

## **Document Citation**

Title Retouching evil

Author(s) Michael Sragow

Source SF Weekly

Date 1998 Sep 09

Type article

Language English

Pagination 14-23

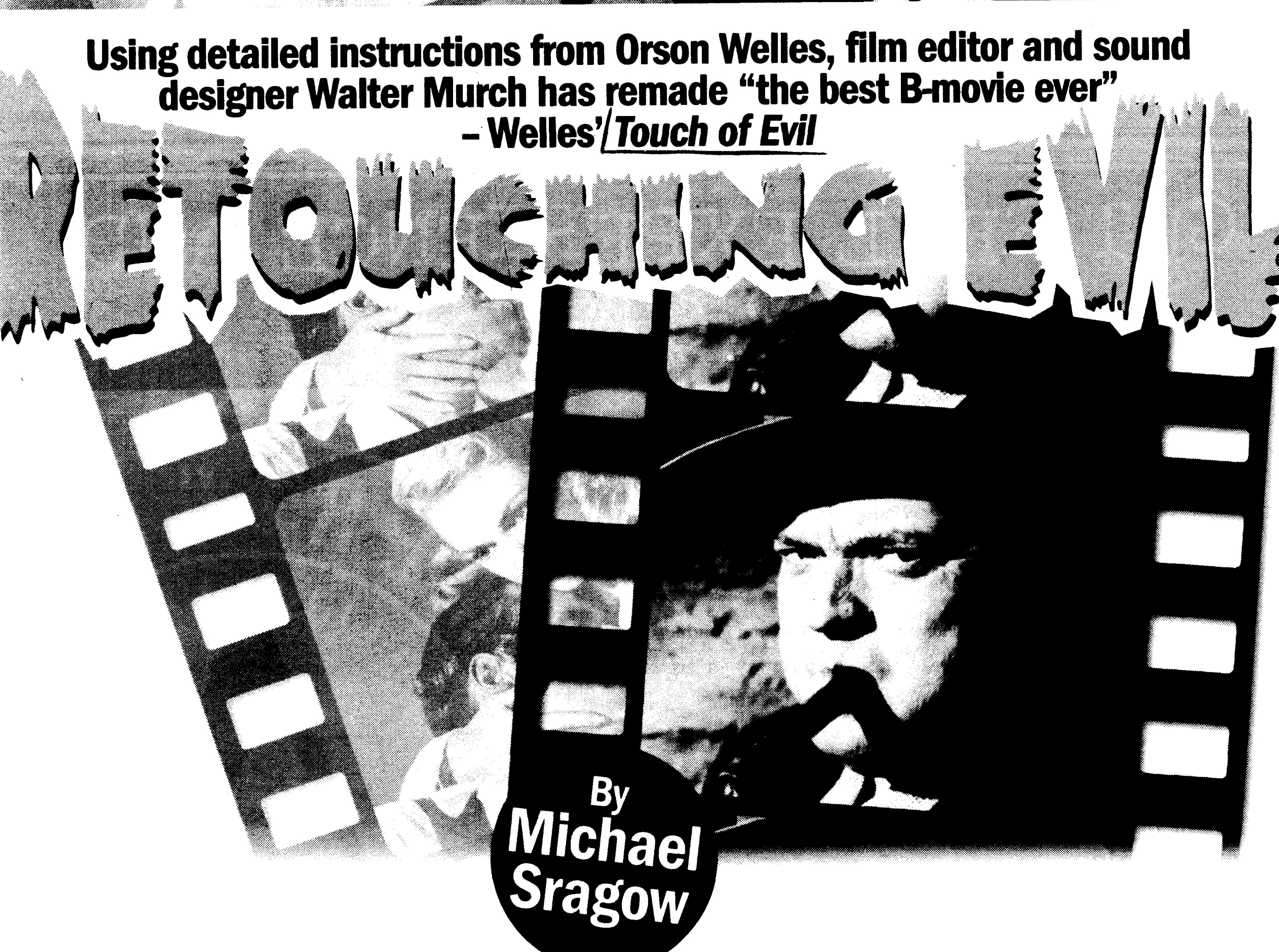
No. of Pages 9

Subjects Murch, Walter (1943), New York, New York, United States

Welles, Orson (1915-1985), Kenosha, Wisconsin, United States

Motion pictures -- Editing

Film Subjects Touch of evil, Welles, Orson, 1958



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

This mode is not atten kane—or The Bridge Over the River Kwai or The Grapes of Wath — but it's unguestionably pungent, ardent yearning permeated the big theater at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch one balmy evening in The best B-movie July. It felt like artistic homesickness. Walter Murch — the renowned film editor and sound designer — was making an audacious presentation to a few dozen filmmakers, journalists, broadcasters, and trusted friends. ever made." George Lucas himself took time off from his Star Wars prequels to host the event for Murch, a pal and creative partner for more than 30 years. Indeed, the occasion was almost a gathering of the clan for the Bay

Area's best directors. And perhaps even a restatement of faith. Philip Kaufman (director of The Right Stuff) and Carroll Ballard (The Black Stallion) were there; so was that relative newcomer to the area, Barry Levinson, who hit the zeitgeist jackpot with Wag the Dog. (The only member of this once close-knit group who couldn't make it was Francis Ford Coppola.) They showed up to honor Murch, who established audiovisual experimentation as a hallmark of San Francisco filmmaking. Murch is the master of a special kind of synesthesia — making a movie's sound enlarge or color its imagery (and vice versa). A supreme example of his art occurs when Michael Corleone readies himself to commit a double murder in Coppola's The Godfather. As he sits in a familystyle Italian restaurant with his imminent victims, the roar of an elevated train takes over the soundtrack and hurtles us into the torrent of his brain. (Murch also did the sound for The Godfather Part II.)

The Godfather (1971) wasn't even a ray on the horizon in 1969. That's when Murch, Lucas, and their fearless leader Coppola formed the core of a caravan that journeyed from Los Angeles to S.F. to found Coppola's pioneering film company, American Zoetrope. But Murch's abilities were immediately felt in American Zoetrope movies such as Coppola's The Rain People (1969), and Lucas' THX 1138 (1971). And American Graffiti (1973) and Coppola's 1974 production of The Conversation and his 1979 Apocalypse Now (for which Murch edited both picture and sound) became milestones of movie sound design. In 1996, Murch took home unprecedented twin Oscars for editing and sound as part of the Academy sweep for Berkeley-based producer Saul Zaentz's The English Patient.

