

Huston, John

by Patrick M. Geoghegan

Huston, John (1906–87), film director, was born 5 August 1906 in Nevada, Missouri, USA, only child of Walter Huston (1884–1950), an actor whose mother was possibly from Ireland, and his wife Rhea Huston (née Gore), a journalist. Diagnosed with heart and kidney disease as a child, he was sent to California for a cure; this early brush with death may have encouraged his later recklessness. Educated in Los Angeles, he had a varied early career as an actor, horseman, and journalist, before going to Paris in 1933 to become a painter. Moving to Hollywood, he worked as a scriptwriter with Warner Brothers before persuading them that he was capable of directing a film; reluctantly, they allowed him to make *The Maltese falcon* (1941), a movie that helped define the *film noir* genre. In an extraordinarily prolific career he went on to direct over forty films, including *The treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), which won him an academy award for best direction, and his father one for best supporting actor; the romantic adventure *The African Queen* (1952); the cult classic *Beat the devil* (1954); the football-inspired *Escape to victory* (1981); and the commercial musical *Annie* (1982).

His Irish involvement began when he visited the country early in the 1950s. Captivated, he bought a house in Kildare in 1952 and moved to Ireland the following year. He loved Ireland, describing it as 'simply beautiful' with the people 'straightforward eccentrics'. From then on Huston took every opportunity to shoot his films in Ireland even if there was no ostensible need, so that he could pursue his fox-hunting and other leisure activities. In April 1954 he began shooting *Moby Dick* at Youghal, Co. Cork, where the power lines were removed for historical accuracy. In the late 1950s he purchased 'St Clerans', near Galway, where he lived until the 1970s, becoming master of the Galway Blazers. On 3 January 1964 he assumed Irish nationality, 'to get to the roots of my ancestors'. A planned film on the 1916 rising never materialised, however, even though he considered rebuilding Nelson's Pillar (demolished, 1966) for it. While shooting *Sinful Davey* (a story set in Scotland) in the Wicklow mountains in 1967 he was visited by the taoiseach, Jack Lynch (qv), and other ministers. Huston took this opportunity to impress on his visitors the necessity of creating an Irish film industry. As a result of his intervention, a film industry committee was established (November 1967) which Huston chaired, and its report the following year recommended the creation of an Irish film board. He worked with Irish art director Tony Inglis (qv) on the classic adventure film *The man who would be king* (1975); Inglis was nominated for an academy award the following year.

Huston's final film was a cinematic version of a James Joyce (qv) short story, *The dead* (1987), which starred Donal McCann (qv). Terminally ill, Huston directed the interior scenes from a wheelchair in America while attached to an oxygen

machine, and was unable to visit his beloved Ireland for location shooting. He died of pneumonia at his home in Newport, Rhode Island, 28 August 1987.

He married five times: first (1926) Dorothy Jeanne Harvey (divorced 1933); second (1937) Leslie Black (divorced 1944); third (1946) Evelyn Keyes (divorced 1950); fourth (1950) Ricki Soma (d. 1969); and fifth (1972) Celeste Shane (divorced 1977). He had one son and two daughters from his fourth marriage, plus a son by Zoe Sallis, and an adopted son, whom he met while making 'Treasure of the Sierra Madre'. His daughter Anjelica (1951–) starred in four of his films, winning an Academy Award for her performance in *Prizzi's honour* (1985). As actor, screenwriter, and director, Huston was one of the greats of American cinema, his indomitable spirit bringing to the screen the vision and depth of an artist.

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*DAB* (on Walter Huston); *Report of the film industry committee* (1968), 5, 45; Axel Madsen, *John Huston* (1979); *International directory of films and film-makers*, ii (1997); John McCarty, *The films of John Huston* (1987); Clive Hart, *Joyce, Huston and the making of 'The dead'* (1988); Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons* (1990); Arthur Flynn, *Irish film: 100 years* (1996); Lillian Ross, *Picture* (1952; 1998 ed.)