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Simone Simon as Irina in *Cat People*

Darkness, Darkness: The Films of Val Lewton

Looking Back at a B-Movie Master

Lewton's struggles to make magic had their own horrors

BY [MARK A. VIEIRA](#)

I. Poetry and Danger

RKO-Radio Pictures was the smallest of the majors in 1939, an odd little studio that had barely survived its first ten years. To radio star [Orson Welles](#), RKO was “the greatest electric train set a boy ever had.” (Leaming, *Orson Welles*, 174) The studio had just stabilized itself after a series of flops when its president, George Schaefer, gave the headstrong Welles a multimillion-dollar contract. Within three years, Welles’s brilliant, uncommercial films had nearly derailed the studio and both he and Schaefer were out on their ears. World War Two was in progress and next door, at Paramount Pictures, someone scrawled on a wall: “In case of an air raid, go directly to RKO. They haven’t had a hit in *years!*” (Niven, *Bring on the Empty Horses*, 28)

Joseph Breen stepped down from his post at the Production Code Administration and took over the shaky studio for a time in 1942, followed by a dark horse named Charles Koerner, who, according to writer DeWitt Bodeen, “had managed a lot of first-class movie theaters and was brought



into RKO to manage the studio because his sense of exploitation was so acute.” (Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron*, 211) Breen suggested to Koerner that he hire David O. Selznick’s affable story editor, Val Lewton (*right*), so Koerner offered Lewton his own production unit at RKO. There were, however, certain conditions.



Lewton could have “artistic freedom” if he: (1) produced “horror programmers”; (2) kept their budgets within \$150,000; (3) accepted titles arrived at by a system of marketing research; and (4) agreed to a salary of only \$250 a week. Lewton agreed but confided to Bodeen, “They may think I’m going to do the usual chiller stuff which’ll make a quick profit, be laughed at, and be forgotten, but I’m going to fool them . . . I’m going to do the kind of suspense movie I like.” (Bodeen, “Val Lewton,” 210) Bodeen recalled: “Mr. Koerner, who had personally welcomed me on my first day at the studio, was of the opinion that vampires, werewolves, and man-made monsters had been over-exploited and that ‘nobody has done much with cats.’” (Ibid, 211) At a Hollywood party, some giddy person had tossed him a catchy title: **Cat People**. “Let’s see what you can do with that,” Koerner told Bodeen the next day. (Ibid) Lewton was crestfallen. “There’s no helping it,” he said to Bodeen. “We’re stuck with that title. If you want to get out now, I won’t hold it against you.” (Ibid, 212) Bodeen needed RKO’s \$75 a week — and wanted to work with Lewton. “When I first knew Val,” said Bodeen, “he was only thirty-seven, a huge, burly, kindly man with a quick sense of humor. He was extremely shy, and easily hurt if his superiors failed to go along with him on story and production plans.” (Ibid, 213)

Lewton knew the value of teamwork from his years at Selznick International, so he built a team in which each member had an artistic stake, whether writer, art director, or assistant. In less than three weeks, Bodeen wrote a script inspired by a magazine layout that showed fashion models wearing cat masks. The new team sat in Lewton’s office, tore the plot apart, and put it together again. At times, Lewton took the stage. Bodeen recalled: “He would move to the light switch of his office, turn off the lights quickly, and continue recounting the story in the darkened room.” (Ibid, 215) After the conference, Lewton would plop himself down at his old Royal typewriter, and, with two fingers, rewrite most of the script. “My wife and I would be driving back to the San Fernando Valley at half past one or two in the morning,” director [Jacques Tourneur](#) remembered. “And always as we passed the studio, we’d see a light in that corner office of his, and he’d be alone, working, correcting what the writer had written. He could only work at that time of night. Next day, he’d hand the work to us.” (Higham, *The Celluloid Muse*, 246)

According to Lewton’s wife, Ruth, he dredged his own Russian Jewish psyche to write the first film. He was terrified of cats. “He had a folk fear,” she said, “an atavistic kind of fear of something going way, way back. Of course, he knew better. He was a very intellectual man and not



a superstitious person — and so he was both frightened and fascinated by his fear.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 28) The plot of **Cat People**



was not so different from Universal’s werewolf fables. A Serbian girl, Irena (Simone Simon), turns into a panther when jealous of her husband’s coworker, Alice (Jane Randolph), or sexually aroused by an unethical psychiatrist (Tom Conway). Lewton’s approach to the material, though, was quite different.