In the '90s, film restoration and rereleasing have ranged from the sacred (Vertigo) to the absurd (Grease). What Murch was unveiling at Lucas' ranch, however, was a radical and unparalleled project — the re-editing and restoration of an odd, flawed masterpiece, Orson Welles' Touch of Evil. As if to celebrate its 40th anniversary, Murch structured its images and sounds according to the dictates of an extraordinary, 58-page memo Welles wrote after seeing a studio-decreed cut released over his objections in 1958. Murch was pulling off a final, critical polish for a director who was deceased.

Editor's note: The new version of Touch of Evil screens at the Castro Theater beginning Sept. 18.

At age 55, Murch cuts an imposing figure — tall, bearded, and angular. He has a resonant voice, a steady gaze, and an unpretentious, philosophical manner. Before the film started he stood up and used a quip from Kaufman to break the ice: "We will show no film before its time," a sardonic reference to the wine commercial that made Welles' Q rating jump in the years before his 1985 death. Then Murch went on to explain the torturous history behind one of the freest, riskiest, and raciest movies ever financed by a Hollywood studio.

Walter Murch.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

With one energizing flourish after another, Touch of Evil takes viewers on a jolting ride through a seedy town on the U.S.-Mexico border. At every turn the glamorous stars — Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh, as a determined Mexican prosecutor and his wife — come up against a couple of charismatic grotesques: a baggy-pants crime boss named Grandi, played by Akim Tamiroff, and a tainted American police captain named Quinlan, played by Welles himself.

Pseudo-insiders might ask: Was this a job for Walter Murch? After all, when Murch pops up in Movie Brat biographies or the occasional interview or profile, he's usually portrayed as an austere, workaholic intellectual. A graduate of the Collegiate School in his hometown, New York City, he earned a B.A. in art history and romance languages from Johns Hopkins in 1965. He studied Italian medieval art history in Perugia, and French literature and 19th-century art history in Paris before getting his master's in cinema at USC in 1968. He peppers his conversations with fables, anecdotes, and aphorisms. His writing about film technique and aesthetics (including his book In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing) is exquisitely controlled, full of elegant theories and proofs. Hailing Murch's ingenuity, intuition, constancy, and warmth, Coppola has called him Gerald McBoingBoing grown up — referring to the playful cartoon character who expressed himself only through sound. Others speak of him in tones befitting a Professor Emeritus McBoingBoing.

But there's something else about Murch — a blend of passion, and, yes, showmanship. I first met Murch in 1986 at the Saul Zaentz Film Center in Berkeley, where he was editing Kaufman's masterpiece, The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

He had filled an entire room with mounted 35mm stills of every Continued on page 16 major shot in the



-- Charton

Heston

been. Luckily, after a single viewing of the studio cut, Welles composed that 58-page memo. It specified improvements to the sound, pace, rhythm, look, and drama. Murch used this memo as a blueprint; it turned out to be a magic carpet. "There were no clunkers" in Welles' notes, he told his audience at Skywalker. And the screening proved it. The Murch re-edit has a juggernaut velocity. It should remind movie lovers that Welles was

"I think it was poignant that Walter was the creative part of the team that pulled together this version of *Touch of Evil*," she continues. "It was Walter who followed the direction of the director — Welles' phantom slept on the sofa in his office and growled at him on occasion. I think, in the heart of their hearts, that all those filmmakers know the contribution Walter has made to their work. So it was touching for me to see George mount his homage to Walter — and a little scary. It was like, 'Oh my goodness — have we left something that other filmmakers can build on?'"

After the Skywalker screening, Lucas gave Murch an original *Touch of Evil* poster. "The Strangest Vengeance Ever Planned!" the poster promised. What Murch had delivered was a sweet revenge for Welles. And it seemed right, inevitable, fated. Murch held up a bound volume containing one of Welles' sound notes for the street scenes. "The format is just ordinary typing," he explained. "Then it breaks into a narrow paragraph all in caps, the only time he does that. It reads:

'IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT IN THE RECORDING OF ALL THESE NUMBERS WHICH ARE SUPPOSED 'TO BE HEARD THROUGH STREET LOUDSPEAKERS, THAT THE EFFECT SHOULD BE JUST THAT, JUST EXACTLY AS BAD AS THAT. THE MUSIC ITSELF SHOULD BE SKILLFULLY PLAYED, BUT IT WILL NOT BE ENOUGH IN DOING THE FINAL SOUND MIXING TO RUN THIS TRACK THROUGH AN ECHO CHAMBER WITH

OF MONEY, I FEEL JUSTIFIED IN INSIST-ING UPON THIS AS THE RESULT WILL REALLY BE WORTH IT.'"

Murch says that when he first scanned that passage it raised the short hairs on his neck: Welles seemed to be discussing a process that Murch thought he'd invented himself and had nicknamed "airballing."

"Going back to the early '70s," he says, "I was dissatisfied with how I heard music that was supposed to be coming from a scene. What people normally did was put music on and then filter it slightly and make it a little squawky, maybe put it through an echo chamber, but usually not even that. There was a discontinuity for me between the space I was looking at and the sound which seemed not to know whether it was coming from this space or was part of the score. So when I used 'source' music, I would just play it in a room, and record it with another tape recorder, so it would have the sound of a radio or a record player in that room. And then I would take the original 'clean' track and put it right next to the so-called 'dirty track' or 'airball' track — I was creating a ball of air around the original sound. In the mix I could decide just how much of one track or the other I could use. And this came out of everything I had done in film school."

