

DEMAGOGUES,

CHARLATANS

AND HUCKSTERS

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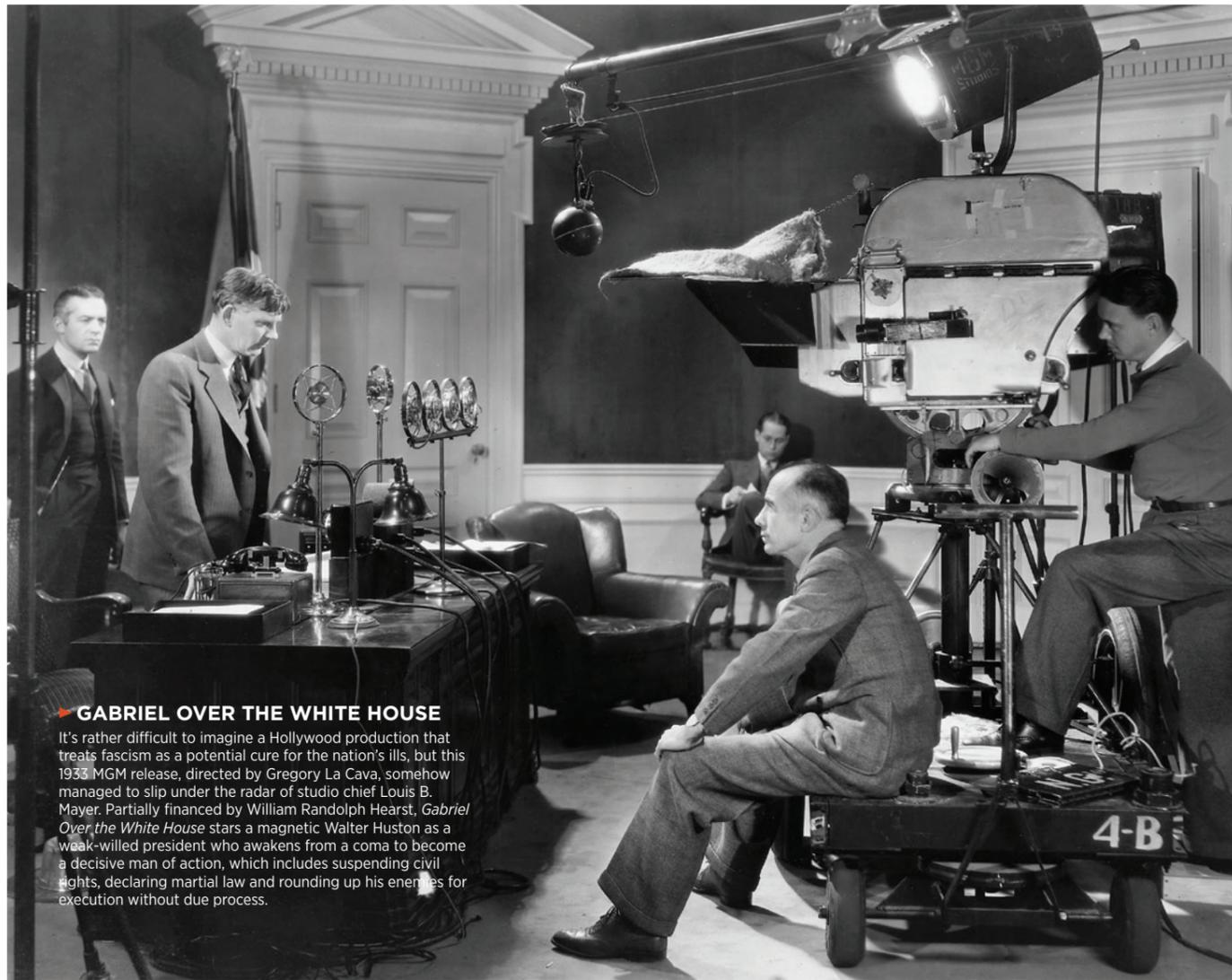
By Steve Chagollan

AS THE 19TH CENTURY POLITICIAN Lord Acton famously intoned, “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The maxim is proven by history, which is filled with populist leaders, often rising from humble roots and seemingly good intentions, who ultimately succumb to base instincts. These characters, usually toppled by their own hubris, are particularly ripe subjects for filmmakers, whether fact-based or not. The following are a few examples:

► **ELMER GANTRY**

This riveting 1960 drama, adapted from the Sinclair Lewis novel by director Richard Brooks, stars Burt Lancaster as the con man/huckster-turned-evangelist of the film’s title, and Jean Simmons as a revivalist modeled after Aimee Semple McPherson. Gantry is portrayed as a silver-tongued, fire-and-brimstone preacher who sells religion as a cure-all, like moonshine off the back of a flatbed truck. Intoxicated by his own magnetism, Gantry rises to the height of power before being felled by sexual scandal. Brooks varnishes the film with exquisite craftsmanship, and elicits Oscar-winning performances from Lancaster and Shirley Jones as Gantry’s Jezebel.