“We tossed away the horror formula right from the beginning,” Lewton said. “No grisly stuff for us. No masklike faces, hardly human, with gnashing teeth and hair standing on end. No creaking physical manifestations. No horror piled upon horror.” (Siegel, 31) What he counted on to frighten his audiences was something more elemental than the fear of a walking mummy. “The stories he produced,” said Bodeen, “are dramatizations of the psychology of fear. Man fears the unknown — the dark, that which may lurk in the shadows. . . . That which he cannot see fills him with basic and understandable terror.” (Bodeen, “Val Lewton,” 215) What Lewton finally conceived was a format in which to tap this well of fear. “Take a sweet love story,” he said, “or a story of sexual antagonisms, about people like the rest of us, not freaks, and cut in your horror here and there by suggestion, and you’ve got something.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 31) Suggestion meant not showing the source of terror. This was unthinkable for Universal, but essential to RKO’s low-budget strictures. Bodeen’s script met those terms. “In the darkness,” he wrote, “to one side of them, there is a sound like a snarl. . . . From the darkness, following them, there is a whisper of light, padded feet, a delicate tick, tick of claws scraping the floor. . . . Now there comes again, pursuing them, the whispering tread of soft paws.” (Fujiwara, *Tourneur*, 78)

The director on Lewton’s team was his friend Jacques Tourneur, with whom he had filmed the Bastille sequences for Selznick’s **A Tale of Two Cities** seven years earlier: “Val was the dreamer and I was the materialist,” Tourneur recalled. “We complemented each other. By himself, Val might go off the deep end, and I, by myself, might lose a certain poetry.” (Siegel, “Tourneur Remembers,” 25) Lewton knew what he wanted. “If you make the screen dark enough,” he said, “the mind’s eye will read into it anything you want. We’re great ones for dark patches.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 32) Tourneur had a flair for creating shadowy sequences, perhaps inherited from his father, Maurice Tourneur, who was the silent cinema’s first master of chiaroscuro. “We believed in suggesting horror rather than showing it,” said Tourneur. (Higham, 248)

One of the standout sequences in **Cat People** had Alice in a deserted indoor swimming pool late at night, splashing contentedly until she becomes uncomfortably aware that something is prowling along the edge of the pool. “The shadow you saw of the big cat on the wall of the swimming pool was actually my fist,”



Tourneur admitted later. (Ibid)
 Another “terror spot” was Alice’s solitary nighttime walk through Central Park, an increasingly nervous stroll accented by alternating sounds of high heels and feline growls, and climaxed by an ordinarily innocent noise. Film editor Mark Robson described it: “From the other side of the park, a bus came by and I put a big, solid sound of air brakes on it, cutting it in at the decisive moment so that it knocked viewers out of their seats. This became the ‘bus,’ and we used the same principle in every film.” (Ibid, 237)



A less frightening but equally unsettling scene called for a glamorous stranger in black to unnerve Irena’s wedding party by staring at her and saying in Serbian, “Moja sestra? (My sister?)” Lewton was a frequent visitor, along with Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Greta Garbo, to Salka Viertel’s Santa Monica salon. He asked her son, Peter, to help him cast the Serbian part. When Viertel met actress Elizabeth Russell, the roommate of his girlfriend, Maria Montez, he said: “I have a friend at RKO who needs a woman for his new movie that looks like a cat.”

“You mean you think I look like a *cat*?” asked Russell.

“Well, they’ll talk about your looking like a cat, so the audience will accept it,” said Viertel, trying not to offend her. Russell (*right*) went on to make the scene “a strange, mysterious thing.” (Mank, *Women in Horror Films, 1940s*, 105)



When Koerner saw the first cut of **Cat People**, he felt that Lewton had let him down. There were not enough shots of the black panther that the studio had paid to rent. Yet the film had been completed in a mere twenty-four days and \$,7000 under budget. Lewton apprehensively took it to a sneak preview at the Hillstreet Theatre in downtown Los Angeles, a rowdy blue-collar haunt. Bodeen remembered:

The preview was preceded by a Disney cartoon about a little pussycat and Val’s spirits sank lower and lower as the audience began to catcall and make loud mewling sounds. ‘Oh, God!’ he kept murmuring, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. [Our] picture’s title was greeted with whoops of derision and louder meows, but when the credits were over and the film began to unreel, the audience quieted, and, as the story progressed, reacted as we had hoped an audience might. There were gasps and some screaming as the shock sequences grew. (Bodeen, 218)

At the Rialto Theatre in New York, **Cat People** became a holdover sensation. “It was with a sense of elation that one sat in the back row of the Rialto,” recalled writer Don Miller. “[I] watched the concerted scream of the packed house when a bus pulls alongside the girl with the hiss of airbrakes. An optical illusion, perhaps, but it seems that the entire theater audience rose and fell in one rippling wave of fear.” (Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron*, 234 Bodeen recalled that “although the café meeting scene of Simone and Elizabeth Russell was very brief, some audience members read a lesbian meaning into the action.” (Mank, *Women in Horror Films*,