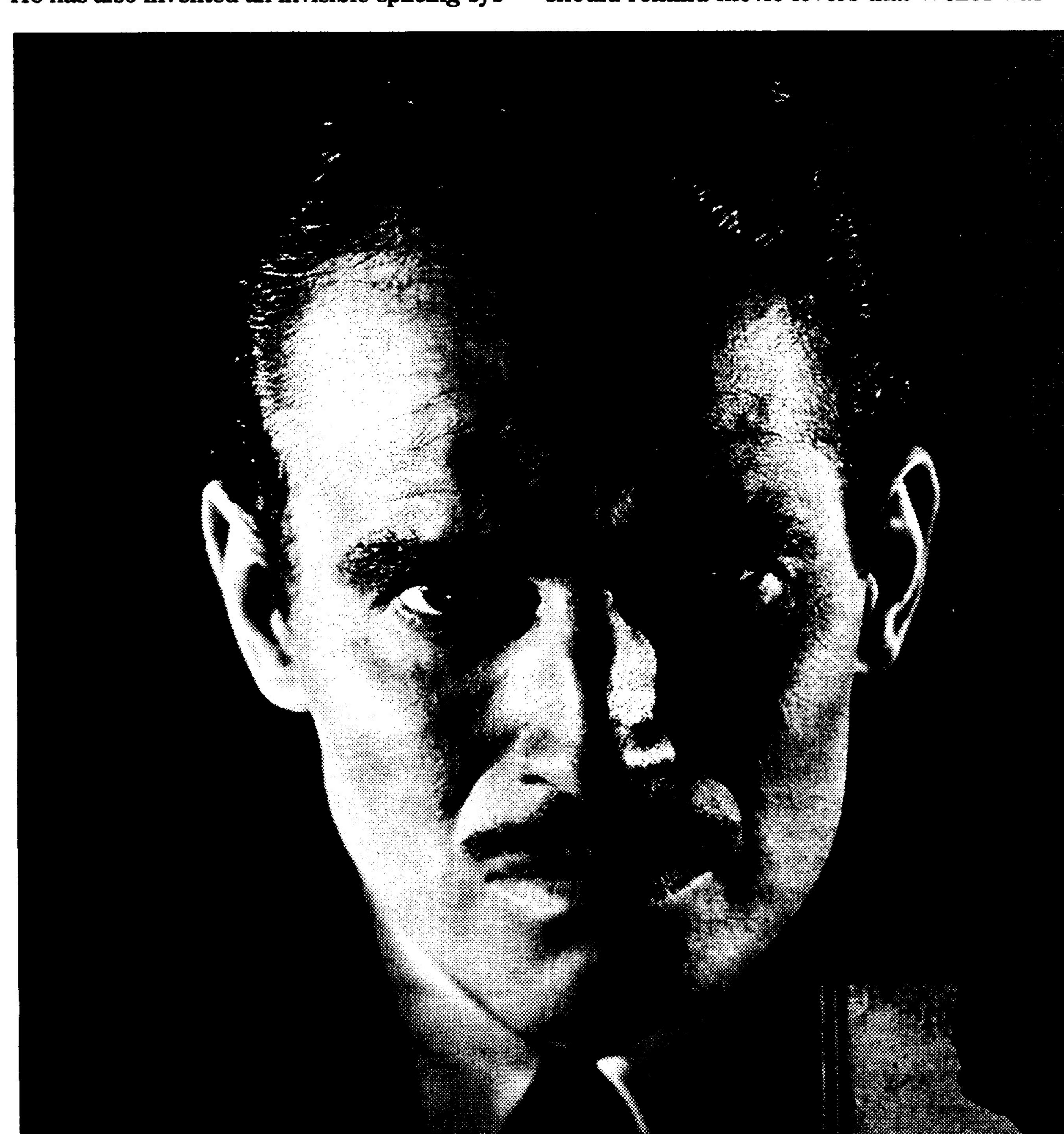
His classmate George Lucas elaborates: "Part of the reason sound flourished in USC had to do with the film school being housed in this building that was big and old and built like Army barracks. The screen for the screening room was positioned against a hall-way that led out onto a patio where everyone would congregate; the speakers would echo into the hallway and the sound would funnel out into the open space. You knew that if you

had a film with a great soundtrack you could draw an audience into the room. Sound was always very important to me; it's probably part of why Walter and I became friends. It was always part of our discussions about films. It was a factor in deciding what films we wanted to make — you'd want to do a certain scene because you could build it around a certain sound."

In 1968, Murch and Lucas both went after the annual Warner Bros. fellowship, which set up the winner as an intern on Warners studio productions. Murch says they made a pact before the final decision that whoever won would give the other guy a hand up. Lucas took the prize, met Coppola on Finian's Rainbow, and then went to work for the dynamic, only-slightly-older filmmaker on The Rain People. He called Murch in the fall of 1968 and asked if he'd cut sound for Coppola. In the middle of 1969, Lucas,

Coppola, Murch, and their families moved to San Francisco in a convoy. And Coppola installed an expensive sound panel at Zoetrope, first thing.

"Walter, George, and I always thought that sound, when you take advantage of it, is 50 percent of the movie," says Coppola. "It operates in extremely subtle ways. I like to borrow a phrase from Jim Morrison: He said music is your special friend, but to a filmmaker sound is your special friend. It's incredibly inexpensive considering the effects you can get with



tem for standard wide-screen movies that makes the running of early cuts less jarring. And he takes legendary care with temporary mixes — he and his colleagues spent a 140-hour week preparing the sound for the epochal screening of the unfinished Apocalypse Now at Cannes, three months before its American premiere. In short, he sweats to display a film at peak impact even at the earliest stages.

At Skywalker, what Murch had to say pierced the knowingness of his audience. It wasn't his blend of lucidity and enthusiasm as he ran through the ways Welles had taken a decent potboiler and cooked up an exhilarating cinematic incubus. It wasn't his coolly indignant account of how Universal executives snatched Touch of Evil away from Welles during post-production, ignoring the director's audio innovations and blunting Evil's edginess and bold, pre-New Wave narrative leaps. It was Murch's own emotional identification with the Welles who made Touch of Evil and was poised for a studio comeback after a 10-year exile in Europe. The Skywalker crowd gasped when Murch recounted the scene in which Welles, a tarnished supercop on his last legs, begs Marlene Dietrich, a Gypsy madam, to read his future. "You haven't got any," she answers. "Your future's all used up."

Sure enough, it was: Universal's subsequent relegation of the film to the second half of double bills sealed a long-held Tinseltown view of Welles as a prodigal child and has-

no art-house obfuscator, but a fabulous popular artist.

