was doing all along.

**[Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News](#)**

On the evening of October 30, 1938, radio listeners across the U.S. heard a startling report of mysterious creatures and terrifying war machines moving toward New York City. But the hair-raising broadcast was not a real news bulletin—it was Orson Welles' adaptation of the H. G. Wells classic "The War of the Worlds." A. Brad Schwartz boldly retells the story of Welles' famed radio play and its impact.

The truth can only be found among long-forgotten script drafts and the memories of Welles's collaborators, which capture the chaotic behind-the-scenes saga of the broadcast: no one involved with *War of the Worlds* expected to deceive any listeners, because they all found the story too silly and improbable to ever be taken seriously. The Mercury's

desperate attempts to make the show seem halfway believable succeeded, almost by accident, far beyond even their wildest expectations.

\* \* \*

By the end of October 1938, Welles's *Mercury Theatre on the Air* had been on CBS for 17 weeks. A low-budget program without a sponsor, the series had built a small but loyal following with fresh adaptations of literary classics. But for the week of Halloween, Welles wanted something very different from the Mercury's earlier offerings.

In a 1960 court deposition, as part of a lawsuit suing CBS to be recognized as the broadcast's rightful co-author, Welles offered an explanation for his inspiration for *War of the Worlds*: "I had conceived the idea of doing a radio broadcast in such a manner that a crisis would actually seem to be happening," he said, "and would be broadcast in such a dramatized form as to appear to be a real event taking place at that time, rather than a mere radio play." Without knowing which book he wanted to adapt, Welles brought the idea to John Houseman, his producer, and Paul Stewart, a veteran radio actor who co-directed the Mercury broadcasts. The three men discussed various works of science fiction before settling on H.G. Wells's 1898 novel, *The War of the Worlds*—even though Houseman doubted that Welles had ever read it.

The original *The War of the Worlds* story recounts a Martian invasion of Great Britain around the turn of the 20th century. The invaders easily defeat the British army thanks to their advanced weaponry, a "heat-ray" and poisonous "black smoke," only to be felled by earthly diseases against which they have no immunity. The novel is a powerful satire of British imperialism—the most powerful colonizer in the world suddenly finds itself colonized—and its first generation of readers would not have found its premise implausible. In 1877, the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli had observed a series of dark lines on the Martian surface that he called *canali*, Italian for "channels." In English, *canali* got mistranslated to "canals," a word implying that these were not natural formations—that someone had built them. Wealthy, self-taught astronomer Percival Lowell popularized this misconception in a series of books describing a highly intelligent, canal-building Martian civilization. H. G. Wells drew liberally from those ideas in crafting his alien invasion story—the first of its kind—and his work inspired an entire genre of science fiction. By 1938, *The War of the Worlds* had "become familiar to children through the medium of comic strips and many succeeding novels and adventure stories," as Orson Welles told the press the day after his broadcast.

After Welles selected the book for adaptation, Houseman passed it on to Howard Koch, a writer recently hired to script the Mercury broadcasts, with instructions to convert it into late-breaking news bulletins. Koch may have been the first member of the Mercury to read *The War of the Worlds*, and he took an immediate dislike to it, finding it terribly dull and dated. Science fiction in the 1930s was largely the purview of children, with alien invaders confined to pulp magazines and the Sunday funnies. The idea that intelligent

Martians might actually exist had largely been discredited. Even with the fake news conceit, Koch struggled to turn the novel into a credible radio drama in less than a week.

On Tuesday, October 25, after three days of work, Koch called Houseman to say that *War of the Worlds* was hopeless. Ever the diplomat, Houseman rang off with the promise to see if Welles might agree to adapt another story. But when he called the Mercury Theatre, he could not get his partner on the phone. Welles had been rehearsing his next stage production—a revival of Georg Buchner’s *Danton’s Death*—for 36 straight hours, desperately trying to inject life into a play that seemed destined to flop. With the future of his theatrical company in crisis, Welles had precious little time to spend on his radio series.

With no other options, Houseman called Koch back and lied. Welles, he said, was determined to do the Martian novel this week. He encouraged Koch to get back to work, and offered suggestions on how to improve the script. Koch worked through the night and the following day, filling countless yellow legal-pad pages with his elegant if frequently illegible handwriting. By sundown on Wednesday, he had finished a complete draft, which Paul Stewart and a handful of Mercury actors rehearsed the next day. Welles was not present, but the rehearsal was recorded on acetate disks for him to listen to later that night. Everyone who heard it later agreed that this stripped-down production—with no music and only the most basic sound effects—was an unmitigated disaster.

This rehearsal recording has apparently not survived, but a copy of Koch’s first draft script—likely the same draft used in rehearsal—is preserved among his papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison. It shows that Koch had already worked out much of the broadcast’s fake news style, but several key elements that made the final show so terrifyingly convincing were missing at this stage. Like the original novel, this draft is divided into two acts of roughly equal length, with the first devoted to fake news bulletins about the Martian invasion. The second act uses a series of lengthy monologues and conventional dramatic scenes to recount the wanderings of a lone survivor, played by Welles.