1940s, 104) Lewton's feline females eventually scared more than \$3 million out of audiences. His secretary, Verna De Mots, said, "**Cat People** saved RKO when it was practically bankrupt." (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 40)

Lewton's next film was called **I Walked with a Zombie**. He overcame his initial aversion to the title by adapting *Jane Eyre* — one of his favorites — to a modern setting in Haiti. Curt Siodmak and Ardel Wray adapted it. "We were all plunged into research on Haitian voodoo," Miss Wray recalled, "every book on the subject Val could find. He was an addictive researcher, drawing out of it the overall feel, mood, and quality he wanted, as well as details for the actual production." (Ibid, 41) Lewton sent her to buy a doll for a sequence in which voodoo animates a figurine. Through the collaborative process, a department-store toy became a charged icon.



Lewton imbued his collaborators with a sense of shared inspiration. "We'd work late," Wray said, "go to dinner at the Melrose Grotto, back to the studio, work some more, then walk out, enjoying and talking about the eerie, half-sinister quality of an empty lot at night." (Ibid) Indeed, it was a nighttime walk that gave this film its most memorable "terror spot," when Frances Dee and Christine Gordon traverse the Haitian jungle in the dead of night to attend a voodoo ceremony. "**I Walked with a Zombie** was the best of Val's films," Robson said, "an absolutely beautiful movie." (Ibid, 51) Credit for this was partly due to the dramatic moonlight effects of Nick Musuraca's cinematography, with its glistening tropical leaves and inky black shadows. And Tourneur, in keeping with the title, kept his agile camera on the move. It was all part of the formula. "After a horror sequence," said Robson, "we always tried to give the audience relief by going to something very beautiful, lyrical if possible. We tried to make the films visually interesting." (Peary, "Mark Robson Remembers," 36) The team had another hit.

Lewton condensed the formula. "A love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fadeout. It's all over in less than seventy minutes." (Ibid, 31) At sixty-six minutes, **The Leopard Man** was his third success story, although he and Tourneur again faced the issue of how not to show the movie's menace, a psychopathic museum curator. In one of his most



disturbing set pieces, Lewton has a young Mexican girl tracked by an unseen "leopard" as she runs an errand for her angry mother. What makes the scene almost unbearable is that the errand is unnecessary, the girl is in real danger, and the mother — to punish the girl — refuses to let her into

the house, even as she screams for help. Only when blood trickles under the door does the heartless mother realize what she has done. Tourneur later observed that these exercises in terror were “made during the war, and, during war, for some mysterious reason, people love to be frightened. Subconsciously we all enjoy being afraid . . . and in wartime, people had money from the plants, money to burn, and they loved that kind of film.” (Higham, 246) Lewton’s tight little team could now take pride in having outdistanced Universal’s horror films, both critically and financially.

The surprising profits of the first three Val Lewton films made RKO-Radio Pictures greedy. According to Tourneur: “We were making so much money on our films together that the studio said, ‘We’ll make twice as much money if we separate them.’ So they pulled us apart.” Koerner rewarded Lewton by promoting him to A pictures. When Lewton in turn promoted Robson from film editor to director, the studio told Lewton that he could not have an untried director on his first A film. To ensure his own independence and to keep his promise to Robson, Lewton asked the studio to put him back on Bs. He got his wish, as well as another pretested title: **The Seventh Victim**. Charles O’Neal began to write Lewton’s idea of an orphan trying to find a murderer before she becomes his seventh victim. Then Lewton changed his mind and hired DeWitt Bodeen to write a script in which the orphan goes to Greenwich Village to find her older sister and save her from a vengeful group of Palladists. “See if it’s possible for you to get to a devil-worshipping society meeting,” Lewton told Bodeen. (Brosnan, *The Horror People*, 79)

To Bodeen’s surprise, RKO quickly located such a group on New York’s West Side. He was allowed to attend a meeting, but only as an anonymous, silent observer.

It was during the war and I would have hated to be Hitler with all the spells they were working against him. They were mostly old people and they were casting these spells while they knitted and crocheted. A bunch of tea-drinking old ladies and gentlemen sitting there muttering imprecations against Hitler. I made use of the experience in that the devil-worshippers in **The Seventh Victim** were very ordinary people who had one basic flaw, an Achilles heel which had turned them against good and towards evil. (Ibid)

In his first draft, Bodeen had a character named Natalie Cortez explain why she has become a Palladist. She is a tall, faded brunette whose black party dress cannot disguise that she has only one arm. “Life has betrayed us,” she says. “We’ve found that there is no Heaven on Earth, so we must worship evil for evil’s own sake.” (Mank, *Women in Horror Films, 1940s*, 258) **The Seventh Victim** (1943) became Lewton’s darkest story, a quest by innocent Mary (Kim Hunter) to save fatalistic Jacqueline (Jean Brooks), the sister who does not want to be saved.

