

The Ghost Ship

USA | 1943 | 69 minutes

Credits

Director	Mark Robson
Screenplay	Donald Henderson Clarke Leo Mittler (story)
Photography	Nicholas Musuraca
Music	Roy Webb

Cast

Capt. Will Stone	Richard Dix
Tom Merriam	Russell Wade
Ellen Roberts	Edith Barrett
First Officer Bowns	Ben Bard

In Brief

Tom Merriam (Russell Wade) excitedly assumes his position as third officer on the freighter Altair. Captain Will Stone (Richard Dix) is a curious man who believes that the responsibility of command bestows extra-legal rights. Strange deaths aboard ship combined with Stone's erratic behavior make it clear to Tom that he's signed on to serve a psychopath.

The film immediately sets up an eerie atmosphere with an opening sequence that involves both a blind beggar and narration by a mute sailor. The acting is good, especially from Dix and Wade, but also from a solid supporting cast – look out for Sir Lancelot as a Trinidadian sailor. Nicholas Musuraca's photography is up to his usual standards, and Robson pulls off a couple of excellent sequences, notably the “accidental” death in the chain store. But in comparison to other Lewtons, even the somewhat maligned *Isle of the Dead* (also directed by Robson), the film seems underpowered. As you might expect for a film set mostly on board a working ship, it's an almost all-male affair, and is in fact the only Lewton horror film not to feature a woman in a leading role. Edith Barrett receives third billing for a short sequence set on dry land in the middle of the film, where she delivers a line that justifies the studio-imposed title: this is a metaphorical ghost ship rather than a literal one.

Along with *Mademoiselle Fifi*, *The Ghost Ship* is possibly the most neglected of Val Lewton's seminal series of RKO productions. Whilst not as atypical as *Fifi*, *The Ghost Ship*, as well as having been unavailable for a long time owing to legal problems, is set apart by a lack of any but the most finite of suggested supernatural presences, the absence of a genre star like Boris Karloff, and the fact that Mark Robson, in spite of his excellent work on *The Seventh Victim*, *Isle of the Dead*, and *Bedlam*, is generally the least celebrated of Lewton's three directorial prodigies. It stars Richard Dix, badly on the wane only twelve years after headlining the Oscar-winning *Cimarron*.

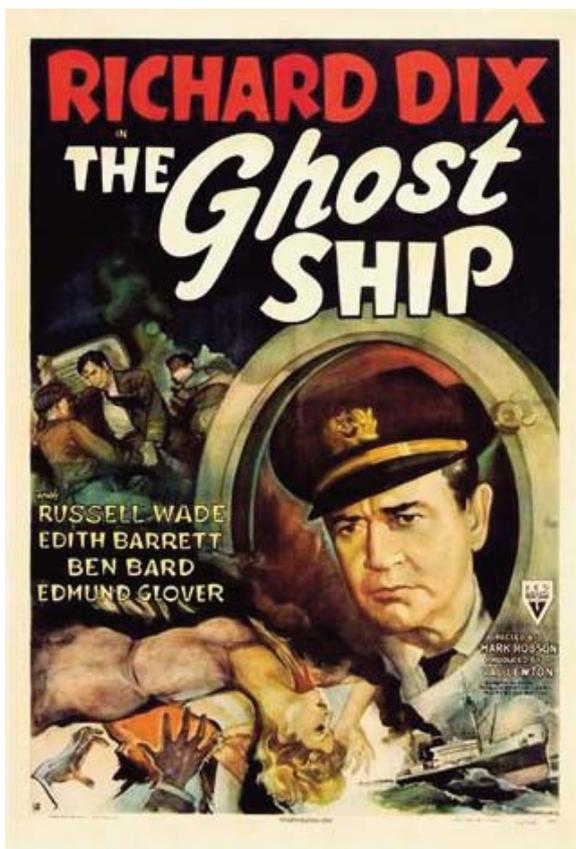
Does *The Ghost Ship* deserve its minor status? No. Although saddled with moments in the screenplay that over-literalise the inherent humanism of Lewton's sensibility, and surely not the best of the Lewton oeuvre, Robson's second film for Lewton sustains its resolutely simple story with rare cumulative force. Whilst the title sparks images of maritime gothic, Lewton and Robson offer a contemporary setting and a remarkably subtle construction of mood and tension, and build upon the remarkable note of drifting limbo first essayed in the shipboard scene of *I Walked With A Zombie*.