Most of the previous Mercury broadcasts resembled the second act of *War of the Worlds*; the series was initially titled *First Person Singular* because it relied so heavily on first-person narration. But unlike the charming narrators of earlier Mercury adaptations such as *Treasure Island* and *Sherlock Holmes*, the protagonist of *The War of the Worlds* was a passive character with a journalistic, impersonal prose style—both traits that make for very boring monologues. Welles believed, and Houseman and Stewart agreed, that the only way to save their show was to focus on enhancing the fake news bulletins in its first act. Beyond that general note, Welles offered few if any specific suggestions, and he soon left to return to *Danton’s Death*.

In Welles’s absence, Houseman and Stewart tore into the script, passing their notes on to Koch for frantic, last minute rewrites. The first act grew longer and the second act got shorter, leaving the script somewhat lopsided. Unlike in most radio dramas, the station break in *War of the Worlds* would come about two-thirds of the way through, and not at

the halfway mark. Apparently, no one in the Mercury realized that listeners who tuned in late and missed the opening announcements would have to wait almost 40 minutes for a disclaimer explaining that the show was fiction. Radio audiences had come to expect that fictional programs would be interrupted on the half-hour for station identification. Breaking news, on the other hand, failed to follow those rules. People who believed the broadcast to be real would be even more convinced when the station break failed to come at 8:30 p.m.

These revisions also removed several clues that might have helped late listeners figure out that the invasion was fake. Two moments that interrupted the fictional news-broadcast with regular dramatic scenes were deleted or revised. At Houseman's suggestion, Koch also removed some specific mentions of the passage of time, such as one character's reference to "last night's massacre." The first draft had clearly established that the invasion occurred over several days, but the revision made it seem as though the broadcast proceeded in real-time. As many observers later noted, having the Martians conquer an entire planet in less than 40 minutes made no logical sense. But Houseman explained in *Run-Through*, the first volume of his memoirs, that he wanted to make the transitions from actual time to fictional time as seamless as possible, in order to draw listeners into the story. Each change added immeasurably to the show's believability. Without meaning to, Koch, Houseman, and Stewart had made it much more likely that some listeners would be fooled by *War of the Worlds*.

\* \* \*

No one involved with Welles' radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* expected to deceive listeners to the degree that they did. (© Bettmann/CORBIS)

Other important changes came from the cast and crew. Actors suggested ways of reworking the dialogue to make it more naturalistic, comprehensible, or convincing. In his memoirs, Houseman recalled that Frank Readick, the actor cast as the reporter who witnesses the Martians' arrival, scrounged up a recording of the *Hindenburg* disaster broadcast and listened to it over and over again, studying the way announcer Herbert Morrison's voice swelled in alarm and abject horror. Readick replicated those emotions during the show with remarkable accuracy, crying out over the horrific shrieks of his fellow actors as his character and other unfortunate New Jerseyites got incinerated by the Martian heat-ray. Ora Nichols, head of the sound effects department at the CBS affiliate in New York, devised chillingly effective noises for the Martian war machines. According to Leonard Maltin's book *The Great American Broadcast*, Welles later sent Nichols a handwritten note, thanking her "for the best job anybody could ever do for anybody."

Although the Mercury worked frantically to make the show sound as realistic as possible, no one anticipated that their efforts would succeed much too well. CBS's legal depart-

ment reviewed Koch's script and demanded only minor changes, such as altering the names of institutions mentioned in the show to avoid libel suits. In his autobiography, radio critic Ben Gross recalled approaching one of the Mercury's actors during that last week of October to ask what Welles had prepared for Sunday night. "Just between us, it's lousy," the actor said, adding that the broadcast would "probably bore you to death." Welles later told the *Saturday Evening Post* that he had called the studio to see how things were shaping up and received a similarly dismal review. "Very dull. Very dull," a technician told him. "It'll put 'em to sleep." Welles now faced disaster on two fronts, with both his theatrical company and his radio series marching toward disaster. Finally, *War of the Worlds* had gained his full attention.

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Mid-afternoon on October 30, 1938, just hours before airtime, Welles arrived in CBS's Studio One for last-minute rehearsals with the cast and crew. Almost immediately, he lost his temper with the material. But according to Houseman, such outbursts were typical in the frantic hours before each Mercury Theatre broadcast. Welles routinely berated his collaborators—calling them lazy, ignorant, incompetent, and many other insults—all while complaining of the mess they'd given him to clean up. He delighted in making his cast and crew scramble by radically revising the show at the last minute, adding new things and taking others out. Out of the chaos came a much stronger show.