"People like Welles and like Walter," says Kaufman, "are the people who know how to work film like sculpture, to discover what's hidden. Walter has been through tough times, he's survived defeats, but he's found that he can play with things in his mind and survive and come up with truly interesting creations — not as a boy wonder, but as a man. And that's what you see with Welles in

Touch of Evil, which is filled with an adult kind of sensibility; not the boy wonder of Citizen Kane, but Orson the man."

To Murch's wife, Aggie — also known as Muriel Murch, who hosts a show called *Cover to Cover* on the Berkeley-based radio station KPFA — Welles was present at Skywalker in a number of ways. Welles, she says, was "the bridge that burnt and left the embers in the river that these filmmakers could walk over. He was absolutely influential on everyone who was there and others who were not.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF FILTER. TO GET THE EFFECT WE'RE LOOKING FOR, IT'S ABSOLUTELY VITAL THAT THIS MUSIC BE PLAYED BACK THROUGH A CHEAP HORN IN THE ALLEY OUTSIDE THE SOUND BUILDING. AFTER THIS IS RECORDED IT THEN CAN BE LOUSED UP EVEN FURTHER BY THE BASIC PROCESS OF RE-RECORDING. BUT A TINNY EXTERIOR HORN IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, AND SINCE IT DOES NOT REPRESENT VERY MUCH IN THE WAY

it. Whenever I see the 'sound design by' credit I chuckle to myself, because Walter and I concocted that credit for him partly because he wasn't in the sound union. And he was performing a function no previous job description would fit, creating a tapestry of sound, one that supports a picture more than literal or even atmospheric sound effects."

Lucas says that just when he was ready to give up on expanding his student film, then known as *THX 1138:4EB*, into a feature, Murch pitched in on the script, and, later, cut the sound while Lucas was cutting the picture

effervescence that got audiences giggly and euphoric. "Depending on what I was looking at, and what the dialogue was, and what we felt was right, I could feature both of the airball tracks, in which case what you got was a musical mist — but with movement in it, because the sources were moving," Murch adds. "So you feel that wherever this sound is coming from it's sort of swinging through the town, coming out of all these cars; and then at the end of a scene, when people had finished talking, and you just wanted music, you could suppress these two tracks and



— "Not," notes Lucas, "the way things usually were done," but true to the film-school spirit of complete collaboration among total film-makers. Lucas wanted a "musical" approach to sound in that movie, and Murch now refers to what they came up with as "a Dagwood sandwich of sound and music with no clear split between them." Murch lifted tracks off records, slowed them down, sped them up, played them backward; he gave every section of the film's futuristic world its own aural signature, so that, for example, the "White Limbo" prison had the base sound of a big room with a lot of machines running.

But THX 1138 was a cold dystopia headed for cult status. Next time out, Lucas tried to be more accessible — he mounted a paean to pre-'63 teen culture called American Graffiti. It was a pop explosion, and an airball jamboree. "We wanted the sound to be naturalistic in its effect but abstract in its placement," explains Lucas. "I wanted the music off the car radios to melt into the night. It was designed to be the opposite of most movies, where the sound effects carry the action and the music is used for the most intense, dramatic moments. In American Graffiti the music would be constant and the sound effects would carry only a few scenes."

Lucas and Murch initially produced the movie's Wolfman Jack broadcast in a studio — two hours of an old-time rock 'n' roll radio show, with introductions, commercials, music, and call-ins. But that was "clean." So they clamped that tape on a Nagra tape recorder with a portable speaker, and rerecorded it a couple of times in the space between the garage and the house where the film was being edited, in Mill Valley. "George held that speaker and would slowly move it from side to side," Murch recalls. "I stood about 50, 75 feet away with another tape recorder and a microphone, and did the same thing. The goal was for us to be only occasionally — if at all — in sync."

ally—if at all—in sync.'

Because of Murch's dexterous mix of the clean and airball tracks, the movie had an

push up the 'dry' track and you'd have thumping rock 'n' roll."

Even the film's toughest critic, Pauline Kael, noted in *The New Yorker*, "The oldrock nostalgia catches the audience up before the movie even gets going." But Universal executive Ned Tanen refused to acknowledge its appeal when he attended a fabled preview in San Francisco. Coppola, the film's producer, angered by Tanen's reaction and flush from *The Godfather*, offered to buy the negative. Universal opened the film small and spread it wide only after it sparked a sensation. The mass audience responded viscerally, and transformed the anemically budgeted youth flick into a commercial and cultural phenomenon.

The point of airballing was to keep the soundtrack unpredictable and alive. Although that helped make American Graffiti a megahit in 1973, Murch surmises that it got Welles in trouble with his proto-airballing in Touch of Evil just 15 years earlier. "People in studios still have a hard time with that concept: You pay for an actor's face, why aren't you lighting the face? I paid for it, I want to see beautiful things.' So in sound, what Welles was doing was paying for a beautiful thing and then lousing it up. They just didn't get it. In the art direction he got newspapers blowing everywhere, he put together a very gritty, stained look, and he wanted the sound of the film to have the same staining."

In 1957, Orson Welles was only 42 but he already needed a second chance. In his 20s he lit up New York theater with a Euro-fascist Julius Caesar and a voodoo Macbeth, and irradiated the airwaves with his you-are-there radiocast of War of the Worlds. Descending on Hollywood with plans to film a slate of ambitious properties at RKO, including Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Welles received unique acclaim for his picture-making debut, Citizen Kane (1941). Unfortunately, theater

Continued on page 18

## Touch of Evil Continued from page 17

owners were too scared of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst, the film's semiBut Welles did his most glorious work during shooting on the back lot and in Venice, which stood in for the border town of Los Robles. It was, for him, a homecoming.

# Murch "was surrounded by detractors, and he didn't have the natural political instincts to kill them before they kill you." — Francis Ford Coppola

disguised subject, to back it solidly.