► **GABRIEL OVER THE WHITE HOUSE**

It's rather difficult to imagine a Hollywood production that treats fascism as a potential cure for the nation's ills, but this 1933 MGM release, directed by Gregory La Cava, somehow managed to slip under the radar of studio chief Louis B. Mayer. Partially financed by William Randolph Hearst, *Gabriel Over the White House* stars a magnetic Walter Huston as a weak-willed president who awakens from a coma to become a decisive man of action, which includes suspending civil rights, declaring martial law and rounding up his enemies for execution without due process.



► **TITUS**

If Richard III is Shakespeare's most irredeemable monarch, *Titus Andronicus* is his most gory play. And this 1999 adaptation by director Julie Taymor takes no prisoners as the cycle of revenge begun by the title character, a Roman general (played by Anthony Hopkins) who initially seals his fate with a violent decree, results in unspeakable acts throughout. Taymor, known for her transfixing imagery, makes maximum use of Italian locations to mix the ancient with the timeless, including the fascist Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana and Hadrian's Villa in Rome. As *The New York Times* states, "We find ourselves in a surreal, time-collapsed dream world, a murderously super-charged virtual reality where the characters loom as recurrent historical archetypes."



► **GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK**

Admittedly, in George Clooney's 2005 cautionary tale, the villain who poses a threat to democracy, particularly the First Amendment—red-baiting, fear-mongering Sen. Joseph McCarthy—is only referred to in archival footage. But his threat to free speech, and freedom of the press in particular, looms large as TV journalist Edward R. Murrow, played by David Strathairn, and his CBS news team push back against Murrow's anti-communist witch hunt and help expose him as the charlatan that he is. Clooney captured the imagery on color film stock but color-corrected it to evoke the era of vintage black & white television.



"I made the decision to use only (Joseph) McCarthy playing himself... If we had an actor play him, you'd say we were making him look too much like a buffoon." —GEORGE CLOONEY ON *GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK*



► **BOB ROBERTS**

The poster for Tim Robbins' 1992 mockumentary about a fictional right-wing candidate (played by Robbins) for the U.S. Senate, has the title character draped in the American flag—an apt image for a man who espouses blind patriotism, family values and trickle-down economics. Influenced by Robert Altman's fly-on-the-wall style and the vérité work of D.A. Pennebaker, Robbins makes his protagonist a self-made millionaire who communicates his jingoistic, America First agenda ("take, make and win by any means") in the guise of a folk singer—part Will Rogers, part Bob Dylan, but dressed in a tailored suit. At one point, he cautions one of his fanatical admirers to stay away from crack because "it's a ghetto drug."



► **CITIZEN KANE**

With his first feature, a portrait of unbridled power and influence, Orson Welles was given unprecedented artistic freedom, creating a stylistic template that influenced filmmakers for decades to come. Bravura tracking shots, severe angles, jolting cuts and expressionistic lighting lend a mesmerizing yet eerie tone to the proceedings. Welles' protagonist, Charles Foster Kane (partially modeled on publishing baron William Randolph Hearst), buys a newspaper, filches the best reporters from his competitors, uses yellow journalism to attack his adversaries, and runs for governor of New York on a platform of combating corruption while cozying up to dictators. Kane's bully-pulpit tactics, and a scandalous love affair, precipitate his downfall, and there's a touch of the Nuremberg rallies in the way Welles stages his speech to supporters as the election nears. As his old friend Jed Leland, played by Joseph Cotton, states about the title character, "He never believed in anything except Charlie Kane."