Lewton’s team made Mary’s search suspenseful with the usual techniques. “Horror spots must be well planned and there should be no more than four or five in a picture,” said Lewton. “Most of them are caused by the fundamental fears: sudden sound, wild animals, darkness. The horror



addicts will populate the darkness with more horrors than all the horror writers in Hollywood could think of.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 32) There were more than enough in this picture. The young heroine accompanies a timid middle-aged detective through a deserted office building; as the suspense of the walk wears off, he falls to the floor, dying of a scissor wound. Later, Jacqueline is almost forced to drink poison by the Palladists but escapes. As she runs through pools of light in grimy alleys, a knife-wielding man creeps behind her. She finally reaches the safety of the brownstone where she has a room. It is furnished with two items: a wooden chair and a noose hanging over it. “**The Seventh Victim**,” said Robson, “had a rather sinister quality, of something intangible, but horribly real. It had an atmosphere. I think the actors and the director had to believe very strongly in the possibilities of disaster, that something *was* there. We believed it ourselves. We talked ourselves into believing it.” (Higham, 237)



Jacqueline, sleek and dark in a Cleopatra wig and a mink coat, tiptoes to her room. A blowzy woman in a bathrobe startles her. “Who are you?” asks Jacqueline.

“I’m Mimi,” replies the thin woman with the bony face and tangled hair (Elizabeth Russell). “I’m dying.”

“No,” says Jacqueline, staring at the neighbor.

“Yes,” says Mimi. “I’ve been quiet. Oh, ever so quiet. I hardly move. And yet it keeps coming all the time, closer and closer. And I rest and I rest. And still I’m dying.”

“And you don’t want to die. I’ve always wanted to die. Always.”

“I’m afraid,” says Mimi, clutching her robe. “And I’m tired of being afraid. Of waiting.”

“Why wait?” asks Jacqueline softly, one eyebrow raised.

“I’m not going to wait,” says Mimi with a new determination. “I’m going out. I’m going to laugh and dance and do all the things I used to do.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know.” Mimi trails off, distracted, and walks into her room, closing the door.

Jacqueline stares after her and whispers, “You will die.” Then she walks slowly to her own room, where the chair and noose await. Mary, waiting with a friend, is relieved to hear that Jacqueline has escaped the Palladists. While she is planning a new life for the two of them, we see the hallway outside Jacqueline’s room. Mimi’s door opens and she comes out, dressed to the nines, her golden hair now elegantly piled atop her head, her sequined cape sparkling in the gaslight.



As she closes her door, ready for a final night of fun, she hears something behind Jacqueline's door — the sound of a chair falling. Mimi shrugs and hurries into the night as Jacqueline's disembodied voice quotes John Donne's "Holy Sonnet VII": "I runne to Death, and Death meets me as fast, and all my Pleasures are like Yesterday."

Lewton's son, Val Edwin Lewton, said, "I think my father was really very pessimistic, and I think that comes out in his films. They may look cheerful and hopeful enough, but I think the real effect behind them was a dark pessimism and hopelessness. This whole dialogue of death — he was obsessed with it." **The Seventh Victim** did not get the reviews that Lewton had come to expect, and its box-office receipts lagged behind its predecessors.

Lewton's next film was planned around a single standing set, a ship built for the 1939 film **Pacific Liner**. "We were interested in single source lighting," Robson explained. "We chose sets that were suitable for single source. It made setups and characters very interesting. It was important for us to use light for dramatic purposes." (Peary, 35) **The Ghost Ship** (1943) was another of Lewton's waking nightmares. A sailor (Russell Wade) finds himself the only crew member who knows that the captain (Richard Dix) is a psychopathic killer. "We thought everything out," said Robson. "We had to do this to accomplish what we did with such low budgets. Val emphasized detail. I remembered that Orson [Welles] had said, 'Detail is the most important thing. The big things take care of themselves.'" (Ibid) The film was doing well when it was stopped by what appeared to be a nuisance suit, a claim that Lewton had plagiarized the story from an unsolicited manuscript. Lewton later lost the suit, and the film was pulled from circulation, the first of the series of bad turns that doomed his career.