Welles had bargained for final cut on Kane; but after controversy crippled that film, RKO wrested away control of his follow-up, the magnificent The Magnificent Ambersons (1942), and aborted his attempt at a folkloric Brazilian epic, It's All True. After the modest, well-made thriller The Stranger (1946), the sometimes dazzling Lady From Shanghai (1948), and a bristling, experimental *Macbeth* (1948), he and Hollywood gave up on each other. He became the king of star turns in runaway costume epics like The Prince of Foxes (1949) and the occasional classy project such as Carol Reed's The Third Man (1949); he used his salaries to budget seat-of-thepants movies like his inspired Othello (1951).

So when Universal hired Welles to direct and write — as well as act in — Touch of Evil, he wasn't slumming: He was fighting for the chance to become once again an American artist working in America after nearly a decade abroad. He thoroughly revamped the script, based on a serviceable policier called Badge of Evil (written by Robert A. Wade and H. Billy Miller under the pseudonym Whit Masterson). He made anti-Mexican racism a

"When Welles went to Europe," Kael wrote in her rave review of Welles' *Falstaff* (1966), "he lost his single greatest asset as a movie director: his sound," and "compensated by developing greater visual virtuosity."

Back in America for *Touch of Evil*, Welles took his camera wizardry to new heights while cooking up a soundtrack as dense, unruly, and alive as *Kane*'s. And he managed to meld old colleagues like Joseph Cotten, Ray Collins, Tamiroff, and Dietrich, young stars like Leigh and Heston, and seasoned Hollywood hands like Joseph Calleia into a *melodramatis personae* vivid enough to anchor a gutter-baroque extravaganza.

Before starring in *Touch of Evil*, Leigh knew Welles only from his movies and a few shared moments on the celebrity circuit — but she leaped at the opportunity to appear in a Welles production. "Orson and I weren't best friends, we didn't double-date, but we'd met at a benefit in London," she says. It was right before Leigh and then-husband Tony Curtis were to co-star in *Houdini* (1953), so Welles did a magic trick with them. She dined with Welles once in Europe, saw him in Hollywood a couple of times, then was startled to get a



key issue, telling the story from three different points of view, and bringing a tragic dimension to his heavy of heavies — Capt. Quinlan, an obsessive police captain with an adoring henchman, an instinct for finding culprits, and a penchant for framing them. Reversing the racial makeup of two central characters, Welles turned the putative hero (played by Heston) into a Mexican supernarc named Vargas, and his new wife (Janet Leigh) into an Anglo from Philadelphia.

telegram from him reading, "Dear Janet, I'm so thrilled you're going to be in my picture. I can't wait to work with you. Orson."

Her agent said Welles wasn't supposed to contact her before they worked out the details; Leigh responded, "'Details, shmetails. I want to work with Orson.' I did! Who wouldn't?" Although studio executives distrusted him, creative people never stopped adoring him. "I was mesmerized by his talent and by him — he was an absolutely riveting

man," Leigh reminisces. "In *Touch of Evil* he was padded and he had fake jowls for that heavy, saggy effect. He really didn't look like that at all — he could charm the pants off of Mother Teresa. I don't mean that he was overtly sexual or a flirt, but he did ooze this charm and fascination."

According to Leigh, the script "changed and grew and blossomed" during rehearsals. As a performer, she found the role of a spunky gal in a racially mixed marriage tantalizing. But what supercharged the production was Welles' adventurous attitude toward the whole filmmaking process.

The most famous and influential traveling shot in motion picture history opens the movie: The camera starts at waist level as a shadowy figure puts a bomb in the trunk of a car; it pulls up into an overhead view of the border town of Los Robles and follows the car down a couple of city blocks; then it picks up Mr. and Mrs. Vargas as they prepare to cross from his country to hers on foot. They reach the checkpoint just as a millionaire and a blonde in the car do—and the blonde complains, "I've got this ticking noise in my head ...."

The Vargases kiss. Welles cuts and — kaboom! — nails down the mood, setting, plot, even racial friction in one seductive, three-minute and 20-second camera move. (In the Murch re-edit you really get to see it — without opening credits and with a tawdry, ominous aural backdrop, including a car radio in the doomed vehicle that operates like a tracer in the viewer's mind.)

The one fine-grained account of the making of *Touch of Evil* appears in Heston's *The Actor's Life: Journals 1956-1976*. It corroborates Welles' own tales about freely changing locations, dialogue, and camera plans, writing Dietrich into the movie at the last minute, and firing his first editor. Welles loved to work nocturnally. ("That gave Orson control," Leigh observes, shrewdly. "When you're shooting at night, the brass can't see your footage until you've done another night's shooting.") At one point Heston notes, "The company is tiring a little now, after fifteen straight nights, but they still work well and cheerfully, full of the hope of a good film."

Sadly, the glee that pervades Heston's log during the shoot dissipates during the editing. After filming was completed, Heston left for three months of shooting on William Wyler's *The Big Country*; he returned to see a cut of *Touch of Evil* and found it "uneven in tempo and unclear in the opening sequences," though full of "marvelous things" and Welles' "enormous talent." And after attending a sneak he wrote, "I'm afraid it's simply not a good picture. ... It doesn't hold together as a story."

Heston chuckles good-naturedly at that estimation. On the phone from his Beverly Hills home, he says he now rates the film as he did in his 1995 autobiography In the Arena — "That's where I say that I agree with Cahiers du Cinema. This movie is not Citizen Kane or The Bridge Over the River Kwai or The Grapes of Wrath — but it's unquestionably the best B-movie ever made. It's marvelously entertaining and consistently surprising. I don't know if Orson was the best director, writer, or actor that I worked with. But he was the most talented man I worked with, if talent means the capacity to get the most out of words and performances and concepts and make something worthwhile. I think these feats of legerdemain were so easy for him that he got bored."

To Welles, the issue wasn't his own ennui but rather the studio's hestility toward him and its lack of enthusiasm for the movie. In an interview with director and film buff Peter Bogdanovich, he said he wanted to finish the picture more than anything, but his initial cut so upset Universal that he was barred from the lot. He referred to it, poignantly, as "the only trouble I've ever had that I can't begin to fathom." However, even the most sympathetic biographers agree with Heston: When Welles absented himself from the studio during the inevitable post-production give-and-take, roaming to New York for an appearance on TV's *The Steve Allen Show* and to Mexico to prepare for a never completed film of *Don Quixote*, he lost control of the movie.

