

Mank

The new film “Mank” (now out on Netflix) may be hard to recommend. Its whole premise rests on familiarity with the creation of a film script, a famous one to be sure, that of the 1941 RKO film “Citizen Kane,” Orson Welles’s spectacular debut as a director--at 24. Questions about its creation, especially its screenplay, have lingered for years and came into greater focus 30 years after the film was launched, in 1971, when noted film essayist and critic, Pauline Kael, scrutinized the film’s screenplay in articles in *The New Yorker* magazine in February of that year. The essays were later turned into Kael’s 1971 book. “Raising Kane.”

Kael’s thesis was that the essence of “Kane” was written by long-time Hollywood veteran, Henry Mankiewicz—nicknamed “Mank”—rather than the film’s producer, director, and star Welles. The film fictionalized the extravagant life of one of the greatest editor-publishers of the day, William Randolph Hearst, head of the nationwide Hearst empire of newspapers and journals. Mankiewicz, at the time past his prime in Hollywood, was hired by Welles to write the script at what amounted to a retreat in the vacant desert up the California Coast, near Hearst’s grandiose estate, San Simeon.

His babysitter was John Houseman (Sam Troughton), a longtime colleague of Welles, told to keep an eye on the “Boy Wonder,” and he is also overseen by a hired secretary, Lily Collins (Rita Alexander), paid to type and report on the script’s progress to Houseman. On off-days, Mank pals around with movie buddies at San Simeon, attending languid feasts with Hearst (Charles Dance), studio head Louis B. Mayer (Arlliss Howard), and MGM star Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried). Welles checks in periodically by phone.

My warning at the opening of this review about “Mank’s” limited appeal stems from the fact that this movie is so dependent on background knowledge and awareness of “Citizen Kane” itself; the film is littered with stories, anecdotes, and images ripped from the original “Kane” itself.

It’s hard to make a strong case for Gary Oldman’s acting (as Mank) because he isn’t much of a protagonist; he is mainly acted upon. He is also a confirmed drunk, not the most interesting character for a film’s lead. Almost a featured player in the movie is the parade of Scotch bottles arrayed on a desk in the study where he writes. For one who was supposed to be one of Hollywood’s wittiest writers, Mank is rarely funny in the film and gives every sign of being a washed up scribbler running out his string. (The film was written by Jack Fincher, the director’s father).

Director David Fincher clearly means to send a love letter to vintage Hollywood with this picture, and he does, in part, shooting the lives of the period stars in a gauzy, black-and-white palette that evokes the aura of the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. For some, the imagery by Erik Messerschmitt might be too

gauzy, and you wish the camera crew had pumped up the HD a bit, partly because the original Kane was so amazingly crisp. Big-eyed Seyfried is adequate as Davies, a rousing comedienne in her time, ranging between silly and simpering. The occasional appearances of Welles, played by Tom Burke, are welcome because the actor has a good hold on Welles' booming voice and burly presence.

(The film, released on Netflix in early December, is rated "R" for language and runs 132 mins.)

(November 2020)