

JACQUES TOURNEUR, FILM DIRECTOR, DIES

Expert in Horror Movies Was 73
—Did 'I Walked With a Zombie,'
'Cat People' and 'Leopard Man'

By ELEANOR BLAU

Jacques Tourneur, a French-born Hollywood director known chiefly for his macabre horror films, died Monday in Bergerac, France. He was 73 years old.

Mr. Tourneur was adept at evoking a sense of bizarre menace lurking in everyday situations, and he achieved this notably in three low-budget films he directed at RKO for the producer Val Lewton: "Cat People" in 1942 and "I Walked With a Zombie" and "The Leopard Man" the following year.

These three and others that Mr. Lewton produced for RKO in the early and mid-40's are regarded by some film connoisseurs as classics. For instance, Carlos Clarens, in "An Illustrated History of the Horror Film," calls them "brief, precisely constructed and neatly executed" movies that "stand out as chamber music against the seedy bombast of the claw-and-fang epics of the day."

Difference of Opinion

Critics writing in that era were not all so enthusiastic. Bosley Crowther of The New York Times, for example, dismissed "Cat People," which starred Simone Simon, in a single paragraph. He wrote, "The strangely embarrassing predicament of a lady who finds herself possessed of mystical feline temptations, especially one to claw people to death, is the topic pursued at tedious and graphically unproductive length."

The woman in question, Irena, is a New York fashion designer who is convinced that, because of special ancestry, she can change into a dangerous cat when impassioned. In his book, Mr. Clarens cites the film's "low-keyed and ominous mood, well-dosed moments of shock and nearly subliminal hints of something almost too evil to be put into words and images."

The next Lewton-Tourneur collaboration, "I Walked With a Zombie," derived from Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre," and is in the film archives of the Museum of Modern Art. Set in the West Indies, it features a woman with a malady that renders her mindless (Christine Gordon) and a nurse (Frances Dee) who leads her through cane fields one night to a voodoo priest. That walk, with the beat of approaching drums, is especially savored by film-terror buffs.

Directed Peck in Debut

Times reviewers were not impressed with "Zombie" or with "The Leopard Man," a film with Dennis O'Keefe about a psychopathic killer. "The most horrifying thing about it is that it actually gets on a screen," wrote Mr. Crowther, dismissing "The Leopard Man" as "half-baked."

In 1944, after "The Leopard Man" Mr. Tourneur directed "Days of Glory," a film depicting the Russian struggle against the Nazis in World War II. It is remembered as the movie in which Gregory Peck made his screen debut.

Born in Paris, the son of Maurice Tourneur, a film director, Mr. Tourneur emigrated to the United States with his father in 1913 and worked as a script clerk for his father's films. He also acted small parts in several films, including "Scaramouche" (1923). He returned to France for several years, helping his father and making a few films of his own, but then went back to Hollywood, directing about 20 shorts in the late 1930's, mostly for M-G-M, and working as a second-unit director before his first full American film, "They All Come Out" (1939).

Most of his more than 20 films did not draw acclaim. They included "Experiment Perilous" with Hedy Lamarr (1944), "Stars in My Crown" (1950), "Way of a Gaucho" (1952), "The Comedy of Terrors" (1964) and his last movie, "War Gods of the Deep" (1965). Late in his career Mr. Tourneur turned to television films. He retired in 1966.