One of Welles's key revisions on *War of the Worlds*, in Houseman's view, involved its pacing. Welles drastically slowed down the opening scenes to the point of tedium, adding dialogue and drawing out the musical interludes between fake news bulletins. Houseman objected strenuously, but Welles overruled him, believing that listeners would only accept the unrealistic speed of the invasion if the broadcast started slowly, then gradually sped up. By the station break, even most listeners who knew that the show was fiction would be carried away by the speed of it all. For those who did not, those 40 minutes would seem like hours.

Another of Welles's changes involved something cut from Koch's first draft: a speech given by "the Secretary of War," describing the government's efforts to combat the Martians. This speech is missing from the final draft script, also preserved at the Wisconsin Historical Society, most likely because of objections from CBS's lawyers. When Welles put it back in, he reassigned it to a less inflammatory Cabinet official, "the Secretary of the Interior," in order to appease the network. But he gave the character a purely vocal promotion by casting Kenneth Delmar, an actor whom he knew could do a pitch-perfect impression of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1938, the major networks expressly forbade most radio programs from impersonating the president, in order to avoid misleading listeners. But Welles suggested, with a wink and a nod, that Delmar make his character sound presidential, and Delmar happily complied.

These kinds of ideas only came to Welles at the last minute, with disaster waiting in the wings. As Richard Wilson observed in the audio documentary *Theatre of the Imagination*,

radio brought out the best in Welles because it “was the only medium that imposed a discipline Orson would recognize, and that was the clock.” With the hours and then the minutes before airtime ticking away, Welles had to come up with innovative ways to save the show, and he invariably delivered. The cast and crew responded in kind. Only in these last minute rehearsals did everyone begin to take *War of the Worlds* more seriously, giving it their best efforts for perhaps the first time. The result demonstrates the special power of collaboration. By pooling their unique talents, Welles and his team produced a show that frankly terrified many of its listeners—even those who never forgot that the whole thing was just a play.

\* \* \*

At the press conference the morning after the show, Welles repeatedly denied that he had ever intended to deceive his audience. But hardly anyone, then or since, has ever taken him at his word. His performance, captured by newsreel cameras, seems too remorseful and contrite, his words chosen much too carefully. Instead of ending his career, *War of the Worlds* catapulted Welles to Hollywood, where he would soon make *Citizen Kane*. Given the immense benefit Welles reaped from the broadcast, many have found it hard to believe that he harbored any regrets about his sudden celebrity.

In later years, Welles began to claim that he really was hiding his delight that Halloween morning. The Mercury, he said in multiple interviews, had always hoped to fool some of their listeners, in order to teach them a lesson about not believing whatever they heard over the radio. But none of Welles’s collaborators—including John Houseman and Howard Koch—ever endorsed such a claim. In fact, they denied it over and over again, long after legal reprisals were a serious concern. The Mercury did quite consciously attempt to inject realism into *War of the Worlds*, but their efforts produced a very different result from the one they intended. The elements of the show that a fraction of its audience found so convincing crept in almost accidentally, as the Mercury desperately tried to avoid being laughed off the air.

*War of the Worlds* formed a kind of crucible for Orson Welles, out of which the wunderkind of the New York stage exploded onto the national scene as a multimedia genius and trickster extraordinaire. He may not have told the whole truth that Halloween morning, but his shock and bewilderment were genuine enough. Only later did he realize and appreciate how his life had changed. As we mark the centennial of Welles’s birth in 1915, we should also remember his second birth in 1938—the broadcast that, because of his best efforts but despite his best intentions, immortalized him forever as ‘the Man from Mars’.”

# Broadcast History

Citation:

Memcott, Mark. "75 Years Ago, 'War of the Worlds' Started a Panic. Or Did It?" NPR, Oct. 30, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/10/30/241797346/75-years-ago-war-of-the-worlds-started-a-panic-or-did-it>

## 75 Years Ago, 'War Of The Worlds' Started A Panic. Or Did It?

October 30, 2013 8:10 AM ET

[Mark Memcott](#)



Invader? No, it's a man dressed as one in 1988. He was in Grovers Mill, N.J., at a 50th anniversary celebration of *The War of the Worlds* broadcast.

Chris Lischy/AP

“We interrupt this blog to bring you a special bulletin:

**Martians have invaded New Jersey!**

OK, as far as we know that hasn't happened.

But we wanted to issue that faux alert because 75 years ago tonight, as our friend Korva Coleman pointed out on the NPR Newscast, Orson Welles and his troupe of radio actors interrupted the Columbia Broadcasting System's programming to "report" that our planet had been invaded.

Ever since then, it's been accepted as fact that the broadcast scared the dickens out of many Americans.

[Morning Edition](#), for instance, reported in 2005 that "listeners panicked, thinking the story was real." Many supposedly jumped in their cars to flee the area of the "invasion."

