

TOWN CALLED HOLLYWOOD

Trio Gives Horror Picture New Dress

BY PHILIP K. SCHEUER

Whenever anybody evolves a new art form in Hollywood it's news. It's even news if that someone takes an old form and just improves on it. From where I sit it looks as though Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur and Mark Robson have turned the trick.

They work at R.K.O. as a unit, so it seems natural to consider them collectively. Lewton is the producer, Tourneur directs and Robson edits. There are writers involved, too—among them Curt Siodmak, De Witt Bodeen and Ardel Wray—but the triumvirate has the final say.

"Don't call us a triumvirate," Lewton begged, as he, Tourneur, Robson and I convened to discuss the matter. "It sounds too important."

Well, this triumvirate makes horror pictures, only they're different horror pictures. Lewton, the ex-story editor appointed to a producer berth at R.K.O., was in a spot. Charlie Koerner, the boss, had just told him to take care of the company's "horror program" and handed him a title: "The Cat People." That was all. Lewton instinctively turned to Tourneur, a youngish director who was also new on the lot, and in time they were joined by Robson, the cutter.

THEY CLICKED

They just naturally hit it off from the start. "The Cat People" was shot in 21 days at a cost of \$132,000. The only "name" in it was Simone Simon; yet the picture is holding over everywhere as an "A" attraction. At the Hawaii Theater in Hollywood, to cite one instance, it is rounding out its third month, returning \$16,000, or more than one-tenth of its cost, to the studio from this one source alone. Nationally it has passed the million mark.

In the 10 short months since they got together the triumvirate has completed a second chiller—"I Walked With a Zombie," which reeks with the most authentic West Indian atmosphere in screen annals—and a third, "The Leopard Man." The budget on each remained about the same—around \$150,000.

Lewton & Co. have three things in common with Alfred Hitchcock (who started modestly, if not humbly, too!) They employ suggestion to inspire terror; insofar as the inexorable demands of box office permit, they prefer unknown actors to known ones, and—a purely personal observation—in at least two of their three works, the crescendo of suspense they manufacture is greater than their ability to "top" it. In short, they have been building up to a letdown—not an awful let-

down, maybe, but one that will still take a lot of fixing.

They'll fix it.

AUDIENCE DOES IT

One reason, I know they will is that they have "a real dread of, and respect for, the audience," in Lewton's words. "You can't be 'too good' for them," he elaborated. "And you can't frighten them by showing them a thing fully, like a man changing into a monster before their eyes, because they will be seeing living people 'blown up' to 10 times normal size—and every defect will be magnified as well!"

He chuckled. "We wouldn't dare take such chances. We make the audience participants; let them do the work. How? I'll tell you a secret: If you make the screen dark enough, the mind's eye will read anything into it you want! We're great ones for dark patches."

A dark patch over the mind's eye. Not bad.

"Remember Simone's long walk alone at night in 'The Cat People'?" Lewton asked. "Most people will swear they saw a leopard move in the hedge above her—but they didn't! Optical illusion; dark patch."

SHORT AND SHIVERY

Lewton & Co. use the short story as their model because they believe you can't sustain horror beyond a certain length. "Our formula is simple," Lewton said: "A love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fadeout. It's all over in less than 70 minutes."

I remarked on the contrast between the unnatural events and the characters themselves, who are usually practical, matter-of-fact folk.

"That's Jacques' fine hand," Lewton nodded toward Director Tourneur, who is hardly the talkative sort. "Jacques doesn't like people who just live in old castles waiting to be scared. He insists that they have jobs, something to work at. He also insists on having what he calls 'weather in the streets,' even when the weather has nothing to do with the case!"

Young Mr. Tourneur is the son of old Mr. (Maurice) Tourneur, one of the great pictorial masters of the old silents.

Some triumvirate. And modest.

You'll be hearing more from them. On their future agenda are "The Seventh Victim," "The Ghost Ship," "Curse of the Cat People," "The Screaming Skull" and "The Amorous Ghost." Bigger and darker patches.