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# **"IT'S ALL TRUE"**

*BY RAYMOND KELLY*

**Filmed from September 1941 to July 1942, the film was abandoned by RKO, leaving Orson Welles with yet another disaster**

**chalked up against his name. The film has now been "rediscovered" and is the subject of a landmark preservation project.**

It could have followed *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* as Orson Welles' third film.

Instead, *It's All True*, a multi-story South American documentary, was abandoned in the midst of production by RKO Pictures and marked the decline of Welles' career in Hollywood as a director.

Believed by some to have been lost or destroyed, more than 20 hours of nitrate negative footage was "rediscovered" two years ago. This lost footage is now the subject of a landmark preservation project by the American Film Institute, the National Center for Film and Video Preservation and the UCLA Film Archives.

Although it is agreed that the film can never be restored, to Welles' original vision, preservationists are hoping the footage can be showcased in a manner that will allow it to be appreciated.

Filmed from September 1941 to July 1942, *It's All True* was to consist of three episodes: "Jangadeiros," the tale of four raft fishermen, who traveled 1,650 miles up the coast of Brazil to make a plea for their impoverished village to that country's dictator; "The Story of the Samba," filmed in Technicolor and set at the famed carnival in Rio; and "My Friend Bonito," directed by Norman Foster and based on a Robert Flaherty story about a Mexican boy and his bull.

Welles undertook the project in January

1942 at the urging of Nelson Rockefeller, a major stockholder at RKO and then co-ordinator of the State Department's Committee on Inter-American Affairs. The film was supposed to have served as a goodwill gesture between the United States and Latin America, where the Nazi propaganda machine was in high gear.

Pressured into departing for the carnival in Rio in February, Welles decided to begin production on *Journey Into Fear* and leave the editing of *The Magnificent Ambersons* to Robert Wise, whom he falsely believed would be following him to Brazil.

"Bonito," which was planned for inclusion in an earlier Welles' production and was already half-way through filming when on May 19, tragedy struck. Four raft fishermen were recreating their triumphant entry into Rio harbor for the "Jangadeiros" episode, when Jacare, the fishermen's leader, drowned after his tree trunk raft overturned. Some days later, a shark washed ashore and what was believed to be Jacare's remains were found in its belly.

Public outcry over the death of beloved national hero, who had risked his life for his village and died in the making of a movie, was overwhelming. Welles and RKO took the brunt of the criticism.

Questions about Welles' spending prompted RKO to order most of the unit back to the United States on June 8. Welles, associate producer Richard Wilson



Welles in Rio de Janeiro at Carnival time, 1942.



and a few crew members stayed on to film additional "Jangadeiros" scenes near Fortazela.

Bad publicity about the filming, reported extravagances by Welles and a changeover in RKO management led to the abandonment of *It's All True* in July.

The jettisoning of *It's All True* and the drastic recutting of *The Magnificent Ambersons* in his absence, gave birth to Welles reputation—deserved or not—as being unable to satisfactorily complete a film.

Welles struggled to salvage the film and his reputation. He attempted to buy the footage from RKO offering his financial claim to *Citizen Kane* and \$197,500. Welles assembled a seven-reel color short of "The Story of the Samba" as a selling tool in hopes of attracting a new backer for the film.

But Welles was unable to meet his payments to RKO or interest another studio in finishing the film. *It's All True* was shelved by RKO in 1945.

RKO's film library was acquired by Desilu Productions in 1958 and then by Paramount Pictures several years later. Most of the color footage from "The Story of the Samba" was unceremoniously dumped into Santa Monica Bay about 25 years ago when it was deemed a fire hazard.

Although word that some footage from *It's All True* existed surfaced over the years, it was not until two years ago that plans for its preservation were made.

Paramount donated more than 140,000 feet of undeveloped *It's All True* footage to the AFI in 1985, which deposited it at the National Center for Film and Video Preservation in Los Angeles.

Gregory Lukow, acting director of the center, said the footage was later moved to the UCLA Film Archives because it had more available storage space.

When the AFI decided to store the 300 cans of film at the UCLA archives, it marked the first time the organizations had

worked together on a single film. The project is still under the auspices of the AFI, allowing sponsors' tax breaks.