Just this past weekend, [our colleagues at Radiolab devoted their very first live hour](#) to a "deep dive into one of the most controversial moments in broadcasting history: Orson Welles' 1938 radio play about Martians invading New Jersey."

According to Radiolab, about 12 million people were listening when Welles' broadcast came on the air and 'about 1 in every 12 ... thought it was true and ... some percentage of that 1 million people ran out of their homes.'

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"That constitutes a major freakout," Radiolab says.



Orson Welles delivering a radio broadcast in 1938, the same year he aired his *War of the Worlds* fake news program.

Well, Slate has a different opinion. "The supposed panic was so tiny as to be practically immeasurable on the night of the broadcast," [it concludes](#). According to Slate:

"Far fewer people heard the broadcast — and fewer still panicked — than most people believe today. How do we know? The night the program aired, the C.E. Hooper ratings service telephoned 5,000 households for its national ratings survey. 'To what program are

you listening?' the service asked respondents. Only 2 percent answered a radio 'play' or 'the Orson Welles program,' or something similar indicating CBS. None said a 'news broadcast,' according to a summary published in *Broadcasting*. In other words, 98 percent of those surveyed were listening to something else, or nothing at all, on Oct. 30, 1938. This minuscule rating is not surprising. Welles' program was scheduled against one of the most popular national programs at the time — ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, a comedy-variety show."

Slate also argues that there's no data to support the idea that many radio listeners heard about the broadcast and tuned in during it. And it points out that 'several important CBS affiliates (including Boston's WEEI) pre-empted Welles' broadcast in favor of local commercial programming, further shrinking its audience.'

So how did the story of the 'panic' grow over the years? Slate blames newspapers, which allegedly 'seized the opportunity presented by Welles' program to discredit radio as a source of news. The newspaper industry sensationalized the panic to prove to advertisers, and regulators, that radio management was irresponsible and not to be trusted.'

Radiolab isn't the only news outlet marking the 75th anniversary, of course. There's also [this report from PBS-TV's \*American Experience\*](#), which says that 'although most listeners understood that the program was a radio drama, the next day's headlines reported that thousands of others plunged into panic, convinced that America was under a deadly Martian attack'."

**From the Web:** [A transcript of \*The War of the Worlds\* broadcast.](#)

So which was it, mass panic or hyped-up hysteria? Something in between? This blogger recalls his father saying the broadcast went mostly unnoticed in the quiet hills of Western New York State.

## Orson Welles

### Citation:

"Orson Welles." *Great Lives: A Century in Obituaries*, Ian Brunskill, Collins, 1st edition, 2005. *Credo Reference*, [https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/collinsgl/orson\\_welles/0?institutionId=2869](https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/collinsgl/orson_welles/0?institutionId=2869). Accessed 25 Sep. 2020.

ORSON WELLES Formidable and inventive actor and producer 10 October 1985  
*from [Great Lives: A Century in Obituaries](#)*

“Orson Welles, the actor, producer, and film director, and one of the most formidable talents of his age, died in Hollywood on October 10 at the age of 70.

Physically and intellectually imposing, he brought an original and inventive mind to bear on radio, the cinema, the stage, and television. His work, though erratic, was never predictable or dull. His career suffered from the enormous critical acclaim for his first film, *Citizen Kane*, made when he was only 26. Its reputation dogged him for the rest of his life, constantly raising expectations that he could not match.

After *Citizen Kane* there was a sense of anti-climax, partly brought on by Welles himself. The freedom granted to him to make that film rarely came his way again. He gained a reputation (which he always refuted) for being extravagant and unreliable. His life was littered with unfinished projects and projects that were announced and never got started. By the end dozens of cameo parts in other people's bad films, and his voice-overs for sherry and lager commercials, came near to extinguishing the memory of a brilliant artist: an actor of power and charm, a film maker responsible for some of the finest work in that medium.

With his fine, rich voice and gift for anecdote he was, too, an outstanding raconteur; and he was a more than usually gifted painter. On everything he did, from the sublime to the dreadful, he left his mark; a huge talent that too often wasted itself and became frustrated.

George Orson Welles was born at Kenosha, Wisconsin, on the shore of Lake Michigan, on May 6, 1915. He was the younger son of Richard Head Welles, a prosperous businessman, and his wife, Beatrice Ives, a concert pianist and a woman of exceptional beauty and high intelligence. She treated her two sons as her intellectual equals, and as a result both reached intellectual maturity very early in life. At 10 Orson was being examined with interest by medical and psychological experts as an infant phenomenon, and by then he had already written a comprehensive thesis on *The Universal History of Drama*.

At 16 he had already travelled extensively, but had an unfulfilled ambition to visit Ireland. Within a few weeks of arriving there, in the autumn of 1931, he made his professional debut as an actor at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, having introduced himself to its directors as 'Orson Welles, star of the New York Theatre Guild'. He was given the part of the Duke of Württemberg in *Jew Süss* after one of the most remarkable auditions ever held in the theatre.

