

ORSON WELLES

and the other side of Carefree, Arizona



*Orson Welles's last film, *The Other Side of the Wind*, finally makes it to the screen after almost 50 years, with its long-awaited world premiere at the Venice Film Festival, 33 years after the legendary filmmaker's death. LMGI member Jim Collette gives us an insider's view of the making of one of the most famous and celebrated unfinished films at its iconic desert location in Carefree, Arizona.* **by Jim Collette**

Gerry Jones knew something was happening that was absolutely not supposed to be happening, and the proof was in the blinding “Klieg lights,” as he called them, that lit up the sky above a certain home in Carefree, Arizona. The home was owned by Ross and Phoebe Slingman, and while the Slingman family was back east, Jones had agreed to keep an eye on the place.

“The Slingmans were quite proud of it,” said Jones, and possibly thrilled that a famous director was to lease the house in their absence. “Ross wrote a strict lease that called for no filming or photography of any kind,” and the would-be tenant agreed. The lessee, Orson Welles, was just there for a casual respite—a desert getaway to relax and contemplate his memoirs.

That was the official story. But in fact, Welles was there to film pivotal scenes from his last opus, *The Other Side of the Wind*. And little did Jones know that this was Welles’s modus operandi. Rent a home. Shoot a movie in it. Rent another home. Ditto. Beverly Hills, Strasbourg, Malaga, and now, inexplicably, Carefree. In *Wind*, the Slingman home would double as the ranch of director Jake Hannaford, played by a Hemingway-esque John Huston.

Jones knew the home well. He had designed and built it, carefully bridging the house over an arroyo between the granite outcroppings of Black Mountain. Memorialized as the desert home Michelangelo Antonioni famously blew up (several times) at the end of *Zabriskie Point*, it was also used as a location in Bob Hope’s *Cancel My Reservation*.

Jones fought in World War II, survived the battle at Okinawa, and entered post-war China as part of the 1st Marine Division. While there, he marveled at the monasteries of the Mahayana Buddhist monks, retreats that hewed to the mountainsides like 1,000-year-old stepping-stones. Twenty-five years later, Jones authored a paper entitled “Must We Destroy in Order to Build?” He answered the question by creating simple, innovative designs that seemed to have been lodged by time into the cracks and crevices of the mountain slopes ringing both Carefree and nearby Phoenix. He constructed his first two homes in Carefree, a town so starkly paradisiacal, that Gordon Lightfoot commemorated its main road with the song “Carefree Highway.”

With the Slingman house, Jones moved exactly one boulder. The rest he used as house-sized foundation stones. It was low-slung,

modern; sited on 3½ acres and, at 2,400 square feet, modest by today’s standards. Crew member Michael Ferris said, “It might not have been big, but it seemed huge due to the people in it.”

In the back was a pool, into which the Slingman kids would launch themselves from adjacent boulders. And it was next to this pool where my high school friend and future storyboard artist, animator and director, Larry Leker, was “shot” and took a dive into the deep end. Not once, but twice.

It was the spring of 1974 and Larry and I had no intention of playing out an alternate opening to *Sunset Boulevard*. We wanted to be in an Orson Welles movie, and Larry’s mother had heard that the director was shooting in Carefree at the Southwestern Studios (it was on this studio backlot where Antonioni’s FX team recreated the Zabriskie house—known locally as “Boulder Reign”—and blew it apart while 17 cameras rolled). *The New Dick Van Dyke Show* had filmed there and that very wet spring, so had Orson Welles.

The rain came down in buckets as Larry’s brother negotiated the narrow, rise-and-fall roads that sluiced through the running washes of Carefree, but we found the studio in the dark and were neither gate checked or even noticed as we strolled in and joined half of the out-of-work actors of the Phoenix metro area. Orson was there, sitting in a chair, orchestrating a big scene centered on Huston, Peter Bogdanovich and Susan Strasberg. We had no idea what was going on. We were three of dozens of party-goers and cineaste-types flowing and circling about Stage 1 as cinematographer Gary Graver and his crew threw light onto celluloid that would not see the film gate of a commercial theater for more than 40 years. *Wind* would prove to be Welles’s final feature film, soon to be cast adrift in a sea of legal contention and familial obstacles like an exiled Charles Foster Kane.

We were extras, in the classic sense. Welles neither knew we were there, nor cared. People came and went, as we did, night after night. We were encouraged to bring cameras—look like real fans, journalists, film fanciers—in today’s parlance, movie bitches. We hauled out a creaky Super 8 camera that J.J. Abrams

Opposite page: Row one and two, photos courtesy of Michael Stringer; row three, photos one, two and four by Mike Ferris; row three, photo three by Jim Collette, LMGI; row four, photo two by Mike Ferris; row four, photos three and four by Jim Collette, LMGI.



would have been proud of—the same one that Larry would use to film a stop-motion eighth-grade wonder called *Fatman and Robin*—and shot away, rubbing shoulders with Welles, Huston, Bogdanovich and some guy named Frank Marshall, hurrah!

