

SUNDAY DATEBOOK

## Val Lewton Retrospective / B-Thrillers With A-Style

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1,381 words

14 November 1993

The San Francisco Chronicle

SUNDAY

26

English

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THE STAR of Val Lewton shined briefly during the 1940s when he was in charge of RKO Pictures' low-budget horror-film division. From 1942-46 the Russian-born producer, who had worked previously for eight years as the story editor for David O. Selznick, turned out a handful of cheap thrillers (never costing more than \$150,000 apiece, and never running longer than 75 minutes) that on a couple of occasions saved the studio from bankruptcy. While cheap may have described their budgets, there was something decidedly classy about their ingredients.

The scripts were literate, often based on classic material, and the casts were excellent (onetime A players now working on the B-movie level). And while the films' themes were about the dark side of humanity, they were subtle in their depiction of horrific material, preferring to suggest rather than blatantly reveal.

Lewton believed that what you couldn't see looked far more horrible in your mind's eye than anything his special-effects department could create. And so his movies were about shadows and the unseen things that prowled within the darkness that always swirled around the edges of the frame. For audiences of the '40s, Lewton's films were instant classics, and they have remained so all these years.

Lewton died in 1951 about the time his last film, "Apache Drum," was released. But his star has continued to shine.

His films have played again and again on TV and at film festivals. Now the Roxie Cinema has scheduled a three-day retrospective to highlight the recent discovery of a Lewton movie that was shelved for 50 years without ever being released.

"Val Lewton Classics" includes a selection of Lewton's best, as perceived by the Roxie's program booker, Elliot Lavine. It begins Friday with "Ghost Ship," the "lost film" that Lewton produced in 1943 and then had to deep-six after a writer claimed that his material had been plagiarized, and successfully sued the studio.

Lavine, who has studied the case, says that "Lewton was such a paragon of virtue that being accused of something fraudulent almost destroyed him. He was a deeply sensitive, religious man and the case left him morbidly depressed."

As a matter of principle, Lewton refused to settle the case out of court, the studio agreed to go to trial and RKO ended up paying \$25,000 plus court costs.

"Ghost Ship" (playing Friday through next Monday, once each day) is in the vein of Jack London's "The Sea Wolf," the novel about a brutal sea captain, and has touches of a seagoing schizophrenic that reminds one of Captain Ahab in "Moby Dick" and Captain Queeg in "The Caine Mutiny."

Richard Dix, a leading man of the '20s and '30s, had sunk to starring in low-budget movies by 1943, but by no means were his best days as an actor over. He had become a superb character actor by this time, providing a powerful and brooding presence that could handle villainous and sympathetic roles.

His Captain Stone, commander of the merchant ship Altair, has the subtleties of character that Lewton always preferred in his films. On the surface Stone seems a benevolent, good-natured friend to his new third officer, Tom Merriam. But the first clue to the captain's true nature is a motto hanging on the wall of his cabin: "Who Does Not Heed the Rudder Shall Meet the Rock."

Stone hides his sadistic nature behind a philosophy that is at first confusing, then begins to crystallize when he tells Merriam, "Men are worthless cattle, and a few men are given authority to drive them." The truth of Captain Stone is that he is a silent murderer, who allows one of his men (Lawrence Tierney, in his first screen role) to be trapped in the anchor compartment and crushed by the descending chain. Another mate disappears overboard, but by now it's clear that Stone did it, and intends to do in Merriam after his unsuccessful attempt to accuse the captain at an informal hearing.

"Ghost Ship," which was directed by Mark Robson, reveals the Lewton touch for suspense when the captain begins to stalk Merriam after turning almost all of the crew against him.

FRIDAY'S co-feature is 1945's "The Body Snatcher," a dramatization of the Burke and Hare legend, from a Robert Louis Stevenson story. A richly detailed period drama, set in Edinburgh in 1831, it stars Boris Karloff as a cruel cabman who steals bodies from the city's cemetery and sells them to a medical school doctor, who uses them in his anatomy classes.

Karloff was never better at playing a human fiend, and the film is ably supported by Bela Lugosi in a small role as the servant to Dr. MacFarland -- who is portrayed with slimy elegance by Henry Daniell. "This is a real mood piece and one of the rare times that Karloff and Lugosi underscored their performances and let the atmosphere tell the story without relying on campy behavior," Lavine said.

Saturday's co-features are "I Walked With a Zombie" (1943) and "Isle of the Dead" (1945), two "walking dead" thrillers reeking with ambience.

Lewton's RKO unit often dreamed up a title for a picture, then wrote the script -- "I Walked With a Zombie" being a classic example. Inspired by "Jane Eyre," the film depicts nurse Frances Dee's visit to an island in the West Indies to care for a woman in a deep sleep. Voodoo ceremonies punctuate the action and the film's best shocks come during a cane-field sequence as a sinister native stalks the heroine.

"ISLE of the Dead" is another Karloff vehicle, this one set on a Greek island during a civil war. A plague is raging and Karloff, a Greek general, thinks it's caused by demons called "vorvolakas" -- vampire creatures that "drain all the life and joy from those who want to live."

A premature burial is at the heart of the film's horror aspects, with a woman in a trance running wild on the island, murdering with a knife.

The Lewton festival ends next Sunday with a triple bill: "The Cat People" (1942), "Curse of the Cat People" (1944) and "The Leopard Man" (1943).

"The Cat People" was Lewton's first film for RKO and the one that saved the studio from financial disaster. Simone Simon portrays Irena Dubrovna, a troubled New York fashion model who believes she might be descended from a race of cat-women who turn into panthers when they are sexually aroused. The film was an audience favorite in '42 for its sequence in which a woman is stalked by an unseen presence through Central Park, an eerie sequence set in a swimming pool and its use of suggestive shadows.

Because of the popularity of "The Cat People," RKO came up with the lurid title "Curse of the Cat People" and told Lewton to make a sequel. What emerged was one of Lewton's most poetic films, one that is best described as a children's fantasy. It completely defied anything the studio expected.

THE character Kent Smith played in the original film is back with a new wife and a daughter named Amy. Irena returns in the form of a fairy godmother (or is she an imaginary playmate created by Amy?) who protects Amy from assorted menaces, one of which is a legendary headless horseman. As a study in child psychology and

how fear has a profound effect on the young, "Curse of the Cat People" is a masterful rendering.

"The Leopard Man," based on a popular novel by Cornell Woolrich, is the bloodiest of Lewton's films, depicting life in a New Mexican town after a black leopard escapes from a nightclub act and several citizens are clawed to death.

Its best scene has a young girl pounding on her mother's door to be allowed into the house.

"Val Lewton Classics" will be screened Fridaythrough next Sunday at the Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th Street.