

Master of Horror Films Reveals His Technique

BY JOHN L. SCOTT

During World War I days drama passed through three stages—action, which included many battle sagas; the thriller; and finally sugary, philosophical pieces. Now history repeats itself. The war feature peak has been passed and we are currently face to face with the horror cycle.

Bookstalls bulge with mystery-shocker stories, but you can count superior products on one hand. Hollywood likewise has gone whole hog for this type of feature, and again there are few outstanding exponents.

Lewton Stands Out

One such expert, however, is Val Lewton, youthful (41) producer at R.K.O.-Radio Studio. Starting with "The Cat People," Lewton has progressed to better, more spectacular horror tales, his latest plans including three extremely unusual yarns, "Chamber of Horrors; a Tale of Bedlam," starring Boris Karloff; "Die Gently, Stranger," and a more conservative pulse-pounder, "None So Blind," with Joan Bennett starred.

Belying completely what one would expect a horror producer to look and act like, Lewton is a large, good-natured, almost bashful chap who was educated at Columbia University, worked on Connecticut and New York newspapers, did publicity for six years, wrote several novels and wound up as story editor for David Selznick before casting his lot with R.K.O. as a producer.

Obvious Shunned

While he is adept at creating suspense on the silver sheet, Lewton eschews the more obvious methods, such as ghouls rising from graves, monsters



HORROR MAN—Boris Karloff will act in Val Lewton's "Bedlam," based on mad-house painting by Hogarth.

shrieking or diabolical scientists concocting weird methods of torture. He believes, instead, in making menaces out of ordinary things.

"In 'Die Gently, Stranger,' written by David Tutaeff, a young Russian, we will make water the menace," Lewton explained. "The story is laid on and around the beaches of Stockholm and we are using the average person's fear of the awe-inspiring ocean and of being lost in fog as a motivating force. One of our situations finds a lone oarsman completely cut off from everything he understands and

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Lewton Tells His Methods

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the result, I hope, will be psychological horror at its best."

Painting Provides Theme

In "Bedlam" Lewton and his director, youthful Mark Robson, a former cutter and law student, are basing their entire picture on Hogarth's famous painting, "A Rake's Progress, Plate No. 8." There will be no screen credit for living writers. Rather it will go to Hogarth, with incidents and dialogue credited to the memoirs and letters of Giacomo Casanova, James Boswell, Lord Chesterfield, Nicholas de la Bretonne and Benjamin Franklin.

"This promises to be a very unusual picture," Lewton said, "although it would be unfair to reveal the plot right now. We started from scratch with a painting and built the story."

"None So Blind," in which Miss Bennett will star, will not stress the horror motif. "If it approaches the quality of 'Woman in the Window' I will be happy," Lewton modestly hoped.

Future Trend Velled

Future trend in mystery-horror features is almost impossible to predict, the producer said, pointing out that postwar conditions may or may not lend themselves to this type of film.

"Strange to say, servicemen overseas seem to like the fantasy-mystery idea," he said. "Whether they will still relish it when they return to civilian life none can tell. Personally I believe they will for a while, at least. Of course, we are bound to hit that philosophical cycle sooner or later. Remember 'Over the Hill' and similar stories after the last war?"

Reading Eases Path

Most of Lewton's cinemas, horror or otherwise—he does make some that are not shockers—have historical backgrounds. Asked how he can be accurate on 16th, 17th and 18th century locales, he explained:

"By reading. When I was with Mr. Selznick he would often put us to work doing research. The French Revolution, for instance, took up considerable of our time; also other historical periods. It's amazing how much useful information one can obtain with a little effort. Even without much education, any man can get more out of the film business than he puts in. There's a great future in it." We agreed. (Now how do we get started?)

Another thing Lewton insists on is believable romance between believable people. "You can't build up to a satisfactory climax unless your audience understands your characters," he said. "They must live like ordinary humans and when something begins to menace them their reactions must be so lifelike that people watching them get the full impact of the situation."