VAL Lewton: Program One

Two films by Mark Robson: BEDLAM and THE GHOST SHIP.

Val Lewton's nine horror films for Rko Radio, released over a four year period between late 1942 and 1946, were sadly under-rated at the time of their appearance, and are perhaps a trifle over-rated today. Both as "B" films and as horror films, they were unusually literate and intelligent, refreshing free from Grand Guignol sensations, and scoring through their use of suggestion rather than outright statement. They aimed, for the most part, for the uneasy shudder rather than the outright shock, and the few physical shocks (the climax of "The Body Snatcher" for example) were real jolters when they came! Superstition, legend, fear, madness, black magic, devil worship and like intangibles were their principal ingredients, and they added credence to their stories by their restraint, their (often) quite commonplace locales, and by the skillful use of apparently meaningful quotes from such works as "The Anatomy of Atavism" which introduced, and closed, the films on notes of grim foreboding.

Today's program is designed not to show the best of this Lewton series; indeed, we hasten to stress that tonight's two films are very definitely second echelon Lewton. However, they do represent two interesting extremes in the series. "THE GHOST SHIP" is probably the least known of all nine pictures; many people even overlook it completely, and assume that there were only eight films in the group. And "BEDLAM" is the most ambitious of the group in terms of budget.

All nine Lewtons were extremely interesting films, even the lesser ones having elements, or sequences, that made them well worthwhile. However, it would seem that the four directed by Val Lewton were, generally speaking, the lesser films in the series. Of tonight's two Robson entries, we'll have more to say in a minute. His two others were "The Seventh Victim", a misfire essay on Satanism in Greenwich Village which had a couple of great sequences, some intriguing dialogue and an enjoyable overall aura of evil, but a certain amount of tedium and hesitancy as well; and "Isle of the Dead" which had a magnificent crypt sequence in the last reel, and little else. Of the other five Lewtons, two are probably among the best horror films ever made - Jacques Tourneur's "Cat People", and Robert Wise's "The Body Snatcher". The remaining three: the Fritsch-Wise "Curse of the Cat People", Tourneur's "I Walked with a Zombie", and also from Tourneur, "The Leopard Man", which started out magnificently and fizzled into nothing three-quarters of the way through. Both Tourneur and Wise seemed to bring added macabre and dramatic qualities to their films; Robson seemed to contribute nothing that was not already there by virtue of the script or stars (Karloff, Richard Dix). What was already there was still enough to make the films notable, but one cannot help feeling that these same films, handled by Tourneur particularly, although Robert Wise too, would have been quite superior.

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"THE GHOST SHIP" (Rko Radio, 1943) Producer: Val Lewton; director: Mark Robson; screenplay: Donald Henderson Clarke; original story by Leo Litvak; photography: Nicholas Musuraca; with RICHARD DIX, Russell Wade, Edith Barrett, Ben Bard, Edmund Glover, Skeletron Knaggs, Tom Burton, Lawrence Tierney, Dewey Robinson, Steve Winston, Robert Rice, Charles Lung, George de Normand, Paul Marion, Sir Lancelot, Boyd Davis. 7 reels.

Essentially a melodrama rather than a horror film, "The Ghost Ship" is one of the weaker films in the series, and probably falls a little flat by its
determination to live up to the reputation of its predecessors. The odd attempts here and there to suggest the supernatural are out of place and merely misleading -- and a chance for a real surprise ending, a la "Caligari", was muffed. But as a straight suspense piece, it is considerably above average, thanks to some excellently written dialogue, and a particularly fine performance by Richard Dix. The camerawork goes a little overboard on low-key lighting, so much so in fact that an exhibitor in the Motion Picture Herald complained that it was the darkest picture he'd ever seen. "Your patrons will go blind" he informed his fellow exhibitors. It isn't quite that bad, but it is rather unnecessarily murky. "The Ghost Ship" could be a sad let-down if your anticipations are measured by the highest Lewton yardsticks, but if you don't expect too much you may be quite pleasantly surprised.

- Intermission -

"BEDLAM" (Rko Radio, 1946) Executive Producer: Jack Gross; Producer Val Lewton; director, Mark Robson; screenplay by Mark Robson, Carlos Keith; photographed by Nicholas Musuraca; starring Boris Karloff, with Anna Lee, Richard Fraser, Eily House, Glenn Vernon, Jason Robards, Ian Wolfe, Leyland Hodgson, Joan Newton, Elizabeth Russell. 8 reels.

Despite its grim theme, "BEDLAM" is again not a horror film in the accepted sense, though it does have some truly horrific moments, especially in the closing reels. Designed as a "prestige" horror film, it was supervised by Jack Gross, and was thus considered on the same higher level, commercially, as "Night Song", "Berlin Express" and other Rko films of that calibre. The experiment wasn't too successful, although to his credit, Gross seems to have left Lewton pretty much alone. But there's too much padding and too much footage; the story gets bogged down in by-play and decor, and as a result it hasn't the directness and tautness of the others. But, once again, it has good writing, fine atmospheric photography, an excellent performance from Karloff, and a wonderful, grim climax wherein the sadistic asylum governor is tried for his life by the inmates. Disappointing though it is in many respects, how much superior it is to the not dissimilar but pointlessly brutal and unsubtle "The Haunted Strangler". Let us not even mention the real shockers of gore and bestiality like "Blood of the Vampire" and "Horrors of the Black Museum" which, the more they try to shock, succeed only in repulsing and boring, and never result in genuine thrills or excitement.

The underplayed horror of "Cat People", "Dead of Night" and "Vampyr" is still the most terrifying of all -- while the exuberant (yet tasteful) Grand Guignol of "The Bride of Frankenstein" and "Mystery of the Wax Museum" runs it a close second in entertainment values, if not in the evoking of terror.

"Bedlam" at times gets a little too clever for its own good in its name-dropping and in the curious scene foretelling the birth of the movies! And Anna Lee's once lovely smile, like Maria Schell's, tends to become annoying in its mechanical repetition. But Karloff (what a fine actor he is, when given a chance) and Musuraca's stark camerawork are the whole show here, and for the most part, they manage to pull it off.

"Bedlam" on television was greatly (though fairly neatly) hacked, although it suffered less than the TV version of "Cat People" from which the famous swimming pool episode was removed completely! Our print of "BEDLAM" is minus the credits unfortunately, but it is otherwise completely intact, and like "The Ghost Ship" is an excellent print to boot. With the missing credits however, we should point out that the film is "suggested" by the painting of William Hogarth, sections of which are used throughout the film as a transitional device.