

Was Orson Welles Jewish?

by Danielle Berrin

According to his long time friend, filmmaker Henry Jaglom, Orson Welles had a little **crush** on the **Jews**.

J

Jaglom knows this because he and Welles, the iconic force behind “Citizen Kane,” “The Third Man” and the famed 1930s radio broadcast “War of the Worlds” lunched together nearly every week for seven years. They dined at Ma Maison, once the most coveted table in all of Los Angeles.

The lunches began in 1978 when Jaglom was in his late 20s and Welles was at a stalemate in his career. Frustrated by all the misconceptions about his legendary figure, Welles planned to write an autobiography to set the record straight. He asked Jaglom to tape their maundering, dishy and sometimes even deep conversations. So for two years, until Welles’s death in 1985, Jaglom recorded the meetings that are now the subject of the book, “My Lunches With Orson,” transcribed, edited and published for Welles-aficionado posterity by the film historian Peter Biskind. Jaglom and Biskind appeared together last night at WritersBloc Los Angeles to talk about those lunches and their provocative content, which Vanity Fair described as “Laden with secrets, gossip, and raunchy jokes.” As WritersBloc founder Andrea Grossman put it, “If Orson Welles thought he’d die one day, he might not have dished so candidly.” But aren’t we glad he did: If Welles’s Great Man complex lent itself to delusions of immortality, his egotism is our rich reward.

Jaglom first met Welles after working on the film “Easy Rider” which persuaded Peter Bogdanovich to arrange an interview for the aspiring filmmaker.

Jaglom had the idea of adapting the play "A Safe Place" into a movie and hoped to create a character for the zany Welles. He flew to New York and knocked on the door of Welles's suite at the Plaza Hotel. He was struck when a rotund man answered the door wearing purple silk pajamas. "He looked like a giant purple grape," Jaglom said. Without a script or a credit to his name, Welles instantly tried to rebuff him, but Jaglom pleaded for an hour of his time. "I'll sit here but I won't listen," he recalled Welles as saying.

Jaglom knew nothing of the character he wanted Welles to play -- only that he wanted Welles. He remembered Welles was a fan of magic. So he crafted an off-the-cuff description: "The character is a lapsed wonder-rabbi who performs miracles!" Jaglom told Welles. "And nobody takes him seriously. He's not a very good rabbi. He's not even a very good Jew. And he's trying to make something disappear..."

Previously refusing to look Jaglom in the eye, Welles turned towards him. "What is he trying to make disappear?" Welles wondered.

"That you won't know until you play the part," Jaglom said.

Silence.

"Can I wear a cape?"

When filming began, the neophyte filmmaker had difficulty persuading his crew to manifest his vision. Welles offered some advice: "Just tell them it's a dream sequence." Suddenly, Jaglom said, "The whole crew turned to pussycats!"

When he later asked Welles to explain, Welles suggested a theory: These are hard working people with hard lives. Anything they can't control threatens the stability of their work.

But the one place they're free is in their dreams. "So if you say it's a dream sequence, you're giving them permission to be free." Years later, when they were enjoying their regular lunches -- which also included trips to Paris, Cannes and London -- Jaglom and Welles developed a reputation in the press as an odd couple. Jaglom recalled that the French newspaper *Le Monde* described them with the headline *Le Petit Ami*: "Girl-friends."

Biskind asked Jaglom what they each got out of the relationship. "We told each other the emotional truth," Jaglom said.



ORSON AND JAGLOM

“

Orson believed his father wasn't his father," Jaglom said. "Dr. Bernstein might have been his father -- he had definitely had an affair with Orson's mother."

"I became somebody with whom he felt comfortable talking about his emotions. He let me in."

That may explain why Jaglom possesses a little known secret: Welles had a special fondness for Jews. Jaglom explained that Welles felt estranged from his "drunk, absent" father. And he suspected that his mother Beatrice, a concert pianist "and a society lady" had had several affairs. In the midst of this, Welles cultivated a relationship with a guardian of sorts by the name of Dr. Bernstein, whom he felt very close to.

"Orson believed his father wasn't his father," Jaglom said. "Dr. Bernstein might have been his father -- he had definitely had an affair with Orson's mother." But Welles also suspected that she'd had an affair with a Russian opera singer. Welles could never confirm, since his mother died when he was 9, and his father followed, when he was a tender 13.

Since Jaglom is Jewish, "the subject was of considerable interest [to me]." One day, Welles turned to him and said, "I know what you want to know, Henry: Am I Jewish?"

Welles answered: "Fifty-fifty."

Jaglom added that whenever they would travel together, Welles would take him to Jewish delis -- Bloom's in London, Goldenberg's in Paris: "He was very connected to his sense of what was Jewish," Jaglom said.

They also had conversations about the Holocaust. "It made him so cynical about men," Jaglom said. "How low men truly are if they are led that way."

Shortly after the war, Welles was invited as the guest of honor to a celebrity dinner in Vienna. The post-war mood among the guests was somber. According to Jaglom, one guest reportedly said, "Vienna is not what it used to be! Something has gone out of Vienna."

Welles tartly replied, "Yes. The Jews."

Jaglom said the remark made the morning headlines.

When Jaglom began his recordings, Welles reportedly said, "Turn it on and don't ever let me see it." It was the only way he thought he could speak freely. To Jaglom's surprise, one day Welles asked, "Is it on?" But Jaglom had forgotten to bring his recorder that day. "He literally grumbled," Jaglom recalled. "And we didn't talk much that lunch."