As 1943 ended, though, Lewton was still making films that were both personal and profitable. Bodeen recalled: "When he was given the assignment to make the sequel to **Cat People**, he groaned because he was told to call it **The Curse of the Cat People**. So he said, 'What I'm going to do is make a very delicate story of a child who is on the verge of insanity because she lives in a fantasy world.'" (Brosnan,



81) Lewton assembled his repertory of players — Kent Smith, Jane Randolph, Simone Simon, Elizabeth Russell — and replaced a slow director, Gunther Fritsch, with film editor Robert Wise. Russell, who played a frustrated actress in the film, recalled that Lewton "was constantly on the set, and had the worried look all the time. He was always in there, perfecting the script the night before." (Mank, *Women in Horror Films, 1940s*, 105) He also oversaw such details as the main titles and publicity. "Val had been involved in publishing," said Robson, "and had a great sense of typography, so the lettering of the main titles was gone over very carefully. We used Caslon Old Style — very clear, lovely, wonderfully

stylish lettering — and we would italicize caps for the first letter of each word.” (Peary, 34) There was also a concern that the RKO publicity department not misrepresent the film. “We would ask the heads of the advertising unit to please not use the goddamned ‘fur’ letters and other trick lettering that gave one a supposed sense of horror,” Robson recalled. (Ibid) Still, the publicists insisted on ballyhooing the film as if it were a Universal monster movie. The press book trumpeted: “Sensational Return of the Killer Cat Woman.” Exhibitors were advised: “Send out a group of men and women wearing cat masks to walk through the streets with cards on their backs reading: ‘Are cats people?’” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 58)

When Lewton’s bosses finally saw the film they were less than happy, according to Bodeen. “I remember after **Curse of the Cat People** the front office thought Val had betrayed them because they wanted more horror.” (Brosnan, 84) But the audience would be the judge. James Agee sat with a New York audience in March 1944. “And when the picture ended,” he wrote, “and it was clear beyond further suspense that anyone who had come to see a story about curses and were-cats should have stayed away, they clearly did not feel



sold out; for an hour they had been captivated by the poetry and danger of childhood, and they showed it in their thorough applause.” (Banzak, 237) Agee was becoming one of Lewton’s biggest boosters. In the January 20, 1945 issue of *The Nation*, he summed up Lewton’s oeuvre to date. “I esteem them so highly because for all their unevenness, their achievements are so consistently alive, limber, poetic, humane, so eager toward the possibilities of the screen, and so resolutely against the grain of all we have learned to expect from the big studios.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 49)

To compete with the big studios, or even with a “major minor” like Universal, RKO needed more than poetry and imaginary cat people. It needed someone to boss Lewton, and where else to turn *but* Universal?

II. Horror Meets Terror

As a unique combination of producer and writer, Val Lewton had grown accustomed to dealing directly with RKO-Radio head Charles Koerner. After the diminishing returns of **The Seventh Victim**, **The Ghost Ship**, and **The Curse of the Cat People**, Lewton ran afoul of an executive named Sid Rogell. At Lewton’s request, Koerner replaced Rogell with an émigré from another studio. “I now find myself working for an abysmally ignorant and stupid gentleman called Jack Gross,” Lewton wrote to his mother, “the man who has been making those Universal horror films and so had a particular grudge against me, as our pictures had shown up his films, not only from an artistic viewpoint, but also from a standpoint of profits.” (Ibid, 66) This was not entirely accurate. Jack J. Gross came from Universal to RKO in early 1944 with a rather impressive portfolio, having produced **My Little Chickadee**, **The Wolf Man**, and **Son of Dracula**. Mark Robson said, “In a way, I think [Val] was a man who needed an

enemy.” Lewton may have imagined envy, but not self-importance. (Ibid, 36) “Jack Gross called Val into his office for a conference,” recalled Robson. “Gross had come to RKO from Universal, where the prevailing idea of horror was a werewolf chasing a girl in a nightgown up a tree.” (Ibid, 71) Also at the meeting was a taciturn exhibition executive named Holt.

“O.K.,” said the peremptory Gross. “We’ve just signed Boris Karloff to a [two-picture] contract and you’re going to use him in your next film.”

Lewton was less than thrilled to hear that his subtle exercises in terror would be compromised by what he considered a hammy bogeyman. There was no title yet, so the meeting was awkwardly adjourned.

As Lewton and Robson headed for the door, Holt spoke up. “Remember!” he said, pointing at Lewton. “No messages!”

Lewton turned and left without a word, but by the time he got to his office he was furious. He had his secretary get Holt on the line. “I’m sorry, but we do have a message, Mr. Holt,” he bellowed into the phone. “And our message is that death is good!”



