Broady speaking, Boris Karloff's performances (in horror films) fall into three categories. There are those films that he obviously believes in, considers far more than mere horror films, and for which he turns in appropriately serious characterisations -- most notably, the Frankenstein films, "The Mummy", "The Black Cat" and his three for Val Lewton. Secondly, there are those that he recognises as being patently absurd but a good lark, and which he plays broadly and to the hilt -- most spectacularly in "The Mask of Fu Manchu", but to a lesser degree in "The Raven" and again on a note of sustained levity. Thirdly, there are the cheap quickies of recent years ("Frankenstein 1970", "Voodoo Island") which he obviously considers unworthy of either a serious performance or a humorously hammed-up one. In these films, rather unprofessionally we must admit, he has given the producers the benefit of his name and nothing else, ambling through his roles without the slightest flicker of interest. Tonight's program offers Karloff in representative examples of the first two categories, while the films in themselves are likewise illustrative of hoked-up Grand Guignol and more serious filmic horror. **(We omitted to add "in the latest "The Raven")**

"The Raven" (Universal, 1935) Directed by Louis Friedlander (Lew Landers); produced by David Diamond; screenplay by David Boehm; camera, Charles Stumar; editor, Alfred Akst; 6 reels

With Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Irene Ware, Lester Matthews, Samuel S. Hinds, Inez Courtney, Ian Wolfe, Spencer Charters, Maidel Turner, Arthur Hoyt, Walter Miller.

Although they appeared together in a number of other films ("Son of Frankenstein", "Black Friday", "The Body Snatcher", "You'll Find Out"), Karloff and Lugosi only ever had three genuine co-starring vehicles -- all for Universal in the mid-'30s. First and best was "The Black Cat", which we plan to revive shortly, in which Karloff was the villain, Lugosi in a sense the hero. Second, not quite as good, but generally more fun, was "The Raven" in which the procedure was reversed, Lugosi became the most villainous of all movie heavies here, with Karloff in a more sympathetic but still menacing role. Their third, "The Invisible Ray", was the weakest though still an interesting film; curiously, both boys were relatively sympathetic menaces in that one. What a pity that no fourth film was produced to complete the cycle by having them both as despicable heavies!

Like the recent AIP "The Raven" (also with Karloff), this earlier version has little or nothing to do with Poe. (Neither did "The Black Cat", but it did evoke a genuinely Poe-esque atmosphere). And also like the recent "The Raven", it is horror with its hair down. It doesn't play for obvious laughs the way the new one did, but it is obviously done tongue-in-cheek -- and is the more effective for being played apparently straight, with all the standard Universal trimmings of musical scoring and elaborate sets. Actually, the decision to so treat it was a wise one; its story is frankly a little nauseous, not to say pointless, but as an effective peg on which to hang all of Boris and Bela's specialties, it serves beautifully. Each situation is a joy, every line a full-blooded gem. Lugosi's frequent paens of praise to Poe are a delight, but for all his magnificent bravura style, it's Karloff in the smaller of the two roles who comes off best with the cunning throw-away line. At one point, when Lugosi has been telling Boris how evil he is, and reminding him that he has killed unnecessarily and on one recent exploit thrust an acetylene torch into a man's eyes, Boris shifts a little uneasy and with righteous indignation bristles "Well, there are some things you just can't 'elp doing!" before dismissing the whole subject.
"The Raven" is grand fun from first to last, with top production values and so much going on that it's hard to realize that it's all over in a tight 62 minutes.

Intermission

"Isle of the Dead" (Rko Radio, 1945) Produced by Val Lewton; directed by Mark Robson; executive producer, Jack Gross; screenplay by Ardel Wray, Josef Michel; photography, Jack MacKenzie; music, Leigh Harline; 7 reels.

With Boris Karloff, Ellen Drew, Marc Cramer, Katherine Emery, Helene Thimig, Alan Napier, Jason Robards, Ernest Dorian, Skelton Knaggs, Sherry Hall.

For a while, "Isle of the Dead" was one of the most elusive Lewtons. Then, when it was reissued in the early 50's double-billed with "Mighty Joe Young", it became, for a while, the easiest to catch. Now, for several years it has vanished again, unless one counts TV showings. But who in their right mind does?

One of the most ambitious, but not one of the best, of the Val Lewtons, "Isle of the Dead" suffers a little too much from trying to live up to the standards set by earlier films in the series. It is determined to be sensible and intelligent about everything, with the result that too much dialogue, backed by a depressing story about a plague, produces an effect surely a little more claustrophobic than was intended. Too, Robson is — and was — a heavy-handed director without the finesse or powers of subtle suggestion that Jacques Tourneur and Robert Wise brought to the best of the series. But even when it isn't entirely coming off, it is still infinitely superior to the other grade-B horror films of the period — "House of Dracula", "The Mad Ghoul" etc. And the last reel more than makes up for earlier lethargy with one of the grimmiest climaxes of any horror film; the kind that makes one uneasy rather than scared, and that after all is the best kind, and the most difficult to accomplish!

Curiously, there's far more of Poe (and "The Masque of the Red Death") about this film than there is in "The Raven". Karloff here plays in a completely serious vein, and his performance is excellent, although the role is a fairly passive one and without the literary dialogue that made his "The Body Snatcher" role one of the finest he ever had.

Perhaps "Isle of the Dead" is a little less effective than most of the Lewtons because it resorts to the deserted-island cliché to separate it from reality, and to provide a bizarre enough background to support the plot premise of a possible werewolf (or its Greek equivalent). The others were more effective because of the juxtaposition of the supernatural or other elements of horror against complete reality. But this is a small quibble in a film which may not be the best of Lewton's nine horror films, but is also far from being the weakest. Incidentally, the marvellously gloomy and atmospheric painting that "suggested" this film was itself the subject of a one-reel film by the National Film Board of Canada in the late 40's; it was one of the best of the then-overdone films which sought to bring life and movement to static canvasses.

— Wm. K. Everson —

Next Tuesday: LOVE 'EM AND LEAVE 'EM (1926) with Louise Brooks, Evelyn Brent, Osgood Perkins; "The Floating Coffin" with Pearl White; D.W. Griffith's "Female of the Species" with Mary Pickford; "In Danger's Path" with Helen Holmes and Hoot Gibson.