He played at both the Gate and Abbey theatres for a year, and then returned to America where he toured with Katherine Cornell. He made his debut on the New York stage as Chorus and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* in December, 1934; in 1936 he became director of the Negro People's Theatre and directed a Negro version of *Macbeth*, and in 1937 was appointed a director of the Federal Theatre Project in New York. In the same year he founded and opened the Mercury Theatre with *Julius Caesar*, played in modern dress and without scenery.

By this time he had also made a name for himself on radio, where he earned huge sums in the part of 'The Shadow', but it was in October, 1938, that he achieved his radio tour de force by producing H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which he presented with such

reality that he terrified half America into believing that their country was being invaded by Martians.

Inevitably, after this, he was invited to go to Hollywood, where RKO signed a contract which gave him virtual carte blanche as producer, director, writer, and actor. His first production was to have been *Heart of Darkness*, from the novel by Conrad, but the outbreak of war in Europe caused a change in plan. Instead he made *Citizen Kane*, a far from flattering biography of a newspaper magnate with obvious similarities to William Randolph Hearst. The Hearst newspapers retaliated by either attacking the film or ignoring it. Kane was played by Welles himself, who described the character as ‘a great lover, a great American citizen, and a dirty dog’. Technically dazzling with its wide-angle and deep-focus photography, intricate flashback structures, and such felicities as a devastatingly accurate parody of *The March of Time* newsreel, *Citizen Kane* was a critical sensation. It was hailed then as one of the best films ever made and time has not reversed that judgment. For a man in his twenties with no previous cinema experience it was an extraordinary achievement.

His second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, from Booth Tarkington’s novel about the decline and fall of a late 19th century aristocratic family, was no less stylish and compelling; but it was severely cut against Welles’s wishes and the final sequence, which threw the film out of balance, was shot by another director. Already Welles’s disenchantment with Hollywood had started.

For the time being, however, he stayed, portraying a brooding Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and directing himself, as a former Nazi at large in a small American town, in *The Stranger*. He was director and leading man again for *The Lady From Shanghai*, a baroque and at times impenetrable thriller with a famous climax in a hall of mirrors. The female lead was Rita Hayworth, Welles’s estranged second wife.

In the same year, 1948, he made a low budget version of *Macbeth*, shot in only three weeks with himself in the title role. Marred by a poor sound-track, the film nevertheless had a barbaric splendour. After this Welles came to Europe and played his most popular and enduring role, as the racketeer Harry Lime in Graham Greene’s atmospheric thriller set in Vienna, *The Third Man*. Welles himself wrote in the picture’s best remembered line, that 500 years of Swiss democracy had produced only the cuckoo clock.

While *Macbeth* was shot in three weeks, his *Othello*, released in 1955, took three years. His performance, passionate and deeply tragic, was modeled on that of the stage production with which he had made his London debut in 1951. Other notable stage appearances during the 1950s were in his own adaptation of *Moby Dick* and as *King Lear*. Breaking his ankle on the first night, he played the king on the second night from a wheelchair.

In the cinema he directed in two thrillers. One, *Confidential Report*, was taken from his own novel; the other, and more successful, *Touch of Evil*, was a triumph of style over plot with Welles at his most flamboyant as the corrupt police chief. His most striking per-

formance outside his own films in the 1950s was as the defense attorney in *Compulsion*, based on the Leopold/Loeb murder trial.

In 1963 he directed his own adaptation of Kafka's nightmarish novel, *The Trial*, making dramatic use of a disused Paris railway station. But though the film was often visually stunning, it did not quite cohere. *Chimes at Midnight*, a portrait of Shakespeare's Falstaff and his relationship with Prince Hal, was, on the other hand, a film to rank with Welles's best, not only for the central performance but an imaginative use of slender resources.

It was Welles's last completed feature. A film of *Don Quixote*, begun in Spain in the 1950s, came eventually to nothing, though much footage was shot; and a long-cherished *Lear* was also aborted. Welles's final two films as director were *The Immortal Story*, made for French television, and an impish semi-documentary about the art world, *F for Fake*.

Of his acting roles outside his films, the less said, on the whole, the better. Among the exceptions were his Cardinal Wolsey in *A Man for All Seasons*. When he celebrated his 70th birthday in May this year, he was in bullish mood. His *Lear* seemed at last to be getting off the ground; two other films, one started back in 1970 and taking the cinema industry as its theme, were announced as firm commitments. But as so often with Welles, the promise was unfulfilled.

He was married three times: to Virginia Nicholson, whom he divorced in 1940; to Rita Hayworth, from 1943 to 1947; and, in 1955, to Paola Mori. Each marriage produced one daughter."

