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BOOKSHELF

'The Brothers Mankiewicz' Review: A Steamroller and a Mensch

The story of two gifted brothers, only one of whom exceeded expectations.



Herman Mankiewicz dressed as three Marx brothers at once. PHOTO: THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

By Scott Eyman

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When Herman Mankiewicz died in 1953, he was a classic burnt-out case, one of those gifted men who fritter their lives away in alcoholism and witty conversation. Herman had produced some of the early Marx Brothers pictures and co-wrote "Citizen Kane." This, along with a grab-bag of credits that included "The Pride of the Yankees," made him seem erratic even by the standards of Hollywood drunks.

Nobody was more aware of his problems than Herman Mankiewicz. As he wrote 10 years before his death, "I seem to become more and more of a rat in a trap of my own construction, a trap that I regularly repair whenever there seems to be danger of some opening that will enable me to escape. I haven't decided yet about making it bomb proof. It would seem to involve a lot of unnecessary labor and expense." Yet Herman was sincerely mourned by everyone who knew him. "He saw everything with clarity," said Orson Welles of Herman. "No matter how odd or

how right or how marvelous his point of view was, it was always diamond white. Nothing muzy.”



Joe Mankiewicz directing Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra. PHOTO: MONDADORI/GETTY IMAGES

THE BROTHERS MANKIEWICZ

By Sydney Ladensohn Stern
Mississippi, 468 pages, \$35

Ladensohn Stern’s beautifully researched and deftly structured dual biography, “The Brothers Mankiewicz.” Herman possessed qualities his brother completely lacked: self-awareness and a gift for intimacy. As the author writes: “Herman could laugh at himself. Joe could not.”

Herman’s younger (by 11 years) brother, Joe, had a far more distinguished career, producing “The Philadelphia Story,” directing “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir” and writing and directing “A Letter to Three Wives” and “All About Eve,” both of which won him a pair of Oscars for writing and directing. In 1951 “All About Eve” amassed 14 Oscar nominations, a record equalled only by “Titanic” in 1997 and “La La Land” in 2017.

Yet, for all of Joe’s undoubted accomplishments, it is Herman Mankiewicz who is the warming fire in Sydney

On some level, failure softened Herman, while success nudged Joe into arrogance—he became an intellectual bully, one of those people who have to win every argument. His third wife

referred to his behavior as “steamrolling.” Joe’s kindness, said a niece, “[came] out of a faucet. He seeks adulation.”

Both brothers labored beneath the sniffy attitude of their father, Franz Mankiewicz—a scholar, a friend of Albert Einstein’s, a professor at City College, USC and UCLA. Herman went to Hollywood in 1926, after stints at the New York Times and the New Yorker, and did American movies a great favor by convincing Ben Hecht to join him. Joe arrived three years later. Then and afterward Franz thought movies should be beneath the notice of the culturally civilized, and he never stopped urging his sons to do something more important.

In 1942 Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles would win Oscars for the script of “Citizen Kane,” which did nothing to slow Herman’s alcoholic decline. Ms. Stern’s take on the enduring squabble about who deserves proper credit for the screenplay follows that of scholar Robert Carringer, who estimated that Herman was responsible for about 60% of the script—that is to say, “the story frame, a cast of characters, various individual scenes, and a good share of the dialogue . . . Welles added the narrative brilliance.” In other words, Herman’s first position credit was entirely justified.

That said, John Houseman’s response to the controversy seems correct: “The whole thing is idiotic; it’s not worth discussing. Herman Mankiewicz wrote it but it’s Orson’s picture just as ‘Stagecoach’ is John Ford’s picture even though Dudley Nichols wrote it.”

Joe Mankiewicz’s married life was less successful than his movies. His second wife, Rose, was an emotionally fragile actress destabilized by her husband’s serial philandering, generally with younger actresses. Joe played Henry Higgins with women as varied as Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Gene Tierney and Linda Darnell. Rose Stradner Mankiewicz committed suicide in 1958.

After his triumph with “All About Eve,” Joe followed an ambitious but erratic path: creditable efforts such as the Marlon Brando version of “Julius Caesar,” an entertaining take on Frank Loesser’s musical “Guys and Dolls,” and the flamboyantly surreal “Suddenly, Last Summer.” On the debit side were the overwritten and underfelt “The Barefoot Contessa” and a botched adaptation of Graham Greene’s “The Quiet American” starring, for no rational reason, Audie Murphy.

And then came “Cleopatra.”

For all of Joe’s skill with dialogue and actors, nothing in his résumé suggested he had the visual skills to energize a spectacle of ancient Rome. Which is not to say he didn’t have reasons to make the picture: After the lawyers were through haggling, hiring Joe Mankiewicz cost Fox at least \$3 million before he shot a foot of film.

It was a lamentable experience, with the director popping pills to maintain an impossible regimen of writing scenes the night before they were to be shot. Elizabeth Taylor was preoccupied by her affair with Richard Burton —she delivered one of her few perfunctory performances—while Burton relied on vocal calisthenics instead of acting. Only Rex Harrison’s Caesar carried any imperial charge. The film emerged as an interminable slog, and its director was never the same afterward, struggling with depression, drug dependency and writer’s block. His follow-ups included the unwatchably arch “The Honey Pot” and the flaccid “There Was a Crooked Man . . .” Only his last film, 1972’s “Sleuth,” was creditable. After that he was afraid to press his luck. Joe Mankiewicz died in 1993.

This model biography tells a story of two gifted brothers, only one of whom exceeded expectations. But underneath the surface wit and brio, “The Brothers Mankiewicz” is a harrowing tale of a subtly lethal sibling rivalry that ultimately strangled them both.

—*Mr. Eyman’s biography of Cary Grant will be published next year by Simon & Schuster.*

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