Edward Richmond, curator of the UCLA archives, calls it a "truly collaborative project with UCLA providing the staffing and the AFI providing funds for outside laboratories."

To spark interest in the preservation, a 22-minute short, *It's All True: Four Men on a Raft*, containing 12 minutes of the "Jangadeiros" footage, was produced and debuted at the Venice Film Festival last year.

Since then, preservationists supported by a limited budget, have worked to identify footage and determining which scenes should be salvaged.

"A lot of it is duplicate takes. To transfer all of it (to safety stock) would be wasteful," Lukow said.

Once the footage is preserved, a joint committee of the National Center for Film and Video Preservation, the AFI and the UCLA archives will decide what the next step will be.

Lukow believes that "the ultimate product needs to be worked out conceptually," but most likely the footage will be used in a documentary about the filming of *It's All True*, and shown either theatrically, on cable television or on home video.

However, preserving the undeveloped footage is the first task.

"If nitrate film isn't stored properly it can totally decay," said Lukow, describing the deterioration as "from goo to froth to powder."

John Tirpak, a fiction film preservationist at the UCLA archives, who has spent much of the past year inspecting the footage, noted that there has been some shrinkage but the negative is in good shape. But there are no guarantees that the quality of the 45-year-old undeveloped negative will remain stable much longer.

"Faced with the prospect of running out of money," the preservation team has agreed not to salvage the footage on an





Still from *It's All True*.

episode by episode basis, but by "saving the most interesting sequences first," Tirpak said.

A \$25,000 grant by the AFI has allowed preservationists to transfer footage from only 20 of the 300 film cans to safety stock.

Most of the footage has been viewed and identified using scripts, production notes and first hand accounts.

Although, Welles died in October 1985 without having seen the footage, Richard Wilson, the associate producer of *It's All True* has been able "to not only identify the footage but supply us with the information on the filming of a scene," Tirpak said. "His help has been immeasurable."

Preservationists sifted through thousands of feet of film, examining it carefully because of its delicate nature and assembling it into some sort of order.

While some cans contained breathtaking shots of the Rio carnival or moving scenes of a poor fishing village near Fortazela, some footage is merely repetitious; "City scenes or establishing shots," Tirpak said.

The script for "My Friend Bonito" and Welles production notes for "Jangadeiros" have been instrumental in understanding the existing footage, Tirpak said.

The widow of "Bonito" scriptwriter John Fante donated that screenplay to the preservation team. Inspection of the surviving footage reveals that "none of the later scenes exist," Tirpak said.

He described the "Bonito" footage as "looking good, but not striking."

"'Jangadeiros' is visually the most striking. Welles was not going for a talky, dramatic film. It looks almost like a silent movie," Tirpak said, adding that the footage is reminiscent of Robert Flaherty's films.

Tirpak said there was no script per se for "Jangadeiros," but Welles' production notes and Wilson's recollections have served as a guide to understanding the footage.

Whether Welles was unable to complete "Jangadeiros" before RKO terminated the project or whether the footage was dumped into the Pacific Ocean, some scenes, including the funeral of a young fisherman, are missing. "We have a procession but we are missing the funeral," Tirpak said.

To a greater extent, very little remains of "The Story of the Samba," which detailed the origin of the dance against the setting of the carnival. Some black and white footage of the carnival, shot from low angles, looks very much like a standard documentary, Tirpak reported.

More impressive is "a couple of reels of color footage" of the carnival that are still in Paramount's possession. The studio has offered to allow the AFI to make copies of the "vibrant" footage, Tirpak said.

Although there is no natural soundtrack to *It's All True*, that is not a major concern. "The film was intended to be a very visual and international film," Tirpak said.

While some may view the negative footage as merely silent, black and white rushes, Tirpak imagines a "film with lush music and Welles' colorful narration." And because the mere assembly of the existing footage can never equal what-might-have-been, preservationists are careful not to bill their work as a "restoration" project.

"Even if all of the footage were available," Tirpak said. "I would not attempt to second guess Welles on the editing."