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A Wellesian Do-Over

Dissatisfied with his performance as Orson Welles in *Ed Wood*, Vincent D'Onofrio takes another crack at it in his directing debut, *Five Minutes, Mr. Welles*.

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BrooklynHazelhurst

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**D'Onofrio in *Five
Minutes, Mr.
Welles***

Of all the offbeat characters that surround the passionate but woefully untalented [director](#) Ed Wood in Tim Burton's 1994 comic biopic, the oddest has to be Orson Welles, simply from the incongruity of one of the worst [filmmakers](#) in the world hobnobbing with one of the titans. But Welles, as played by Vincent D'Onofrio, is charming as he commiserates with [Johnny Depp's](#) Wood, closing the gap between their two worlds when he tells Wood, "Visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making someone else's dreams?"

D'Onofrio is lovely in the part, but during a telephone interview with *FilmStew*, the [actor](#) insists, "I was never really happy with my performance in *Ed Wood*, so I always wanted to try it again."

That he has with *Five Minutes, Mr. Welles*, a half-hour film that screens Wednesday, May 3ard, at the San Francisco International Film Festival as part of the "Domestic Dramas" shorts [program](#). It is the actor's impressive directing debut, with Will Conroy's screenplay based on D'Onofrio's original idea.

The two-person [drama](#) takes place during the shooting of *The Third Man*, in which Welles so indelibly played black market profiteer Harry Lime. Gorgeously shot by cinematographer Frank Prinzi and scored by David Mansfield in a style that pays homage to the unforgettable Anton Karas zither music that accompanied the 1949 classic, the film confines itself to Welles' dressing room. The five-minute knock that will call him back to the set is coming soon, but Welles has no interest in heeding it, to the disgust of Katherine (Janine Theriault), who argues that he must be on his best behavior. As they parry, the mercurial Welles' moods constantly shift, one moment ebullient, the next petulant; one second charming; the next irascible. And abundantly apparent is his genius.

When D'Onofrio was researching Welles, he came across that fact that it was Welles, and not [screenwriter](#) Graham Greene, who wrote *The Third Man's* most memorable monologue, in which Lime justifies himself to his old friend Holly (Joseph Cotton): 'Don't be so gloomy. After all it's not that awful. Like the fella says, in Italy for 30 years under the Borgia's they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.'

"The idea that he wrote it and they brought it into the scene and they shot it that day was interesting to me," explains D'Onofrio. "So I invented it, I fictionalized it. I just thought, how could he come up with something – is it genius or is it just circumstance? So I took the structure from that monologue and structured my story with the same concept. Will wrote it for me and we shot it."

The 46-year-old Brooklyn native reckons that he was probably around 18 the first time he saw *The Third Man* at New York's now defunct Bleecker Street Cinema, but it was not so much the film that inspired his own work as Welles himself. "The thing that interests me



The Criterion Collection Photo

Welles in *The Third Man*

most about it was presenting Orson as a man," he asserts. "Not as a genius or an icon, but as a man. That was more interesting to me than the actual making of *The Third Man*."

"I think that it was nice to be able to treat such a huge figure from cinema in such a human way, and then birth some kind of genius out of this kind of human circumstance," the [actor](#) adds. "That was more fun for me, thinking about it those terms."

D'Onofrio counts himself as a Welles' fan. "I think as much as any other actor or artist who's interested in film. He's so much a part of cinema [in America](#) that you can't deny it," he says. He admits that he knew little about Welles before he made *Ed Wood*, and the research he started then fascinated him. But the offer to play the part came at the last minute. "I didn't have the time I would have wanted to really study

[him]," he says.

That initial engagement with the cinema giant remained once *Ed Wood* wrapped, along with the nagging conviction that he had failed to do the character justice. Another actor might have let it go, but D'Onofrio is dedicated to his craft. "I'm so passionate about what I do. My friends and I, we love to act. Still, at my age – the feeling to do what I do for a living hasn't dissipated after all these years. For me, it is the same," he insists.

Any research into Welles turns up stories of plans that went awry, films that didn't get made at all, or those - such as *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Mr. Arkadin* - that were taken from his control and mangled. It is a side of the [movie](#) industry that still exists. "There's always times when you feel that people have turned their backs on you in this business," D'Onofrio notes. "People make promises; people are fickle, and sometimes they just blatantly turn their backs on you."

"I've been lucky not to have to burn any bridges, but I've

been around long enough to see that actual stuff like that happens," he continues. "I handle things different. I'm much lower level than Orson Welles. I keep things very close to home, very personal. I usually don't end up somewhere where I don't want to be."

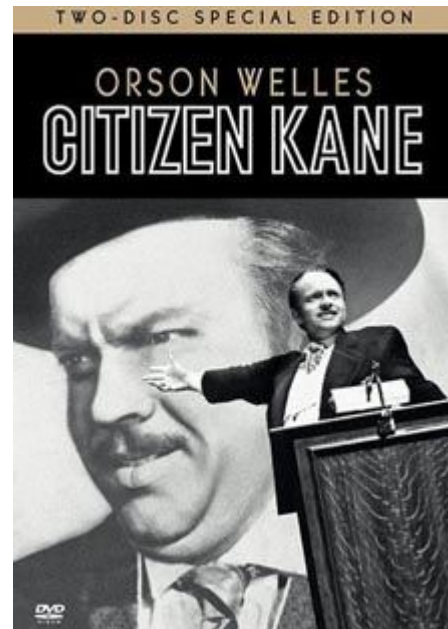
Welles cut a larger-than-life figure from the very beginning of his career. He was after all the man who convinced Americans of a Martian invasion in the 1930s with his *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast and who effortlessly stepped into movies with 1941's *Citizen Kane*, creating a figure in Charles Foster Kane even more outsized than himself. Kane is D'Onofrio's favorite among Welles' films. "For me, it's like the acting, the filmmaking in that movie is just superb."

But when D'Onofrio set out to make his own movie, it was less that legendary Welles that interested him than the man beneath the bravado. "I had never looked at somebody in his position in the way that I was planning to look at him," D'Onofrio observes. "My perspective on him is completely different than I've ever had on any other icon like him."

"The wonderful thing about studying Orson was the fact that he was – even though he was a showboat at times - so human," he adds. "He would just put his foot in his mouth all the time. I'm not sure there's going to be anybody like him around for a long time."

Having gotten his feet wet with the short, which began making the festival rounds last year, D'Onofrio hopes to start soon on his first feature, a dark western he is currently co-writing with Conroy. Prinzi will once again be his cinematographer and others from the Welles' shoot will also be involved.

In the meantime, is he finally satisfied with his portrayal of Orson Welles? Yes, he replies. "I approached it in a different way. I gave you a man and I gave you Orson at the same time, whereas in *Ed Wood*, it was supposed to be this iconic figure, which I never had enough time to get right."



Turner [Home Entertainment](#) Photo

Great directing *and* acting