What Lewton did not know was that Boris Karloff had signed with RKO because he was fed up with Universal’s horror act. “I dislike the word ‘horror,’ yet it is a word that has been tagged to me,” said Karloff. “It is a misnomer, for it means revulsion. The films I have made were made for entertainment, maybe with the object of making the audience’s hair stand on end, but never to revolt people. Perhaps ‘terror’ would be a much better word to describe these films.” (Bean, 52) The decline he had predicted for the Frankenstein Monster had indeed taken place. “When it started to become **Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man**,” he said, “it was done from hunger.” (Ibid) Perhaps RKO, which was paying him \$6,000 a week, would be a little more imaginative. Soon it was time for him to meet the reluctant Lewton.

“It was strange, the first meeting,” Robert Wise recalled. “Boris came to the studio for a meeting with Val, Mark, and me. I had never seen him except on the screen, and this was before [I had seen him in a] color film. When he first walked in the door, I was startled by his coloring, the strange bluish cast — but when he turned those eyes on us and that velvet voice said, ‘Good afternoon, gentlemen,’ we were his, and never thought about anything else.” (Lindsay, 111) Someone was thinking about Universal monster rallies, because Bela Lugosi’s name came up. Karloff, ever tactful, agreed to work with him. At this point, Lugosi was eking out a living in Poverty Row programmers and occasionally doing scenes from **Dracula** in summer stock productions. He was preparing for one such tour when his ongoing financial anxiety took the form of ulcers. A sympathetic doctor treated the pain as well as the gastric distress. Lugosi was soon addicted to morphine.

Meanwhile, Lewton endured the indignity of presenting script proposals to RKO. The first project to be approved was a story he dreamed up as a child while staring for hours at Arnold Böcklin's painting **Isle of the Dead**. The film, which was an anecdotal piece about claustrophobia set in 1912 Greece, commenced shooting on July 14, 1944, but Karloff began to suffer severe back pain. "Between shots, he was in a wheelchair, but he made no complaints," recalled writer Ardel Wray. "He managed to be wryly humorous about it — not falsely, in that obnoxious 'See how brave I'm being' way." (Ibid) Lewton shut down production and Karloff entered Good Samaritan Hospital for a spinal fusion. The operation was a success, but his recovery took six weeks. **Isle of the Dead** was postponed because of other cast members' commitments and **The Body Snatcher** was readied for the cameras.

Another proposal was **The Body Snatcher**. He wrote to Gross on May 10, 1944, outlining the reasons why Robert Louis Stevenson's story would make a Karloff vehicle. His reasons were: (1) a good title; (2) the exploitation value of a classic; (3) its public domain status; (4) a period setting that could still be filmed cheaply; and (5) a character that could be adapted for Bela Lugosi. Stevenson's 1884 short story made anecdotal use of the 1829 case of Burke and Hare, two Edinburgh "resurrectionists" who murdered eighteen people in order to supply cadavers for the anatomy lab of the infamous Dr. Knox. Burke's claim to fame was suffocating each victim by forcefully holding his hand over the nose and mouth.

Lewton and writer Philip MacDonald expanded Gray's character to fit Karloff's stature and loaded the script with scenes of dissection, mayhem, and death. Alas, Joseph Breen refused to pass the script "because of the repellent nature of such matter, which has to do with grave-robbing, dissecting bodies, and pickling bodies." (Breen, letter to Pandro S. Berman, September 27, 1944, *The Body Snatcher* file, PCA) Lewton



hurriedly rewrote the script, but a nervous MacDonald worried that the hasty rewriting might reflect badly on him, so he insisted that Lewton share credit; Lewton used the pseudonym "Carlos Keith." One of the first scenes he cut showed a bereaved woman trying to locate a loved one in a laboratory littered with spare parts. While Lewton strove to make the script acceptable to Breen, Gross pushed him to write more horror. "It breaks my heart to see Val come home night after night late and so discouraged," wrote Lewton's wife, Ruth. "You know his temperament. It's hard for him to throw off slights, fancied or otherwise." (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 77) Breen, who respected Lewton, approved his revisions.

"Boris was very keen to do this film because he felt it gave him an opportunity to show that he could act as well as play the monster," said director Robert Wise. "He was fascinated by the duel between him and Henry Daniell, one of the great character actors of the time." Daniell was

known for his sardonic, showy roles in **Camille**, **The Sea Hawk**, and **Jane Eyre**. (Banzak, 299) “Henry Daniell was a nice man,” recalled actor Alan Napier, “but he was a crazy man. Believed in the devil and that sort of thing. He had a belief in the powers of evil.” (Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi*, 254) Karloff called him “a pro, a real honest-to-goodness pro. There was no rubbish with him, no faking.” (Roman, 401) Karloff rose to the occasion in spite of ongoing pain. “He had back problems,” recalled Wise, “but he never let that interfere a bit, and was determined to show that he could hold his own with Henry Daniell.” (Banzak, 299)

As anticipated, their scenes crackled with the electricity that only two great performers can generate. The well-structured script gave each successive encounter between Karloff’s insolent grave robber and Daniell’s guilty doctor an additional charge until Karloff’s final speech: “I am a small man, a humble man, and, being poor, I have had to do much that I did not want to do. But so long as the great Dr. MacFarlane jumps at my whistle, that long am I a man. And if I have not that, I have nothing.”