Murch feels Welles must have understood the power-mad psyches of studio moguls after all, he specialized in playing devious big shots and master manipulators like Kane, Cardinal Wolsey (A Man for All Seasons), and, of course, Quinlan. That Welles wouldn't train his seductive wiles on his bosses still bewilders Heston, who remains proud that Welles credited him with providing the opportunity to make *Touch of Evil*. The actor remembers the two of them sharing a bottle of champagne at a ham-and-egg joint right after the film's nocturnal wrap.

"You made one mistake," Heston told Welles. "You wrote two or three short scenes to remind the audience that I'm the hero of the film, when it's really about the fall of Captain Quinlan." Welles replied, with mock-relief, "Then I won't have to worry about the cutting."

Murch says that of the directors he's worked with in the flesh, Coppola is "temperamentally the closest to Welles, not only as a human being with all the ups and downs that they both went through, and as a polymath, but

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

also as a filmmaker interested in synesthesia." Indeed, Coppola says, "I viewed the Orson Welles kind of theater as Western kabuki, in that every element was potentially the most important collaborating element — sometime sound, sometime lighting, sometime the actors. I brought that experience of going from area to area with me when I went from the theater into movies. And Walter encouraged and reinforced my ideas and brought them to a higher degree of sophistication."

There's a direct line from the climax of Touch of Evil — the bugging of Welles' crooked police captain — to Coppola's The Conversation. Murch's labor of love on this quirky masterwork, both as sound designer and first-time film editor, marked him as a filmmaker's filmmaker.

The Conversation tells the story of an audio Continued on page 20

# Touch of Evil Continued from page 19

surveillance expert named Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) who allows his emotions to cloud his judgment on a perilous case. While taping a young couple played by Cyndi Williams and Frederick Forrest, he hears Forrest say, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." Caul assumes they're potential targets in a murder. But it turns out they may have engineered a murder themselves — a point Murch clinched in the sound editing, when he inserted, at the psychological climax, an alternate take of Forrest reading the line: "He'd kill us if he got the chance."

Thanks to Murch, Coppola fulfilled his dream of making a first-class American art movie — a "combination of character study and suspense film, of Hermann Hesse and Alfred Hitchcock," as Murch puts it. And Murch did it by introducing a note of subjectivity where you least expect it: Right between Caul's ears. Watching the film again while thinking about Murch provides a pointed study in contrasts, because Caul is in some ways a matched opposite to Murch. Both are driven to get a job done right. But Caul struggles to extract a clean, rational line of sound ics." But when she returned to the set after a from the mire of everyday noise, and is disarmed when his heart misleads him; Murch tries to find the metaphor and mystery beneath the obvious, and views his intellectual work as preparation for embracing the spontaneous feeling or epiphany.

And if Caul keeps a brittle distance from his co-workers, Murch fosters a spirited collegiality. Pat Jackson, Murch's most frequent collaborator, had worked on documentaries when she got her first feature job syncing dailies on The Conversation. She chalks up Murch's openness to his "supreme self-confidence and artistic generosity. He's not micromanaging. His antennae are so out for what will work for the movie, he makes people rise to do their best. He was making the transition from mixing American Graffiti to cutting The Conversation, and he was perfectly willing to let me cut a scene. I was tied into knots, because I wanted it to be perfect, and he was still busy mixing. I'd anguish over every cut, and he'd say, 'Get out of here! It will be fine, and if it's not, we'll fix it.' That was totally liberating to a novice."

The respect and loyalty Murch commands buttressed him during the arduous mid-'80s production of Return to Oz. This dark, nonmusical sequel to The Wizard of Oz situates Dorothy in a stark, ravaged Kansas straight out of Wisconsin Death Trip. A frightful 19thcentury-looking electroshock gadget dominates the opening sequence, and even Oz has succumbed to depression under the rule of the Nome King. Yet the movie is oddly haunting. The effects have a handmade (not hand-me-down) quality. Marvelous characters like the mechanical man named Tik Tok, or the makeshift creature called the Gump, reflect, in a fun house mirror, Murch's fascination for the intersection between the mechanical (or the inanimate) and the natural (or animated). As Dorothy, the fetching young Fairuza Balk (best-known now as the teen-age vamp in the 1996 horror comedy The Craft) maintains an almost-mystical poise in grotesque circumstances.

Piper Laurie, who plays Auntie Em, remembers Murch being "a dear, patient, extremely intelligent gentleman, who seemed to know exactly what he wanted, and was definitely his father's son." Indeed, Murch's father, also named Walter Murch, is one of the key influences on Return to Oz; he was a modernist painter celebrated for bringing an intense atmosphere to objects and for suggesting the hidden life of machines. Of course growing

up with any artist can be a catalytic experience. But beyond teaching his son that it's worthwhile and honorable to spend your day in front of an easel, Murch the elder's art seems to have imbued Murch the younger with the quest to find the human edges and the magic — in technology.

Late in June, I visited the Murch family manse, Blackberry Farm, in the rural Marin County shoreline town of Bolinas; its clean, Shaker-like beauty once inspired Kaufman to dub it "the First Church of Walter Murch." Chickens were racing and gobbling through the back yard (Oz features Billina, the talking hen), and the horse barn next door contained not just Murch's office suite but a piece of the Nome King and the door from electroshock specialist Dr. Worley's office.

But if Return to Oz is always close to Murch, making it for Disney was not an experience he'd like to repeat. To Laurie, "He knew the rhythm of things, the pace, how fast things should move, how fast the buggy I was driving should get around the corner. That's not to say there wasn't 'heart' there, it's just that, unlike most directors, he had a really magnificent, detailed understanding of the mechantwo-week break in Scotland, "the limo driver who picked me up and drove me to the set said, 'You don't know what's been going on.' When I arrived on the set he was still working, but sitting in directors' chairs were Lucas, Coppola, and some other director for whom he had done such brilliant work. They weren't even watching what he was doing, they were just chatting amongst themselves. When I found out that they flew over just to support him, I was so moved."

