

The War of the Worlds?

This announcement was in fact part of a radio play, but one so realistic that most people who heard it took it for the real thing. The programme had started undrammatically enough. At 8.00 p.m. an announcer said “the Columbia broadcasting system presents Orson Wells and his Mercury theater of the air in war of the worlds by H. G. Wells. “but by chance at the same time on the main rival network a music programme began featuring a completely unknown singer. By 10 past 8.00 bored listeners were turning their dials to see if there was anything better on CBS. This is what they heard .

“Ladies and gentlemen I have an important announcement to make. The strange object which fell in new Jersey earlier this evening was not a meteorite. Incredible as it may seem, it contains strange beings who are believed to be part of an army from the planet Mars”

Soft music followed. A subtle touch to get people anxious . What is going on ? The announcer came on again. There was a nervous panic tone in his voice. He said the situation was changing rapidly . the Martians, hideous, lathery-skinned creatures take over most of new jersey already and moved quickly into neighbouring states. Army and police units raced to stop them . there was more music more urgent announcements, chilling silences. People were glued to their seats . One of well’s actors pretended to be the president of the USA and warned the American people against the dangers of panic. Despite this there was a terrible sense of panic in new jersey that evening. Everyone tried to leave and roads were filled with cars racing for the hills. Families fled from their homes with wet towels over their heads believing this would save them from the nauseous space gases the radio told them about. The panic had started.

After it was all over Welles, a radio well known actor at the age of 24, was fiercely criticized for throwing half the USA into terror. Dozens of people took legal action against CBS, but in the end the complaints were all withdrawn and , instead, of taking Welles ‘ show off the air , CBS’s bosses congratulated themselves for having hired the most talked about actor in America.