Karloff’s scenes with Lugosi were a different matter. “Lugosi was quite ill,” recalled actor Robert Clarke, “and he was not very communicative. He talked very little to anyone. He was off by himself, and he spent a lot of time lying on his back in his dressing room.” (Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi*, 264) Lugosi was playing the doctor’s half-wit assistant, so he did not have long speeches to memorize. However, illness, narcotics, and alcohol debilitated him. “He was a little vague,” said Wise. “He was not quite on it, which was all right for the role, because he played a not-very-bright guy.” (Nollen, 154) There was one juicy scene, though, in which Lugosi tries to blackmail Karloff and is knocked to the floor, suffocated, and thrown in a vat of brine. The physical demands of the scene could have harmed Lugosi. “I always appreciated Karloff’s sensitivity,” said Wise. “Boris was very gentle with him.” (Ibid) Indeed, the big horror star began to win many admirers at RKO, including visiting servicemen who watched him carry a cadaver onto the set. When Wise called cut, they were amazed to hear Karloff say to them, “God damn it, this thing is heavy!” (Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi*, 285) Overjoyed that he was not playing a monster or a mad scientist, Karloff invested his performance with his own intellectual humor. No one ever had so much fun being “bad.” The results showed on film, earning both financial and critical rewards. The *Hollywood Reporter* called **The Body Snatcher** “an unqualified lulu, certain to satisfy the most ardent chill-and-thrill craver, for this is about as grisly an affair as the screen has ever ventured to offer.” (Banzak, 299)

Isle of the Dead went back into production on December 1, 1944. Koerner was ill, so Lewton had to argue with Gross about how much horror to film. As a result, last-minute rewriting caused much of the film to be overexpository and episodic. What worked, however, was the scene in which Mrs. St. Aubyn (Katherine Emery), terrified of being buried alive, succumbs to the plague and is interred. “After



the pallbearers have gone,” James Agee wrote, “the camera coldly, tenderly approaches the coffin in a silence so intense as to be almost unbearable. When the shriek of the prematurely buried woman finally comes, it releases the rest of the show into a free-for-all masterpiece of increasing terror.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 75) A West Virginia exhibitor concurred. “The first part of the picture is boring, but the last part had my patrons screaming and shouting their heads off.” (Jensen, 143)

Lewton had hardly finished **Isle of the Dead** when Charles Koerner died of leukemia. His death in February 1945 left RKO in disarray and Lewton without an advocate. Karloff was interested in working with Lewton again, but first had to honor a promise to entertain troops in the Pacific for several months. When Karloff returned, Lewton had to compete for his services. Universal was offering Karloff a three-picture contract. “I came home and we went to the studio,” said Karloff, “and, to my horror, I found that the first film was a Frankenstein.” (Nollen, 162) He tried to be polite, but an unnamed producer forced the issue.

“Don’t ask me to feel sorry for you,” said the producer. “You can quit after your next picture. I have to keep making them.”

“But you’ll have to get another Monster,” smiled Karloff, ending the negotiations. (Berg)

Lewton could breathe a sigh of relief about Universal, but when he saw M-G-M’s **Picture of Dorian Gray**, he was envious. “We make horror films because we have to make them, and we make them for little money and fight every minute to make them right,” wrote Lewton. “Here’s a man who makes a bawdy horror story out of a classic, with no compulsion upon him to do so and with every facility that money and time can provide for the making of a good film. Mr. Lewin just hasn’t got it. He must be a poop.” (Siegel, “Letter to the Editor”)

With Robson again directing, Lewton got to work on **Chamber of Horrors**, a project inspired by Plate Eight of William Hogarth’s “The Rake’s Progress.” Karloff would portray Master Sims, an inhuman bureaucrat who runs the St. Mary of Bethlehem asylum (“Bedlam”). Nell Bowen (Anna Lee) is a rich man’s toy who comes to despise Sims for his treatment of the “loonies.” Her struggle to help them even as she is trapped with them forms the story that Robson cowrote with Lewton. “The stories of his pictures are not half so important as the experiments and innovative effects he tried,” said Robson, “and his ideas about shock and beauty in motion pictures.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 36)

Chamber of Horrors, ultimately called **Bedlam** (1946), had a slickness that belied its budget; it used standing sets from **The Bells of St. Mary’s** and a hand-me-down gown from **Gone with the Wind**. Lewton made the most of each set piece and Karloff threw himself into the part of Sims with gruesome relish, dishing out cruelty with a lisp and a smile. In one



scene, he makes his patients perform for the rich guests at a Vauxhall masque. After beating one lunatic (Glenn Vernon) into memorizing a sycophantic speech, he then paints him gold so he can portray Reason. The disoriented young man cannot recite his speech because his skin is starting to suffocate. When he collapses and dies, Sims makes obsequious jokes with the uncaring nobility.