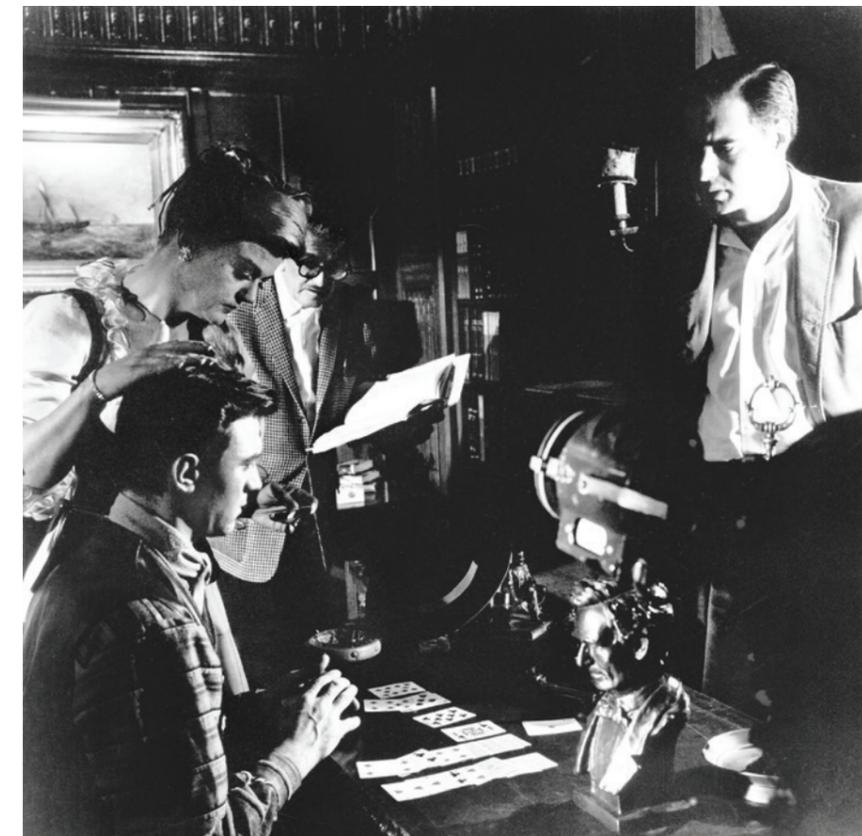


PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST



► **J. EDGAR**

FBI founder J. Edgar Hoover has long been denounced as an unscrupulous figure who collected compromising info on his and the country's perceived enemies, including sitting presidents, to solidify his power. But Clint Eastwood's 2011 biopic paints Hoover with a more nuanced brush—as a patriot of deep moral convictions who sometimes exceeded his jurisdiction to ensure the nation's security. "Sometimes you need to bend the rules a little in order to keep the country safe," says Leonardo DiCaprio as Hoover in the film. Eastwood also presents Hoover's rumored homosexuality as fact, a detail that riled many devotees in the agency. And it's this conflict between the private man and the public figure that lays the foundation for Eastwood's empathetic approach.



PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST



► **THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE**

In this feverish 1962 Cold War thriller, director John Frankenheimer weaves together several elements that played on the national fears of the time: the self-entitlement of political dynasties, the public face that disguises nefarious intentions, potential spies within D.C.'s ranks, the idea of a puppet government controlled by enemy forces and the so-called "domino effect" posed by our Communist adversaries. The players include a brainwashed war hero, his Lady Macbeth-like mother and a rabble-rousing, McCarthy-like demagogue bent on destabilizing democracy. It all adds up to a surprisingly prescient classic, and bravura filmmaking by a director who was not afraid to push buttons.

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► **RICHARD III**

Shakespeare's ultra-violent historical play is updated to 1930s England, with all the fascistic pomp and circumstance of Nazi Germany at its diabolical height. The title character, played by Ian McKellen, who co-wrote the 1995 adaptation with director Richard Loncraine, is a ruthless Machiavellian who murders his way to the throne and delights in his own depravity. The humor is black and the blood runs deep. The audaciousness of Loncraine's nightmarish vision is punctuated by lavish production values and an all-star cast that gives its all. As *The New York Times* put it, there's "money, power, glamour, titled aristocrats, kinky sex, drugs and a smiling cobra for a villain... Who could resist?"



► **ALL THE KING'S MEN**

Following in the footsteps of Robert Rossen's Oscar-winning 1949 release, writer-director Steven Zaillian recasts his adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel from the Depression to the '50s. Sean Penn plays Willie Stark, a corrupt southern politician-turned-demagogue modeled after populist Louisiana governor Huey Long. "The basic morality of the story," said Zaillian in 2006, "the questions it brings up about right and wrong, ends and means, are eternal."

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— *THE NEW YORK TIMES* ON *RICHARD III*



► **A FACE IN THE CROWD**

Elia Kazan's 1957 classic traces the rise of "Lonesome" Rhodes, played by Andy Griffith and loosely inspired by Will Rogers. We first encounter Rhodes as a drunken drifter, but when he's given the opportunity to sing on a local radio show, his folksy humor and aw-shucks charm lead to a rabid following and national fame. Not surprisingly, Rhodes becomes drunk with power, and the homespun values he espouses curdle into megalomania. Kazan was known for manipulating his actors into digging deep, often beyond their own capabilities. And Griffith, in his feature debut, delivers the most dynamic performance of his career, and one for the ages.

