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## *When Are You Going to Finish Don Quixote?*

In 1950, after the enormous financial failures of his first four pictures, Orson Welles was considered “out of control” and “not a team player.” Effectively blacklisted by the industry and his monies entirely depleted, Welles found himself sinking into “ever more depraved scenarios,” scrounging for adjunct work at community colleges, “teaching film studies, composition, whatever they’d take [him] on for.” He moved into a loft apartment populated with rats, the smells of exotic spices, surrounded by leery-eyed neighbors. He wrote syllabi on his Remington roll-top half drunk on Irish whisky, the moonlight guiding his way. Nightly he fell to his cot with bleary eyes and aching back. There Welles conceived an adaptation of *Don Quixote* where the dreamy old hero in armor and chain mail drifts through our modern world. Welles explained to friend and biographer, Peter Bogdanovich: “Quixote was never a modern man, Peter. The whole point of *Don Quixote* is he was always an anachronism with his romantic notions, his chivalry, his love of reading fiction—”

The film flittered on a back alley wall while vagrants, the only audience, watched with slumped drunken eyes. Flickering image: Welles and a young girl seated at a table outside a stadium.

“Was Mr. Don Quixote a bullfighter?” the young girl asked. “Not exactly,” Welles answered. “It’s a profession, not a vocation. A bullfighter works for money. Don Quixote was an aficionado.”

Welles often taught evenings, returning to his apartment in the early a.m., the near absolute calm of the streets, save the long off rattle of bottles toppling from vagrant’s hands, the skittering of rats. Those evenings he did not teach, Welles scripted and sketched costumes and sets for *Don Quixote*. He often took his dinners at his desk with “old Sam Woo kindly bringing [him] heaping plates of leftover fried rice, shrimp, and noodles and whatever else was lying around” from the China Dragon below. The dim lit loft apartment save the one lamplight, the flies rattling in the incandescence, his sleeves rolled, hands smeared of ink from the fumbling with typewriter ribbons, the well-thumbed paperback of Cervantes on his lap, on the floor, flung across the room. In the hours between fills of food Welles felt a “strange delirium” set in as scents of fish and Sam Woo’s famous chop suey wafted through the floorboards. “Very similar to a recent amputee who tries lifting objects because he yet senses the missing limb,” Bogdanovich has observed, “Welles worked on his picture these first

months because he believed it was *what he did*, not because he particularly wanted—”

“... a blur of anxious students, half-drowsed students, one-sided discussions or half-silent discussions with half-filled classrooms, dead eyes, and open mouths, yawning, drooling.”

Those rare occasions inspiration struck, Welles worked through the night by the pallor of the moon, the street lights reflecting off rain-strewn windows, and indeed continued his momentum into the next day, through his commute. He clasped the stacked sheets aboard the streetcar, pencil nubbin clenched between his teeth, the jolting of the car, the coughing shouting sneezing telephone conversations of hooky-playing school children. Finally, he staggered into his morning classes, unshaved with shirt untucked, indeed often unwashed and splattered with chop suey. Students quickly learned to expect little discussion of their writing on these days; instead, Welles “slumped against his desk like he was out of breath,” sighed, “Ah, Sancho, ah old friend,” and gazed off “all dreamy eyed.” Some mornings silence alone followed these mournful exhalations and students chatted merrily on cell phones or doodled on notepads. Other mornings, Welles began speaking ten minutes prior to the start of class, perhaps even while he yet poured his coffee in the adjunct offices, and so he entered the classroom in mid-contemplation, going on “about sand and castles and horses.” A scattered few students later fondly recalled: “it was like sitting

there in the desert” with the “dust swirling” and the “dry heat” cracking their skin. Most students suggest they would have “just left” those days if not for the transfixing voice of their instructor. “You were bored and didn’t know what he was going on about but you could not help but sit there and listen,” many agreed. More than a few students suggested the one-time novice magician had “hypnotized” them or “piped in some sort of nerve gas” to keep them still.

“He thinks hes better than the whole world because he made movies but I never seen any of his movies I bet there all terrible movies—”

“[students] received calls at all hours where a strange voice would say ‘Welles means to speak with you’ and they’d be given instructions to a pub or a cafe.” There he’d sit in trench coat and black felt hat and kid gloves, with his grade book or a recent essay. Most often a plate of corned beef and boiled potatoes (“remembrances, Peter, of my boyhood spent trekking the lonely roads of Ireland, eating at the simple kitchen tables of farmhands; meals paid for with my canvasses, canvasses I convinced these good people would someday be worth a great deal, coming from a famous artist like me!”) before him, Welles stuffed his “fat purple face,” lips “shiny” with spilled wines and “meat grease—”

“Maybe the funnest teacher I ever knew but also real hard. I learned a lot! Thanks prof!”