“Boris used to get quite annoyed when people referred to it as a horror picture,” Lee remembered. “He said, ‘It’s not a horror picture. It’s a *historical* picture.’” (Banzak, 299) Karloff explained:

Horror too often is played for revulsion. Val used to say that the audience is the best actor in theater, if you give it a chance. Let the audience fill in the details, Val said. If you do everything for them, the power of the imagination doesn’t come into play. Suggest things. [They] need suggestions to stimulate their imaginations . . . Only outline the details. (Roman, 401)

The scenes in the asylum had contrasty images of stark white arms shooting out from opaque shadows and a soundtrack vibrant with the cacophony of madness. Together they conveyed the filth and misery of the notorious institution. Once again, Agee had praise for Lewton: “I think that few people in Hollywood show in their work that they know or care half as much about movies or human beings.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 82) As the 1946 film became yet another Lewton hit, Karloff was interviewed for a *Los Angeles Times* article titled “Farewell to Monsters.” In it, Louis Berg wrote a touching sentence: “Mr. Karloff has great love and respect for Mr. Lewton, as the man who rescued him from the living dead and restored, so to speak, his soul.” (Berg)

Perhaps some sort of transference had occurred between the two artists, because **Bedlam** was the beginning of the end for Val Lewton. “Pressure was placed upon him to get out of B pictures and into something better, something which Val never really wanted to do,” said Wise. “But he was not immune to the pressures of this town — more money, more status, the urgings of his agent. He was pushed out of his home at RKO and couldn’t deal with what he found elsewhere.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 83) In November 1946 Lewton suffered a heart attack. He then left RKO, and at one studio after another — Paramount, Metro, Universal — tried to make A films that would have the vitality of his Bs. “Fighting for what he wanted wore Val out, and failure to get it broke his heart,” said Napier. “He should have been an independent producer, [yet] he needed the protection of a big studio.” (Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi*, 276)

In the late 1940s the studio system — assaulted by the Supreme Court, hostile senators, and television — was beginning to sag under its own weight. Lewton had trouble playing the game when he knew the rules. Now, ignored by an industry that was making new rules, he grew despondent. He sat in a silent office, sometimes sobbing behind its closed door. “The whole aspect of such waiting is just too



corrosive,” Lewton wrote to his mother. “One even begins to doubt one’s own abilities.” (Siegel, *The Reality of Terror*, 93) Bodeen said, “I never knew anybody who was so desperately unhappy, who lost all faith in himself.” (Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi*, 278) If he had been able to hold out a bit longer, he might have benefited from the cataclysmic changes that were roiling the motion-picture industry, but he could not. Val Lewton suffered a second heart attack and died on March 13, 1951. He was forty-six years old.

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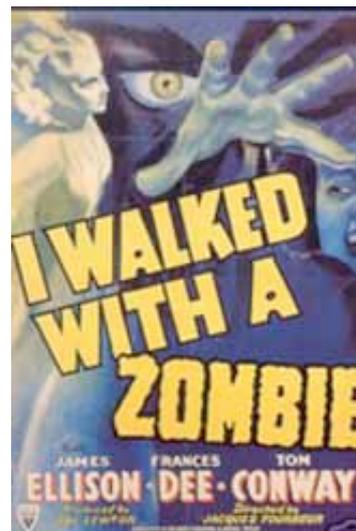
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NOTE: This article is reprinted from the author’s wonderful illustrated narrative history of horror and science-fiction from silent film to **2001**: [Hollywood Horror: From Gothic](#)



[to Cosmic](#) (New York: Harry Abrams, 2003) features many rare images, some of which are on view in this article. Reprinted with kind permission of the author.

ACCESS: The long-awaited Val Lewton DVD Box set containing all nine of his major films was released in October 2005 to widespread acclaim, not only for its quality transfers, but also for the wealth of extras, including such unexpected thrills as William Friedkin doing commentary on **The Leopard Man**. (Though we wish he hadn't consistently mispronounced Margo's character's name as "Clue-Clue"! It's Clo-Clo, Bill.)

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