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## About the Novel

### Citation:

Wells, H. G., and Cynthia Giles. "The War of the Worlds." *The Literature of War*, edited by Thomas Riggs, Gale, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, [https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galelow/the\\_war\\_of\\_the\\_worlds/0?institutionId=2869](https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galelow/the_war_of_the_worlds/0?institutionId=2869). Accessed 25 Sep. 2020.

### The War of the Worlds

in [Experiments](#)  
from [The Literature of War](#)

☞Key Facts

Conflict: Fictional

Genre: Novel

## OVERVIEW

“The War of the Worlds, by H. G. (Herbert George) Wells (1866–1946), is regarded as one of the most influential and prophetic works of early science fiction. Published in 1898, the novel both reflects and exploits the pervasive fin de siècle anxieties that afflicted Victorian society, offering an imaginative scenario in which human civilization is almost—but not quite—annihilated by bloodthirsty extraterrestrials. In addition, The War of the Worlds presents a thinly veiled indictment of nineteenth-century imperialism and a philosophical commentary on controversial concepts such as “social Darwinism” (in which the fittest leave the weak behind) and “total war” (in which civilians are targeted along with military forces).

The novel is set in and around London, near the end of the nineteenth century. Its unnamed narrator recounts the arrival on Earth of hostile creatures from Mars. They attack the human population from enormous tripod-shaped mobile towers, using heat rays and poison gas. Human defenses ultimately prove useless against the Martian technology, and it turns out that the invaders intend to utilize human blood as a food source.

The narrator, who goes through a series of ordeals while trying to reunite with his wife, observes varied responses to the invasion and has lengthy conversations with a clergyman whose faith is shaken by the events and an artilleryman who articulates a grim plan for survival. Both the idealistic clergyman and the utilitarian artilleryman become demented, and the general populace runs mad. But the narrator—who is a student of science and moral philosophy—keeps his wits and eventually gets home. In the end, humanity is unexpectedly saved when the Martians succumb to infectious microorganisms. Following these events, which are told in flashback, scientists speculate that the Martians were an ancient race whose brains had become over evolved while their physical strength and resilience had atrophied.

The War of the Worlds was an immediate popular success, as were Wells's other early works of science fiction, which included *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and *The Invisible Man* (1897). Wells, who referred to the novels as “scientific romances,” always claimed they were unimportant by comparison to his later work, which included not only dozens of novels and short stories but also a wide array of nonfiction books and articles. Yet *The War of the Worlds* has become the best known of all his works, in part because a radio dramatization of the novel caused public panic in some areas of the northeastern United States when it aired in 1938. Wells's story has retained a place in the popular imagination, influencing many later works of science fiction through its depiction of human vulnerability in the face of superior technology.

## HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was the predominant colonial and military power on earth. As the century came to a close, however, it was becoming

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*War of the Worlds: The Panic Broadcast* Study Guide 2021

16 | Page

ing apparent that the empire was stagnating or beginning to decline. In addition, the certainties of religious belief and social theory were disturbed by publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, and throughout the nineteenth century industrialization not only displaced workers from the countryside into the cities but also disrupted traditional class structures.

Germany's unexpected victory in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 raised fears that a military invasion of the United Kingdom was possible. George Chesney capitalized on these national insecurities in his 1871 novel *The Battle of Dorking*, which depicted Germans invading an English market town. Chesney's novel was so popular that it spawned a thriving genre of "invasion literature" that persisted into the twentieth century. The United Kingdom was also struck by millennial anxiety and growing social unrest as the turn of the century approached.

Taken altogether, these factors created a perfect environment for *The War of the Worlds*, which combined two popular fascinations: invasion literature and stories about Mars. Interest in interplanetary adventures had begun in 1880 with Percy Greg's *Across the Zodiac* and was intensified in 1894 by reports that a French astronomer had observed "strange lights" on Mars. The following year, American astronomer Percival Lowell's book *Mars* suggested that features on the planet's surface could be irrigation channels, possibly constructed to support life on an arid world.

Those bits of news served as inspirations for *The War of the Worlds*, in which the flashes of light became departing spacecraft and the Martians were imagined as canal-builders forced to leave their depleted planet in search of a new home. Along with these seemingly scientific ideas, Wells incorporated the horrifying notion that Martians might imbibe human blood, not unlike the vampire featured in Bram Stoker's popular 1897 novel *Dracula*.

## WELLS AND WELLES THE GREAT SCARE



Orson Welles broadcasting a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* in 1938. © FORTEAN/TOPFOTO/THE IMAGE WORKS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

H. G. Wells hit upon a powerful idea in 1898 when he depicted the helplessness of human beings faced with an otherworldly invasion. In the century after *The War of the Worlds* was published, its premise inspired many works of science fiction and disaster drama. The first film based on the novel attracted enthusiastic audiences in 1953 and is widely considered a classic of science fiction cinema.