“—late buses in the rain or sloshing through the soot-blackened puddles in futile attempt at an early train. My overcoat—a damp sack—a suit of lead—my briefcase sodden through—papers gone to mush—sometimes just *their* work—no loss, at all [chuckles]—but too often my sketches, my drafts, were also—no loss at all either—On those days I—how could I prattle on—those *bug eyes*—Peter, I went around the block—drank an Irish coffee or three—They didn’t notice the difference—”

“Such was his new profession that weeks, months,” Bogdanovich reports, “passed without Welles’ progressing on his—in fact, he told me, ‘Peter, entire semesters I forgot about *Don Quixote*’ until some arbitrary night he’d awake in a cold sweat, terrified he’d forget about it entirely—”

“Mr fancy pants needs to no this IS NOT Harverd and he should GO BACK TOO RUS-SIA if he don’t like it hear.”

Near the Christmas holidays of Welles’ second year teaching his neighbors recall a “rather attractive brunette” in “a pea-green coat” and “brown knitted hat” hauling “several rather enormous suitcases” up the winding stairs. This woman we may best ascertain was the mostly unknown “Beth” Welles often made passing reference to in discussion with Bogdanovich. “She all but gave me up for ‘lost to frivolity,’ as she put it, which should have told me more than enough of her

general character,” Welles explained, “until she heard I was teaching. Heavens knows who told her or who even would have known enough to say. Now she believed I’d become grounded and serious. I suppose I had. She showed up one evening looking like a lost puppy and I, sentimental for the old days, took her in. How predictable the outcome! Peter, I first rued my decision about a day later when she insisted I hock the Remington for new towels. She said I never used it anymore and it was true—mostly—By then she had me by the heart and all the fight went out of me.”

crunch of blackened skin

“—copiers out of toner—paper jam mucking up the entire works—and a line of groaning fellow adjuncts—we comrades in this futile state. Exiled Ivy Leaguers bemoaned the impossibility of a so-called school of higher education functioning without such rudimentary tools of the trade—hunched over bar tables in black turtle-necks—they talked revolution—”

“—script for my *Don Quixote*, which I’d lost in a box under old student papers. Now I found it and hid it anew from [Beth] for fear she’d find it herself and make me burn it. Surely she’d see it as a threat to our life together.” Beth, yet beautiful decades later, her hair gone white and the paper thin sheen of her brow and cheeks, declared in a rare interview that she found these sheets “hidden in the most absurd and childish places, as if he were a young boy hiding pornography. Buried

in the sugar jar, sewn into the lining of jackets, wadded into pouches of pipe tobacco, slid into picture frames." When asked why she did not destroy these sheets or, at the least, confront her lover on the matter, Beth insisted the script clearly was of such low quality that it presented "little threat" to Orson's suddenly grounded disposition. "I decided to let him have his fun," she said.

"I'm glad they kicked you out Hollywood because here you make our dreams bigger I'm going into the movies because you showed me how to dream Prof Orson Welles you are the greatest!!!!"

"—these sounds, these lights—what work of the sorcerer is this good friend Sancho?" said Quixote in full rusted armor at the back of the theater, Sancho at his side. On the screen, a lascivious young heroine in tattered rags, heroic in posture, remained silent in resolution. Before her, a fiend in a leather vest and studded black leather mask. He lolled his yellow eyes. "Will no one save this frail beauty?" cried Quixote with lance upraised. Transfixed by the film, the audience ignored the Mighty Hidalgo. On the screen, the damsel's rags fell way and out toppled her enormous white breasts and raised pink nipples. "Chivalry truly is dead!" wept Don Quixote while Sancho grabbed hold of his master's armor. "It is only a titty show!" Sancho soothed [the canny viewer will realize this is a Welles voice-over, clearly not synched with the actor's lips]. Next, to the hooting delight of the audience, the damsel was repeatedly lashed across the buttocks