Murch's ordeal was comparable to Coppola's on The Godfather. Between the time Murch made the deal and the time he made the movie, Disney had changed hands, and the new executives disliked the dailies. looked askance at Murch's modus operandi, and panicked over any spike in the budget. In a push to speed up the production (at a studio in England), the first assistant director and cinematographer were fired, others hired; and a studio watchdog replaced the original producer. Finally, Disney decided that Murch would be fired, too. But Lucas got wind of the move. And though he was on a publicity tour in Japan for Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, he swung into action. As he remembers it, "I called Disney and was told they had shut down the picture. I told them they didn't want to do that — you should never shut down a picture anyway, but if you do, you should do it on a Friday, not a Wednesday. They did continue the picture to the weekend. I flew to London and met with the Disney executive, who was already there, and told him I'd act as an executive producer myself. Things got back on track."

Coppola, Kaufman, and others closed ranks behind Murch. Some of Murch's friends theorize that he likes the contained atmosphere of an editing room better than the tumult of a set. But the studio-scarred Coppola, with a subconscious echo of *The* Conversation's signature line, says, "He was surrounded by detractors, and he didn't have the natural political instincts to kill them before they kill you."

After the sabotage of Touch of Evil, Welles reentered vagabondage, making movies all over the world while aching to return to Hollywood. After the crucible of Return to Oz, Murch drew sustenance from his family in Bolinas (and from co-workers who were as loyal as family). He first met Aggie in England

Continued on page 22

# Touch of Evil Continued from page 20

in 1964, and they married in New York in 1965. He and Aggie have raised a son another Walter! — and a daughter, Beatrice, and two foster children, sisters Carrie and Connie Angland, who became members of the family and went into the movies themselves: Carrie as a makeup artist and Connie as a puppeteer. When the kids were just about grown, in 1987, Aggie went back to school herself. She had trained as a nurse, and returned to get a bachelor's degree in nursing; but a creative writing class prodded her to become a radio dramatist, host, and author. (Her book, Journey in the Middle of the Road: One Woman's Path Through a Midlife Education, was published in 1995.)

Ten years after Murch's father died (at age 60, in 1967), he found a father figure in the director Fred Zinnemann (From Here to Eternity), for whom he edited Julia. (Based on part of *Pentimento*, Lillian Hellman's autobiographical follow-up to An Unfinished Woman, it won three Academy Awards in 1977.) The documentary that Murch directed and edited in memory of Zinnemann — As I See It, named for Zinnemann's credo, "I try to tell the truth as I see it, and the beauty has to take care of itself' — is, as Aggie says, "a true act of love." In turn, Murch himself has become the mentor for generations of editors and sound experts. He's known for his honesty and generosity.

Pat Jackson recalls that when Murch was teaching a class at the San Francisco Art Institute, he asked one of the students, "Why in God's name did you make this movie, and who did you think would want to see it?" The student thought that was a bit harsh. But Murch retorted, "No, it's a mass medium. If people don't want to see your movie, it's better to find that out sooner than later." On the other hand, when Murch went to a rough-cut screening of Crumb in 1994, and everyone else walked out convinced it was a debacle, Walter told director Terry Zwigoff, "The one shot where Crumb is at the bus stop should be a few frames longer; add three seconds. Apart from that, don't change a thing." Murch then went on to mix the film for free.

Murch probably would have done the same for Welles — a director who, despite his joke to Heston, cared deeply about editing and sound.

In the early '90s, Chicago Reader critic and Welles scholar Jonathan Rosenbaum sold an abbreviated version of Welles' memo on the editing of Touch of Evil to the UC Berkeley-based Film Quarterly. It's a valiant, rending document, filled with acute diagnoses and heartfelt pleas. At one point Welles writes, "I must ask that you open your mind for a moment to this opinion from the man who, after all, made the picture."

Once he read that version of the memo, producer Rick Schmidlin, who has an eclectic list of credits (including *The Doors Live at the Hollywood Bowl*), began the movement that became Murch's project by pitching *Touch of Evil* to Universal as a laserdisc special edition. Schmidlin thought he'd add commentaries by Heston, Leigh, and Welles aficionados, along with any documents he could find, and, as a bonus, tack on samples of Welles' key suggestions — like unrolling the opening shot without credits.

Schmidlin says he and Louis Feola, president of MCA/Universal Home Video, would meet socially and engage in casual conversation until "I'd drop the bomb and bring up *Touch of Evil.*" Finally, one night over dinner, before Schmidlin had a chance to raise the

subject, Feola told him there would be a meeting to discuss whether *Touch of Evil* was ripe for a theatrical rerelease. The next day Schmidlin started getting excited calls from Universal. He urged the studio executives to find the full memo and launch a re-edit based on its recommendations. Chairman Emeritus Lew Wasserman himself helped them get the document. The project went ahead with one stipulation: Schmidlin stick to Welles' memo and other period documents.

Welles had written his memo so cleverly that executives and craftspeople who weren't on his wavelength could still grasp it immediately. Early on Schmidlin fed a VHS cassette into a computer editing system and tried out one of Welles' tips — intercutting Quinlan trying to intimidate Mr. Vargas with Grandi trying to intimidate Mrs. Vargas. (Welles wanted to signal to the audience that these two story strands carried equal weight.) It worked without tweaking of any kind. But Schmidlin also recognized what he dubs "innuendoes of the highest caliber" — audiovisual subtleties that only a film sophisticate could translate. "Carrying out this memo had to be primarily an editor's project, not a producer's or a preservationist's," he says. "And everything [Welles] was saying in this memo was crying out 'Walter Murch.'"

At the time Murch was laboring, without credit, on the final picture edit of *The Apostle*. Last December, Murch agreed to do the show. "He had read the memo once," says Schmidlin. "Then he read the memo again to me, all 58 pages. He wanted to examine the memo and address each of the issues; he was trying to judge their emotional effect, and make a list of the changes that had to be done. And this was the meeting that won his commitment. I think *Orson* talked him into it; Walter realized that Orson had given him something serious to work with."

Says Murch: "I'd never been talked to by a director as directly and fully as in this memo. The level of articulation in this piece is astonishing. By the time he wrote this memo, he had seen the abyss, and any smoke or bullshit that he normally might have blown was swamped by the desperate need to get these things down and not venture into ambiguous areas. This was his last stand; he was trying to be direct."