Yet it was radio that made *The War of the Worlds* a landmark of popular culture. An ambitious young writer named Orson Welles adapted the novel for performance on the radio drama series *Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Welles broadcast the story on the night before Halloween in 1938 in a simulated-reality format, beginning with “news flashes” that interrupted a music show to report strange lights in the sky. Soon the news story took over the broadcast, presenting mock interviews with experts and gradually escalating into an account of Martian machines overrunning humans.

At several points before and during the presentation, announcements explained that it was a dramatization, not a real news event. A number of people did not hear the disclaimers, however, and there was some amount of panic behavior, though no one is really sure how much. It is certain, however, that the highly publicized event propelled Orson Welles into

a legendary career that included not only acting but also writing and directing such classic films as *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

It is also certain that six deaths occurred in Ecuador after Radio Quito aired a Spanish-language version of Welles's radio drama in 1949. A panic sparked by the broadcast turned into a deadly riot after the hoax was revealed, demonstrating once again how much the idea of alien invasion plays on humanity's deepest fears.

Wells's audience was troubled not only by threats that could be imagined from past and present experience, but also by fears of what they could not yet foresee. As the pace of social and scientific change accelerated, there was an increasing awareness that new forms of technology would soon alter human life—perhaps beyond recognition. Wells tapped into that concern by depicting the Martians as humanoids who had become (after eons of evolution) so intellectually overdeveloped that they were dependent on machine technology to supplement or even replace their physical capabilities.

The technology they created for survival also gave them an insurmountable advantage over the conventional weaponry of Earth. Wells, who had been educated in the sciences, used *The War of the Worlds* to depict a new military might that would be characterized by motor-driven killing machines, deadly heat rays, inescapable poison gas, and unpreventable assaults from the air. Just two decades later, this “Martian” style of warfare became a human reality when tanks, chemical weapons, and even airplanes appeared in World War I.

## **THEMES AND STYLE**

For most of its early readers, *The War of the Worlds* was merely a satisfying mixture of gory sensationalism and lightly philosophical commentary, offered up in a journalistic style that was both efficient and entertaining. (An anonymous reviewer for *The Critic* aptly described the novel as “an Associated Press dispatch, describing a universal nightmare.”)

Wells points to the irony of colonizers becoming colonized in an early passage, as the narrator muses on the morality of the Martian invasion:

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

Here, the Tasmanians represent the most extreme consequences of European colonialism, in which the indigenous population is effectively wiped out by deprivation, disease, and military force. Those who survived the European colonization of Africa, Asia, the Ameri-

cas, and the South Pacific saw their lands and natural resources seized by a foreign army, their labor exploited by foreign companies, and their traditional cultures destroyed.

The War of the Worlds is ironically titled, because the war is so one-sided, the forces so unequal, that there is never any meaningful combat, just the rapid collapse of human civilization. There is little or no time or opportunity for romantic patriotism, heroism, or brotherhood in arms. In fact, once it becomes plain that Earth can put up no defense against the Martians, Wells's demoralized humans revert to selfish, savage behavior. In the end they survive only by an intervention of luck, or perhaps divine providence.

Although Welles was not an absolute pacifist, his opposition to imperialism and non-defensive war is subtly evident in *The War of the Worlds*. At the same time, there is a complementary subtext in which the Martian colonizers are wiped out by disease, just as native populations were decimated by European diseases for which they had no immunity. Similarly, the Martians are not motivated by the imperial desire for “more” (land, goods, political power) but rather by an instinct for survival. These Darwinian aspects—which are also reflected in the evolutionary exhaustion that has befallen the Martians—complicate the theme of anti-imperialism and create ambiguities which make the novel an intriguing work of fiction rather than an ideological tract.

## CRITICAL DISCUSSION

In the twentieth century, as Wells shifted his attention from dark fantasies to progressive social commentary, he came to regard his early works as inconsequential. That view was generally shared by the critical community until 1961, when Bernard Bergonzi's [The Early H. G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances](#) argued persuasively that Wells's popular speculative fictions deserved to be taken seriously. For example, Bergonzi points out that the fantastic surface of *The War of the Worlds* conceals important insights into “the secret fears and lack of confidence of late Victorian bourgeois society.”

The subsequent renewal of interest in Welles's early novels proved fortunate for his posthumous reputation, since—as Frank McConnell explains in his 1980 essay “H. G. Wells: Utopia and Doomsday”—his works of speculative fiction are now regarded as classics, while “the rest of Wells seems to have vanished without a trace.” Few people today, McConnell observes, are “aware that Wells's imprint on [the early twentieth century] was equal to or greater than that of D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, C. S. Lewis, or W. H. Auden.” By that time the doomsday visions that had suited the mood of fin de siècle England had been replaced in Wells's work by utopian ideals of progress and social reform.