A few fun nights and then it was over ... or so we thought. But the filming wasn't over. The crew had simply packed up and moved to the house. The Slingman house. They had driven off in two trucks. It was dinner and we found one truck at the local Burger King. We were given some fuzzy directions, told to look for a place that would be "lit up like a lighthouse." And it was.



Larry, I'll add, has a habit of persevering. Long after I bolted from Hollywood, he hung in there, animating his way through the Ralph Bakshi years, the Disney renaissance, and the Dumbo leap to 3D, and he isn't afraid to make an ass of himself. On that night in Carefree, he scaled the back fence by the pool and was summarily tossed out. He then stood at the bottom of the driveway, and yelled, "until they let us in, just to shut me up."

This, I do not remember. Terrified to make a scene, I only recall that suddenly we were in the house, standing in close proximity to the great and powerful Orson Welles, and he had a dog that farted like there was no tomorrow. For several nights, we hung out. Mostly waiting to take a turn as an extra, or stand in for one of the many actors who were filmed the week before, the year before—but were now absent. Huston and Bogdanovich were still present, as was actress and Welles partner, Oja Kodar.

The interior of the house was dominated by a living room with a long table where Welles held court—often with a can of Fresca in hand. Like all movie sets, excitement mixed with long stretches of ennui. Yet, Larry and I both remember scenes like they are mounted 16mm frames: Kodar is wearing a sheer top and, like any kid from the Phoenix westside, with its cotton fields and crop dusters, I struggle to stare out the window. And there—momentarily left unguarded—a thick, dog-eared script. Larry fantasizes about taking one into the bathroom for a speed read, but his courage, this time, flags.

Welles was mercurial—his voice, "quite frightening," Larry recalled. But generally he was affable, accessible. "He would remind crew members to get something to eat, and seemed genuinely appreciative of the effort they were making on his behalf." As Ferris recalled, "There was an ego, but he was a feeling guy—sweet, sentimental."

Ferris was ex-Air Force and a friend of Graver's. "I could quote scenes from the most out-of-the-way little movies and he could do the same. A friendship broke out." Graver was an extraordinarily hardworking director and DP, who made more than 200 B-to-Z-grade movies with titles like *One Million AC/DC*—a film Joseph McBride dubbed the first "bisexual dinosaur movie." Graver convinced Orson that Ferris, at six-foot-three, had a strong

shoulder and "they could use this guy." His first day on the job, said Ferris, "Orson gives me a big handshake and says, 'Glad to meet you, Mike. Can you get on the other side of that camera and throw dirt on me?'" He laughed. "Orson Welles! Begging me to throw dirt at him!"

Huston was more mysterious—to us, anyway, a bit scary. "He rarely spoke," remembered Larry, "and the look on his face was intimidating. He carried an oxygen tube in one hand and usually had a cigarette in the other. One of the PAs seemed worried that the two would meet and John would erupt like a flamethrower." He would occasionally motion to Welles and the director would rush over for a quiet conference. "Unlike Peter Bogdanovich, whom he seemed to tolerate, Welles was very respectful to John."

Huston I warmed up to. But at the time, I was probably more enamored of Welles's protégé, Bogdanovich, who was on a searing hot streak with back-to-back-to-back hits: *The Last Picture Show*, *What's Up, Doc?*, *Paper Moon*. Bogdanovich was young, hip, confident. *Daisy Miller* was in the can and he was no doubt proud of it. I tried to strike up a conversation. No luck.

But Larry managed to inadvertently tap into Bogdanovich's fabled knowledge of cinema history when he stumbled upon Welles's Oscar statuette for *Citizen Kane*. It was sitting on the floor behind some books, and Larry turned to Bogdanovich and blithely announced, "It looks like a cheap bowling trophy." The director set him right. "During the war," Bogdanovich schooled him, "they cast the statues from painted plaster—to support the war effort."

Larry recalled this being said with "a withering gaze." The "cheap" Oscars could be traded, after the war, for the real, gold-plated thing. "Still," said Larry, "it really was a mess. Clearly it had been carried around the world wherever Orson went. The felt was gone and it wriggled drunkenly on the base." Larry used a butter knife from the kitchen, tightened the bolt to the base, and reverently put it back on the bookcase." Author Josh Karp (*Orson Welles's Last Movie: The Making of The Other Side of the Wind*) noted that the Oscar was used as a prop during the movie, and Welles later gave it to Gary Graver, who promoted

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and carried the torch for the unfinished film long after the director died.