to high wailing moans. [When the film cuts back to our heroes the viewer immediately realizes the Knight of Mournful Countenance has gained some two hundred pounds in the passing of seconds—indeed, the following action was spliced into the film years after wiry, emaciated, Mischa Auer died—] Quixote dashed to the front of the theater, leapt to the screen, finally plunged his lance deep into the fiend's vest, his studded mask: "have at you fiend! Vile pervert!"—movement of lips to no sound—Welles' voice: "Wretched indecent!" while at first popcorn and soda and boos are hurled to our hero, the mess dashing off his armor—as he attempts to gather the heroine into his arms—she, bloodied, yet lashed on the screen, yet moaning and bucking at the hips—burly men in trench coats rise from the front row, their pants unbuckled and unzipped—they drag Quixote from the screen, thrashing and—

"—from the corridor I heard this terrible—not a clucking—almost shrieking—the sound of something tearing—When I entered the classroom the desks were in a circle—we now had all of our enlightening discussions in this circle, indeed, Peter, we depended upon this circle of chairs in all matters—(better to catch them drowsing or fiddling with their telephones)—and there at the center sat a half-dozen of my finest students, stripped to their trousers, blood and feathers streaked across their chests, their faces, caught in their hair like tribesmen—a wicker bucket filled with the bloody-pink bodies of plucked chickens—they pulled feathers from what were



in fact, momentarily, living birds—a splatter of blood—raised tendons—and to the other side of the room stood an empty cage of chicken wire. I gasped—I raged—I—They smiled with bloody feathery lips—‘Cool it Prof,’ one of them finally spoke, ‘we’re just hungry is all.’”

“—Salisbury steaks and green bean dinners on fold-out television trays. So many of our nights spent in the midst of the soft gray glow of the tube. Alternating who turned up the volume when the above-ground train shuddered past. Singing contests. Celebrity dance-offs. Pro wrestling. We watched, our faces dumb in the flickering gray light. Our endless sullen munching—‘I love this show,’ Beth would say. ‘Yeah,’ I would no doubt agree. ‘It’s a good one.’”

“I received a call in the dead of night summoning me to a café,” Spanish actor Mischa Auer recalled, “from a man I thought was the assistant to Orson Welles. I later learned it was Welles himself, masking his voice.”

“—eerie flickering light. Inside they sat in the center of the circle around a bonfire of textbooks and pencils. The flames groped the ceiling, Peter, and the smoke from the pages blackened their faces like coal soot. All those pages smoldering—now gray—now white puffs of nothingness—a gust from the opened windows and fragments flittered past me. Over this fire, the golden corpses of a half-dozen freshly plucked chickens turned on makeshift spits. Their glowing faces—

they did not look up when I cleared my throat—slammed my palm on my desk—transfixed—the fire and the birds—eyes filled with the reflected flickering—Gone absolutely stupid—”

Smoke rose from the burned out husks of motels and funeral parlors—

He daydreamed of her sooty hands, smears of ash across her brow, loose pages smoldering in coffee canisters—

According to published accounts some “four hundred hours” of rough material was filmed by the crew over the course of a decade. “Some scenes are lifted entirely from the original novel,” sources contend, “while others were invented on the spot by [Welles].” Much of the picture’s sheer immensity is owed to the director’s method of inspiration: “[Welles] calls [his crew] at all hours if ‘moved’ by a sunrise or a car alarm or a horse neighing or whatever random sound or event.” It was estimated that some forty percent of the footage “in the can” was of fields gently blowing, sheep grazing, the coloring of the sunset or other such phenomena unconnected to any sort of plot or recognizable aspect of an “entertainment.” Sources insist Welles believed the footage would work wonderfully as a “television program” and would finally bring them all a “comfortable living.”

“I hatted Fat Orsons class. I staid up all night writing F.O.’s ridiculus papers and F.O. with a pig

face still gave me a F!"

She smelled of lighter fluid. He knew it.

A beautiful olive-skinned girl, her polka-dotted mini-skirt higher and higher up her thighs, zipped along the Spanish countryside on a white Vespa. When in rusted armor the rail-thin Knight of Mournful Countenance leapt from the ditch with rusted sword hoisted over his head, "Monsters! Devils! Spawn of the Black Magic!" The olive beauty swerved and was sent clattering, bloody, to the road, while her Vespa skidded some twenty yards away. Quixote knelt to the wailing woman: "No need to thank me—" Sancho stood aghast in the ditch: "But it's only a Vespa, master! It's no hellbeast—only a Vespa!"