The Martians launch an attack from their three-legged fighting machines in Steven Spielberg's 2005 film version of *The War of the Worlds*. © DREAMWORKS/PARAMOUNT/THE KOBAL COLLECTION/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

While Wellsian socialism found an enthusiastic audience at first, by mid-century Wells and his ideas had faded from view. As Allan Chavkin points out in “Mr. Sammler's War of the Planets,” when the protagonist of Saul Bellow's acclaimed 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* muses on his affinities with Wells, he does not identify with the Wells who became an apostle of optimism. Instead he resonates with “the Wells of *The War of the Worlds*, the dark Wells who, like Sammler, is anxious about the survival of the species and ponders whether evolution will lead toward progress or extinction.”

Since the late twentieth century, *The War of the Worlds* has attracted the attention of scholars whose interests range from the history of ideas to post-colonialist criticism. In his 1992 study *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763–3749*, for example, I. F. Clarke finds *The War of the Worlds* to be “the perfect nineteenth-century myth of the imaginary war.” It offers a symbolic representation of ideas already abroad in the culture and therefore immediately understood. Ingo Cornils takes a comparative approach in his 2003 essay “The Martians Are Coming! War, Peace, Love, and Scientific Progress in H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and Kurd Laßwitz's *Auf zwei Planeten*,” which considers Wells's novel in relation to a German work (*Two Planets*) also written in 1897. (Laßwitz's novel—until the 1930s one of the most popular German science fiction works—transcends the war plot the two books have in common and ends in a mutually beneficial cooperation between Earthlings and Martians).

Patricia Kerslake, in her 2007 survey [Science Fiction and Empire](#), examines *The War of the Worlds* as a narrative that “speaks of colonialism and the imperial drive from the most violent and dystopian of viewpoints.” Bed Paudyal, in his 2009 essay “Trauma, Sublime, and the Ambivalence of Imperialist Imagination in H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*,” considers the novel in relation to philosopher Edmund Burke's aesthetic theories, particularly his theory of the sublime.”

## SOURCES

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## FURTHER READING

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  - Wells, H. G.; Martin A. Danahay. *The War of the Worlds*. Broadview Peterborough, 2003. Print.
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  - *The War of the Worlds*. Adapt. and perf. Wells, Orson . CBSRadio, 30 Oct. 1938. Radio.
  - *The War of the Worlds*. Dir. Byron Haskin; Perf. Gene Barry; Ann Robinson; Les Tremayne. Paramount Pictures, 1953. Film.
  - *The War of the Worlds*. Dir. Steven Spielberg; Perf. Tom Cruise; Dakota Fanning; Tim Robbins. Paramount Pictures, 2005. Film.
- H. G. Wells  
Cynthia Giles

### **Things to think about prior to performance:**

- What is your familiarity with *The War of the Worlds* novel or its subsequent adaptations?
- The idea of Mars and "aliens" has been a trope of science fiction and fantasy for years. Now that NASA's Viking probes were the first ever to successfully set a footpad on Mars in a powered landing, does it awaken any fears of potential life forms?
- What is your notion of "fake news?"
- Have you ever listened to a story and wondered if it was real or fictional?
- What do you think might be a circumstance where you would hear a story on radio, television, or the internet and believe it could NOT be real?

### **Things to watch for in performance:**

- Look for the visual differences between the 1938 and 1948 periods in the production.
- All of the actors are supposed to be in the same radio studio space. Notice the scenic details of how the production tried to establish this environment.
- Listen for the dialect changes the actors make in order to establish different conventions of the period, different characters, and different regions.
- Notice the design of the properties in each space, i.e. the microphones, the items used to make sound effects, the radio scripts, etc.

### **Things to think about after the performance:**

- Think about the parallels between a radio broadcast in 1938 appearing to deliver a false story to the public and contemporary biased websites and cable networks broadcasting opinion rather than factual news.

- Do you think that people are more or less willing to believe what they hear from the media today than they were in 1938?
- Do you think people were primed to panic because of the series of tumultuous events that surrounded 1938 or are people gullible by nature?
- What did you experience watching the actors voice different characters throughout the play?
- What did you think about the 1948 commercials for *All American Brands*?
- Was there a difference between the 1938 characters and the 1948 characters? If so, what? If not, why?
- What did the sound effects and visual film clips, place cards, and photographs have on your experience?

### **Other Analysis “Tools”:**

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, WHAT happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is ‘about?’ In a nutshell, how does the playwright drive his point(s) home?
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for their work?

**The running time for this production is approximately 1 hour and 55 minutes, with a 5 minute intermission**

<https://www.atthemac.org/events/war-of-the-worlds/>

### **Performance Dates:**

Thursday: April 15, Friday, April 16, Saturday April 17 at 7pm  
and Sunday, April 18 at 3pm

Thursday: April 22, Friday, April 23, Saturday April 24 at 7pm  
and Sunday, April 25 at 3pm

### **Zoom Discussion**

Thursday, April 15: Post-show Discussion with Director, Production Team and Actors, following the performance: <https://cod.zoom.us/j/89685676085>