

Old Hollywood Horror, but With Depth and Flair

By CARYN JAMES

New York Times (1857-Current file); Jul 2, 1993; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2001)
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How does an all-American guy respond when his bride hints that an old Serbian curse might turn her into a panther? "Oh, Irena, you crazy kid," he says cheerfully.

A nurse who has stumbled into a job with a peculiar Caribbean family begins her story in a lilting, light-hearted voice. "I walked with a zombie!" she chirps, very much as if she were saying: "Silly me! I stubbed my toe!"

And when a young woman comes to New York City to search for her missing sister, she is more shocked to learn that the sister has secretly married than she is to find her held captive by a coven of devil-worshippers. They are, after all, respectable-looking devil-worshippers, even if they do meet in Greenwich Village.

There is a quaint and touching innocence in the way the heroes of Val Lewton's films react to cat people, zombies and satanic cults. The husband in "Cat People," the nurse in "I Walked With a Zombie," the young woman in "The Seventh Victim": these are regular people who, under Lewton's shrewd guidance, lead us more convincingly than we might imagine into deep psychological horror.

Making the Audience Jump

The catchy, trashy titles of the films Lewton produced are much better known than the name of the man who shaped them. And the title of the series beginning today at Film Forum, "Val Lewton: Horror Most Noir," gives an accurate sense of the shadowy style and intelligence that makes Lewton's genre films among the best the Hollywood studios ever turned out. This two-week series begins Film Forum's seventh annual Summer Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction and Genre Festival. In a season flooded with new special-effects movies, it is a delight to rediscover these Lewtons from the 1940's, films that rely on cheap sound effects and darkness to make the audience jump.

Although Lewton's films are dated in their details — who would call his beloved "you crazy kid" anymore? — they are definitely not campy, not the sorts of movies that are so bad they accidentally become funny. (Those films come up next on Film Forum's schedule, with a series devoted to the director Ed Wood Jr., whose cheapo, preposterous "Plan 9 From Outer Space" is frequently called the worst movie ever made. No argument here.) Lewton's taut chillers are of a different order, turning B-movies into an art of their own.

Lewton cannot be blamed for those lurid titles. When he was hired to churn out movies for the horror unit at RKO in 1942, the studio established a pattern. They handed him an audience-tested title and didn't much care what story he came back with, as long

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Film Forum
Frances Dee faces one of the walking dead in a scene from "I Walked With a Zombie," at the Film Forum's Val Lewton retrospective.

as the movie was made cheaply and fast, and turned out to be about 75 minutes long.

Power of the Unseen

Nominally the producer, Lewton influenced every aspect of his films, and he usually invented the stories. He turned the horror title "Cat People" into a resonant psychological study. Simone Simon is the mysterious Irena, a beautiful woman who paces outside the panther's cage at the zoo, drawing pictures of the cat with a stake through its heart. Physical passion or jealousy, she believes, will turn her into a destructive cat, just the sort of psychological twist Lewton favored.

He once described his style by saying, "If you make the screen dark enough, the mind's eye will read anything into it you want," and throughout his career he turned a low budget to his advantage by relying on the eerie power of the unseen. "Cat People" heightens suspense by not letting on until the very end whether Irena actually turns into a cat or simply has a peculiarly active imagination. When Alice, a woman in love with

it.) The obstacle to marriage is not a mad wife in the attic, but a silent, dazed wife who seems to be among the living dead. In an alluring and creepy episode, the selfless Betsy leads the wife through dark, portentous woods to a voodoo camp where she hopes for a cure. What they find gives new meaning to the idea of mother-in-law trouble.

Style Over Sense

Although Lewton finally credits ancient curses and voodoo with physical power, their reality seems beside the point. Among the directors most in tune with his idea of psychological terror was Mark Robson, who directed "The Seventh Victim" and "The Ghost Ship."

Despite its creaky plot, "The Seventh Victim" is one of Lewton's best movies, a triumph of style over sense. In her first major role, Kim Hunter plays Mary, the innocent woman who goes from boarding school to Greenwich Village. She is an extremely credible guide, the key to our belief in the story. Jean Brooks plays her proto-beatnik sister, Jacqueline, obsessed with death and briefly attached to the coven that now threatens her life.

In a terrifying scene that anticipates "Psycho," Mary is shocked by a visitor who breaks in while she showers; only the visitor's shadow is seen on the shower curtain, as the voice makes a lethal warning. An extra treat is Hugh Beaumont. As Gregory Ward, the sisters' shared love interest, he relies on the soothing paternal tone that would soon make him famous as a different Ward: Ward Cleaver, Beaver's dad.

'Captain's a Homicidal Maniac!'

The series' major rediscovery is "The Ghost Ship," the story of a ship's captain whose extreme notion of authority leads him to murder. The film was pulled from distribution for nearly 50 years because of a plagiarism suit. Lewton lost the suit, although it is hard to imagine anyone thinking the story is the point. Lewton's trademark touches are what set "The Ghost Ship" apart. An appendectomy performed by the third mate, following radio instructions, is more terrifying than a dozen zombies. This third mate is the typical Lewton naif, who guilelessly tells his shipmates: "I've got to convince you somehow. The captain's a homicidal maniac!"

Lewton made a few lesser movies after leaving RKO, and died in 1951 at the age of 46. Even at RKO he made some nonhorror films, like the period piece "Mademoiselle Fifi," based on Guy de Maupassant stories. His great contribution, though, is to have produced movies that can still convince us that the captain is a homicidal maniac, the beautiful woman a panther, the pesky wife a zombie.

A two-week series of films produced during the 1940's by Val Lewton.

Irena's husband, goes swimming in a lonely basement pool at night, she becomes certain that the cat-woman is stalking her. We see only a shadow on the wall, then the human Irena, though Alice later finds that her robe has been clawed to shreds.

Jacques Tourneur, who directed "Cat People" and "I Walked With a Zombie," was the most visually poetic of Lewton's directors. In "Zombie," the nurse's initial silly tone gives way to an elegant series of set pieces. Overcompensating for his hideous title, Lewton admittedly pilfered the plot of "Jane Eyre."

Betsy, the nurse, instantly falls in love with her employer. (Lewton couldn't waste time letting people fall in love; he simply pushed them into