Forty years after the 1938 radio drama, "War of the Worlds," panicked millions who thought Martians had actually invaded Earth, broadcast director Orson Welles talks about the experience.

Keywords

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Orson Welles Recalls "War of the Worlds" Broadcast 40 Years Later
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On that Sunday evening back in 1938 more than six million American people were listening to The Mercury Theater, and in spite the fact that they had four separate announcements saying this was only a radio drama, the format of the show, with it’s news inserts and it’s eyewitness reports of the Martians invading New Jersey, sent more than a million American people fleeing from their homes absolutely terrified.

CARL PHILLIPS (Narrator): Ladies and gentlemen, this is terrific! This end of the thing is beginning to flake off. The top is beginning to rotate like a screw and the thing must be hollow!

VOICES: She's movin'! Look, the darn thing's unscrewing! Stand back, there! Keep those men back, I tell you! Keep back there. Keep those idiots back!

PHILLIPS: Ladies and gentlemen, it's indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it, so awful. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate. The monster or whatever it is can hardly move.

LANGE: On the day after the broadcast, a remorseful 23-year-old Orson Wells met with newsmen.
ORSON WELLES: (From file footage) Because we are deeply shocked and deeply regretful about the results of last nights broadcast. And it seemed, came, rather as a great surprise to us that a story, a fine H.G. Wells classic, fantasy, the original for so many succeeding comic strips and adventure stories and novels about a mythical invasion by monsters from the planet Mars should have had so profound an effect upon radio listeners.

LANGE: Did you get a big laugh out of it Orson?

WELLES: Huge, yes, huge, huge laugh. I never thought it was anything but funny. But because the great tragedy, there are pictures of me made about three hours afterwards looking as much as I could like an early Christian Saint. I didn’t know what I was doing. I’m afraid that I’m about as hypocritical as anybody could possibly get.

We expected a lunatic fringe but we didn’t know it would go all they way across the country you know. I had friends who you know ran out. One of my favorites was Jack Barrymore who had a kennel of Great Dane dogs who went out and undid all the kennels and said ‘fend for yourselves’ you know?

LANGE: And of course the next day there was a great hearing cry that radio should be censored. Did you go along with that?

WELLES: Well I don’t like censorship anyway, but the queue and cry was from the newspapers who had been losing all their advertising to radio of course. And if you read the newspapers the next day you would’ve thought I was Judah’s excoriate and that my life was over. But then in the newspapers we began to discover individual voices, like Dorothy Thompson, who wrote an article saying this is wonderful and it’s very funny. And it turned out that the mood of the country was that mood. That people in general, a great majority of people, thought it was terribly funny. Although that night there were many people on the phone and the radio station, you know, saying to me you know ‘our wives are in the church on their knees and you think your funny’ and so on like that. And we went over to CBS the next morning; there wasn’t a Vice President to be seen for ten miles. There was nobody in the building but elevator operators, because nobody was going admit to anything for a while. Walter Winchell contributed a lot to the confusion over at NBC because no sooner were we off the air that he was on saying ‘there’s no cause for alarm, the Martians have not landed.’ Out with a whole different group of people you see.

(From file footage) This is Orson Welles ladies and gentleman, out of character, to assure you that the war of the worlds has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be. The mercury theater’s own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying ‘boo.’

LANGE: For the Today program I’m Kelly Lange in Los Angeles.