Schmidlin notes that as Murch finished reading certain portions of the memo, "He would look up at me and smile like he knew, he really knew. It gave me goose bumps. Walter operates at some remove from the studio, but he knows how the studios operate and knows what they can do to harm a director's film. This was his chance to listen to a director, without any interference. And what a director!"

By January, Universal had assembled the materials needed for the re-edit. The prime sources were the original negative of the 96-minute 1958 release prints and the single, solitary print of a 108-minute studio-cut preview of the film. Murch digitized both versions and entered them into his editing computer. The short version had a negative in decent shape, plus music, sound effects, and dialogue on separate tracks. These, along with a CD of the original Henry Mancini score, gave Murch all the sounds he needed.

Meanwhile, Bob O'Neil, Universal's director of film preservation and vault services, toiled at lifting a negative off the long print that would allow Murch to fuse material from both versions. Everyone got caught up in the spirit of discovery. After reading the memo, O'Neil went to the Nuart Theater to see the long version in a noir festival, and was astonished at Welles' perspicacity: "During the scene in which Janet is terrorized in the

motel, the cast just keeps marching into the room. Welles had said [that] the way it was cut [in the studio-approved version] the scene would get a bad laugh. And, at the Nuart, it did get a bad laugh. Again and again, having studied the memo, I knew that what he predicted was bound to happen. It convinced me he was a genius."

The prospect of reworking a Welles classic never daunted Murch. Digesting Welles' writing made him feel as if the director were nearby — snoozing on the sofa in Murch's office. It took the editor only a couple of weeks to make his first pass through the material. And Murch knew that after 10 minutes of watching his rough assemblage, "It was a better film. And that betterness sustained itself throughout. I was moved by what had happened; it's like when you're building a boat, and there comes a certain point when you put it together, and then you hit the hull of a boat, and the whole boat resonates — you feel like it's all of a piece."

Schmidlin worked with Murch at Blackberry Farm: "As he edited in the barn, I would go over every day. He's not a five-day-a-week, 9-to-5 kind of guy; he's a seven-day-a-week, whenever-he-gets-up-to-whenever-he-gets-tired kind of guy. He'd take off on a Friday afternoon, say, 'See you Saturday at 9 a.m.,' and still be there at 10 p.m.; then he'd say, 'See you tomorrow.' There was no clock."

Welles' most difficult request was to edit out a shot of Quinlan's doting partner Sgt. Menzies (Joseph Calleia) collapsing on a table while arguing with Heston's self-righteous Vargas. This cut would epitomize the challenges and payoffs of the entire amazing exercise. All Welles had said was that his choice of an 18.5mm lens made the actor look grotesque and broke the visual continuity. But Welles had something more in mind. Coming near the halfway mark, the scene is the turning point for what L.A. Confidential writer/director Curtis Hanson calls the prodigious love story in Welles' oeuvre the fraternal bond between Quinlan and Menzies. The sergeant looks up to the captain as paragon and teacher; he can't listen to Vargas accuse Quinlan of fixing cases and, in close-up, he crumples. Schmidlin recalls saying, "We've got to take out this shot. But Walter said it couldn't be done right, that we had to sacrifice this one." Murch confesses he felt that "without the work print for the scene, with only the cut negative, it would be like trying to tie your shoelaces with one hand."

"The next day," Schmidlin says, "I went to walk in [Marin County's] Muir Woods, a great place for meditation. The sun was coming in through the trees, I felt as close to heaven as possible, and all I could see in front of me was Joseph Calleia's head collapsing on the table. I got to the barn that afternoon, as scheduled. I said, Walter, get the head off the table.' He said it couldn't be done. I said, 'You're Walter Murch and you can do it!' And he could. He worked on it for hours and got the head off the table while saving the integrity of the scene."

The deletion became a revelation. Rosenbaum, who'd been hired to enforce Universal's edict that Welles' memo be followed to the letter, knew as well as anyone that Welles — like God — is in the details. At one point Rosenbaum reinserted a critical off-screen grunt that underscores Quinlan's brutality during a beating scene. (The effect had been lost on the release-print negative.) But even he was amazed by how excising Calleia's close-up altered "everything else, like how a tiny adjustment in some homeopathic treatment can affect the whole body."

In previous versions there's no contest

between Vargas, the straight-arrow Mexican lawman, and Menzies, Quinlan's innocent, overgrown protégé. In the old cuts of the film, Menzies denounces Vargas' charges against Quinlan only after his collapse. As Murch says, "When he collapses on that table, the damage is done. To use diplomatic terminology, Vargas sees him blink. You watch that head fall and you think, 'Whoops—there's the dry rot.' So in the structure of the film from that point on, Menzies is Vargas' dog on a leash, and his character is reduced accordingly.

"But by taking that close-up out and never having him collapse, what he does in the last two reels of the film, he does on his own account, because he, morally, is outraged at what his best friend has done. And it hurts him: 'He made me what I am!' Menzies says, in a line that was cut out and now is back. Quinlan's relationship with him is kind of Shakespearean — in a sense, the great man is brought down precisely because of his greatness in his servant's eyes, though 'great' and 'greatness' should be in quotes. Now you see the wonderful ambiguity of Menzies' character."

And now, whenever Schmidlin thinks of Muir Woods, he thinks of Joseph Calleia's head.

By the time Dietrich delivered her eulogy for Quinlan at the end of *Touch of Evil* — "He was some kind of a man. ... What does it matter what you say about people?" — Welles' film had left the directors at Skywalker thrilled and dazed.

With its deranged motelkeeper (Dennis Weaver) and its sexy portraits of an endan-

gered Janet Leigh, as well as its seedy ambience and horrific murder, Touch of Evil had everyone thinking that Hitchcock had raided it for Psycho. Philip Kaufman and Carroll Ballard were swapping reactions about Welles' combination of filmmaking bravado and emotion — his use of wide-angle lenses in close-ups and tracking shots, of a hand-held camera in a homicide — and, overall, his knack for creating compositions that wring maximum tension per minute.

And Aggie Murch felt the group energy. "I think now is a special time and place, in film history, with this Bay Area group," she says. "There's a genuine love among the filmmakers up here. They were young and adventurous together, they've gone through fights and struggle, and everyone's got enough battle scars to appreciate the other. Now they're just artists trying to make their art."