Dix plays Captain Stone, commander of a freighter, the *Altair*, who takes on a young, recent academy graduate Tom Merriam (Russell Wade) as his third officer, because his record reminds Stone of himself: an up-by-his-bootstraps orphan with talent and conscientious ambition. Merriam responds to Stone very much as an avuncular father figure at first, for Stone has a warm and reasonable affect that charms his crew. But the *Altair* has a reputation as an unlucky ship, a reputation which soon proves to be founded in fact, as lone crewmembers keep meeting grisly deaths. Merriam observes that Stone is given to playing odd games with his men's safety, as when he leaves a huge cargo hook untethered so that its paint job will dry neatly, which eventually requires the men to risk having their brains bashed out in securing it when a sea rises and the hook starts to dance like a great, impudent serpent on its chain.

Stone soon reveals to Merriam his fixation with “authority”, a deep-set psychological need to intrude his will upon men – to play not just commander but god. He kills men who stand up for themselves or presume upon him through artfully arranged accidents. When one man is crushed by an anchor chain after Stone has locked him in, Merriam recognises his game, and tries to alert the shipping company when they put in to a Caribbean port, but the inquiry that results fails to reveal any support from the men for Merriam's story. Merriam quits his post, but when he's knocked out defending one of the crew, Billy Radd (Sir Lancelot) in a bar fight, he's carried back aboard the ship, and soon realises that Stone plans to kill him after destroying him with mind games.



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Stone's maniacal fixation is described in plainly psychological terms, and yet it's also, like the villain of *The Leopard Man's* madness, a metaphor for fascist impulse and a Nietzschean nightmare, with Captain Stone explaining to Merriam that when in command of men, one has the right to take risks with those lives. His men, however, only perceive his patina of authority, even if they see through his falsely congenial, protective demeanour, and it's a fact Stone counts on, believing his authority to be a gift bestowed only on the exceptional. Merriam and Stone are locked in a deep mutual awareness stemming from their innate similarities, which first attracted them and then finally, destructively sets them in polarised antagonism. Merriam finally finds his only help on board to be the intellectual radio operator Jacob 'Sparks' Winslow (Edmund Glover) and Finn (Skelton Knaggs), a mute but preternaturally aware seaman who bides his time until the crucial moment.

Knaggs' character, like Sir Lancelot's in *I Walked With A Zombie*, serves as a kind of chorus for the tale, his innermost thoughts expressed in voiceover, and an almost otherworldly protecting presence for Wade, one whose silent awareness counterbalances the blind voice of fate that is the beggar who waits on the dock at the Altair's home port. For Merriam's soul is at stake in the drama: both Knaggs and Helen (Edith Barrett), Stone's long-time paramour, attempt to defend his innocence and keep him from becoming consumed by his misanthropy like Stone. Barrett (in a terrific performance; she also played the divided, self-consumed mother, a similar figure to Stone, in *Zombie*) tries one last time to coax Stone back to humanity when in port, telling him that she's finally secured the divorce that she's been unable to get for over a decade, that they can finally be married, but Stone knows he's too far gone to be saved by her now. She also promises to fix up Merriam with her sister, which is jolly nice of her.

Lewton tended to resent having stars imposed on him by the RKO chieftains, but he always took remarkable care then to tailor roles for those stars: the conception of Captain Stone, seemingly solid, dependable, friendly, yet oddly, subtly off-kilter, fits Dix as precisely as the parts Lewton conjured for Karloff and his altogether more immediately fearsome affect. Although Dix was anything but a great actor, he does remarkably well by the part, with his calm, seemingly avuncular way of reciting foreboding creeds and opinions, his lunacy steadily rising, and his impression of physical size and strength makes him a truly formidable psycho for Merriam to have hounding him. Wade, unfortunately, is as bland here as in *The Body Snatcher*.

Whilst many have noticed Lewton's films' casually anti-racist bent, this film sports perhaps the most explicit example, where Merriam intervenes to save Radd from white bullies, an act of selflessness that lands him back in the path of the murderous dictator figure: it's easy to miss because it's not emphasised in a self-congratulatory manner, but this moment lends a dash of specificity that strengthens the film's allegory of scapegoating, divide-and-rule authoritarianism. The final twenty minutes are superb in detailing Merriam's increasingly desperate, paranoid frustration in finding his cabin rigged to be vulnerable to any intruder, the crew refusing to listen to his entreaties, and Stone gloating over Merriam's inability to prove him a nefarious villain, indeed, having convinced everyone else that Merriam is himself a disturbed individual, before the truly, unnervingly physical confrontation of between hulking Dix and spidery Knaggs sees the embodied Dictator and Samaritan ideals fight to the death. Characteristically, rather than having blaring melodramatic music accompany this struggle, only one of Sir Lancelot's gentle shanties, being sung on the deck, scores the moment, lending it an hallucinatory incongruity. With many Lewton regular players (Lancelot, Barrett, Ben Bard) and the technical team at the height of their suggestive gifts, *The Ghost Ship* is the quietest of quiet successes.

- Dennis Schwartz

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