“Welles and Bogdanovich had a strained relationship that made no sense to me at the time,” said Larry, “but is understandable in retrospect. Bogdanovich was the current Golden Boy of Hollywood and when we met him, he was at the apex of his career. One night, Peter asked someone to call him a limo to take him to the airport. Welles seemed particularly annoyed with this and said, ‘You mean a limousine? This is not a Hollywood production with a limousine budget, Peter!’”

Most of the filming of *The Other Side of the Wind* took place between 1970 and 1976. Forty-five years after the fact, stories from cast and crew play out like scenes from *Rashomon*, with sometimes little agreement on when, where and who did what. For example: “There was a cigar-store Indian,” remembered Larry, “and Orson put it in the shot. When Bogdanovich asked about the significance of the statue, Orson said, ‘It’s for the critics. They’ll carry on about the symbology of it. And, in fact, it means nothing.’ He then turned to Peter for emphasis and used his famous voice: ‘Nothing!’” Others recall a different prop and different target of Welles’s sarcasm, but the story remains the same. It was Orson being Orson Welles.

“He held court,” said Ferris, who went onto become a camera operator for director John Cassavetes and a slew of franchises like *Jurassic Park*, *Mission: Impossible* and *Die Hard*. “We would sit there and listen to one of the greatest voices in history, grinning from ear to ear. He never paused, he never hesitated except for effect. It just flowed out of him. He had a great kind of laugh and giggle that made him very human.”

Due to the lengthy shooting schedule, actors came and went and sometimes never came back, and Larry found himself as a stand-in one night by the pool. His job was to fall face-first into the water. “Remember,” he was told, “we don’t want to see your face. If we do, we’ll have to shoot it again.” Larry executed a perfect death spiral, but after drying off, “They asked me to do it again for good measure. I was fairly sure they did a second take as payback for me yelling at them from the driveway,

but how often does a 15-year-old kid get punished by Orson Welles? It was well worth it.”

Much of the cutting-edge imagery in *Wind* was choreographed by Welles while wrapped in a terry cloth robe, firmly planted in a lounge chair. Ferris recalled, “It was organized chaos, but the chain of command began and ended with Orson. He was everything, and he had enormous visual capacity. He knew how to place people and practically cut the film within the camera—all without leaving that chair.”

Eventually, the good times had to come to an end, for us, and Welles. The problem was money, or the lack of it. Waiting for a check from Europe that never came, Graver announced that that was the end of the shoot. “And when we left that night, we never went back,” said Larry. In a few years, Larry would make the pilgrimage out west, and—from a metaphorical driveway called Hollywood—yell at Ralph Bakshi to give him a job. It worked.

But money wasn’t the only complication for Welles. After four months, everybody in Carefree knew that he was making a movie. All they had to do was look at the roof, where actors Cameron Mitchell, Paul Stewart and Mercedes McCambridge were cavorting while Welles instructed them to act as if “invisible midgets” were grabbing their ankles. And watching the house from his vantage point on Stagecoach Pass Road was Gerry Jones, who relayed the bad news to Ross Slingman. The homeowner proceeded to evict Welles for violating the lease, and after regaining possession, “we walked through it together,” said Jones.

“A car had smashed through the front wall of the guest house. Family heirlooms were floating in the swimming pool. Scraps of ham and eggs were lying in the beds and [there were] obvious signs of pornographic film production.” The latter might have been inferred from the blacked-out windows and, guessed Josh Karp, and the comings and goings of endless cameras and scantily clad young people. “As Ross and I continued through the house, I even found several pairs of Orson’s oversized underwear,” which he ventured were a size “68-inch waist.”

Soon enough, the Slingmans got the house back into “pristine shape,” and allowed themselves a modicum of forgiveness. The Slingman house of Carefree, Arizona, was now enshrined forever in the director’s final feature film, to be finished and released 45 years later by the efforts of Gary Graver, Peter Bogdanovich, Netflix and a laundry list of devoted Wellesian aficionados.

“We never forgot Mr. Welles,” said Gerry Jones, now in his nineties. “Each year on the anniversary of the eviction, Ross ran up a pair of Orson’s drawers up the flagpole while we enjoyed a bottle of wine.”

If you’re up for the mind-boggling story of just how “post” post-production can get, read *Orson Welles’s Last Movie: The Making of The Other Side of the Wind* by Josh Karp. See the official Netflix trailer at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=100&v=nMWHBUTHmf0



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