"Hooting cheering snarling—"

"We began talking marriage. [Beth] openly asked my opinion of children's names—"

When Mischa Auer [the actor portraying Don Quixote] died fifteen years after production of *Don Quixote* began, industry types snickered Welles would *have to* wrap up the shoot and edit his material down to a distributable size. "Something he could show, if they'd let him show it—" This was not the case. Rather than halt production, "[Welles] fashioned a latex mask using [Auer's] death mask as a model" so filming could continue. The new footage was un-watchable for some of the longtime actors—Between his now

considerable girth and the pale rubbery mask, Welles seemed more like a "Kabuki warrior" than the emaciated, yet venerable, Knight of the Mournful Countenance portrayed by Auer.

"Could they hear my lectures over the crunch of the blacked pig skin, the chomping on chops and ribs, the clucking of their remaining hens in the cages back of the classroom? Unlikely at best."

—camped out on the Spanish hillside, eating goats roasted over open fires, filming—And then Welles was gone for a year, two years, earning enough money to resume—then a new series of summons and they began again—"Another year older, but the picture no closer to finished—"

—knitting blue baby booties in the lamp-light—"Orson we'll need a car—that will cost money—Orson you'll need to pick up more classes—Orson see to the dean on—"

Welles took his script to CBS head Donald Altmann with the idea of having Don Quixote produced as a sort of continuously perpetuating series. Each episode would begin with a Welles narration before resuming the adventures of Sancho and the don. The idea was flat-out rejected for the "literary nature" of the material, although Welles insisted it was already "chock-loaded with bawdy humor." "For all his so-called talent, Welles has not yet learned," read Altmann's partial notes of the meeting, "what Joe Public wants



to see and this is why hes [sic] a failure.”

“—streaked with blood and feces hoisting penknives and switch blades—”

“—schools libraries inoculations diapers cereal talcum—”

Upon acceptance of the AFI Lifetime Achievement Award, Orson Welles framed his career as one of a “maverick” who “went at things his own way.” He detailed his life: “I fund my movies with money I earn at odd jobs—” His stooped posture from the long hours on his hands and knees, scrubbing floors, painting fences—“I long ago learned I could live no other way.” Now, Welles must have wondered: had Beth received his summons? Did she watch the proceedings from some blackened back row? Oh if only, if only, he must have thought. At that moment, he must have uttered a silent prayer for her visit, that night, at the hotel—“You were right all along Orson—a genius, they say it here, and here, and here of course—” —“Not frivolous?” —“Oh no darling no never!”

“the boys descended onto the wriggling screaming creature—”

Smoke rose from the burned out husks of motels and funeral parlors as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza clopped along. Ashes of former citizens swirled in the gray winds. Sancho sneezed, fell from his mule, cried out, climbed up again,

while Quixote mused on the beauty and virtue of his fair Dulcinea. “Somewhere my mistress reclines combing her auburn locks. Even the birds chirp enchanted by her beauty, her purity.”

Sancho sneezed again, his face soot-blackened, the ashes of all those dead. “I hate to say it,” Sancho wheezed between sneezes, “but I think everyone is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Obliterated.”

Sancho gestured to the remnants of trucks, shopping malls, even smoldering ruins of airplanes half vaporized, with only the cockpit and a fragment of the wing remaining. No animals skittered amongst the ashes unless their souls somewhere lingered. Perhaps now the ghosts of men too wandered amongst the fogs and fires, lost and bemused. Scratched their heads. Attempted purchase of a pastrami sandwich where once a deli stood; sat to watch a ballgame at the rubble heap that had been a sports bar. But our heroes saw no ghosts, only the gusts of ash and dust, those last vestiges of flesh. The sun itself a muffled flash behind the swirling remains.

If we could go deeper into the ground, into the rubble, perhaps we would find the rats the worms the roaches which persist and will populate whatever it is which follows. Instead we have only Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, astride respectively the famous steed Rocinante and an unnamed mule. They too persist. In their motions and considerations of islands and damsels. In the madness of their pursuits. The folly of their obsessions. As they have from the beginning and

will long past all the rest has ceased—

“A boy Orson—he’s—”

“Ah Sancho—” Quixote said, his almost blue-

dead lips, “I was mad, but now I am sane. Forgive me for ever making you mad like me and for making you believe as did I that knights errant ever have existed or do—”

