

= The Ghost Ship =

The Ghost Ship (1943) is an American black @-@ and @-@ white psychological thriller film , with elements of mystery and horror , directed by Mark Robson , starring Richard Dix and featuring Russell Wade , Edith Barrett , Ben Bard and Edmund Glover , along with Skelton Knaggs . It was produced by Val Lewton for RKO Radio Pictures as part of a series of low @-@ budget horror films . The film can be seen as a " low @-@ key psychological thriller " , a " suspense drama " , and a " waterlogged melodrama " .

The film is about a young merchant marine officer who begins to suspect that his ship 's captain is mentally unbalanced and endangering the lives of the ship 's crew . The ship 's crew , however , believes the vessel to be haunted and cursed and several mysterious deaths occur .

Upon its theatrical release on Christmas Eve , 1943 , the film was a box office success but received a mixed critical reception . However , in February 1944 , Lewton was sued for plagiarism by playwrights Samuel R. Golding and Norbert Faulkner , who claimed that the script was based on a play that was submitted to Lewton for a possible film . Because of the suit , The Ghost Ship was withdrawn from theatrical release and not shown for nearly 50 years . It was not until the film 's copyright was not renewed and it entered the public domain in the 1990s , that it began to be available again , and was released as part of the Val Lewton Horror Collection DVD set in 2005 . The film , with its predominantly male cast , has been argued by several film critics to have homosexual undertones .

It is in sharp contrast to the majority of patriotic wartime films , especially among the plethora of those that take place primarily on a ship , which usually feature themes such a brotherhood , respect for higher @-@ ranking officers , and able , hard working seamen .

= = Plot = =

Tom Merriam (Russell Wade) , a young merchant marine officer , joins the crew of the ship Altair . At first , all seems well and Merriam bonds with the captain , Will Stone (Richard Dix) . The ship , already shorthanded due to the death of a crew member before it left port , loses another (" the Greek ") when he develops appendicitis . (Taking direction over the ship 's radio , the captain is to perform the appendectomy , but he is unable to make the incision . Instead , Merriam successfully removes the sailor 's appendix , but ? feeling he should be loyal to the captain and spare him embarrassment ? swears the radio operator to secrecy . Afterward , the captain has a self @-@ serving explanation for his failure .)

One of the crew , Louie (an uncredited Lawrence Tierney) , tells the captain he should pull in to port and take on new crew . The captain says " You know , there are captains who might hold this against you , Louie . " Shortly after , the captain closes the hatch to the chain locker with Louie inside , and Louie is crushed to death by the chain . Merriam believes that Captain Stone , who is obsessed with authority , did it intentionally . When they dock at the fictional Caribbean island of " San Sebastian " (which had appeared in RKO 's I Walked with a Zombie ? another Lewton production ? and later in RKO 's Zombies on Broadway) , Merriam attempts to expose the Captain 's madness at a board of inquiry . The crew all speak favorably of the captain , including the Greek , who credits the captain with saving his life . Merriam states his intention to leave the Altair .

After the inquiry , the captain admits to a female friend (Edith Barrett , who had appeared in I Walked with a Zombie) that he fears he is losing his mind . Soon after , Merriam is involved in a fight in port and knocked unconscious . One of his former shipmates ? unaware that he has left the Altair ? brings the unconscious man back aboard ship before the vessel departs . Merriam wakes up on the ship and fears that the pathologically insane Captain Stone may now attempt to kill him , a fear that is only reinforced when the captain , referring to the young officer 's accusations , says " You know , Mr. Merriam , there are some captains who would hold this against you . "

Merriam , scorned by the crew , finds that he can no longer lock the door to his cabin . Fearing for his life , he tries to steal a gun from the ship 's weapons locker , but is confronted by Captain Stone . Stone dares Merriam to try to get the support of the crew , but Merriam is rebuffed in this effort . This

changes when Radioman Winslow (Edmund Glover) receives a radiogram asking if Merriam is on board , and Captain Stone orders Winslow to lie , replying that Merriam is not aboard . The radioman shows Merriam the captain 's reply radiogram and says that he now mistrusts the captain and will send a message to the company expressing his concerns about Stone 's mental health . However , as he leaves Merriam 's cabin , Winslow encounters the captain . As the two walk side @-@ by @-@ side , Winslow drops the captain 's radiogram to the deck , and it is picked up by an illiterate crewman , Finn the Mute (Skelton Knaggs) , whose internal monologues serve as a sort of one @-@ man Greek chorus throughout the film .

Captain Stone now orders Merriam to send a radio message to the corporate office advising them that Winslow has been washed overboard . Merriam accuses the captain of murdering Winslow , and the two fight . Crew members intervene , and the captain has the crew tie up Merriam and put him in his bunk . The captain then has First Officer Bowns (Ben Bard) administer a sedative to Merriam . Finn finally delivers the captain 's radiogram to Bowns , who can read . Bowns becomes deeply alarmed . The first officer talks to several other crew members , all of whom now begin questioning the captain 's sanity .

Captain Stone overhears Bowns ' conversation with the crew , and goes insane . He takes a knife and enters Merriam 's cabin to kill the young officer , but Finn arrives to try to stop him . While the crew is up on deck singing , Finn and the captain engage in a desperate struggle in the dark , during which Finn kills the captain . After the captain 's death , Merriam is reinstated and the ship returns to its home port of San Pedro .

= = Cast = =

= = Production = =

RKO had scored a major financial success with Cat People (1942) . The film , which cost \$ 141 @,@ 659 , brought in almost \$ 4 million in its first two years and saved the studio from financial disaster . RKO wanted to move quickly on a sequel to build on the success of Cat People , but producer Val Lewton wished to make the fantasy @-@ comedy story " The Amorous Ghost " instead . As Lewton and studio wrangled , Lewton commenced production on The Seventh Victim , a horror @-@ murder mystery film , and on May 12 , 1943 , RKO announced it was delaying production on the sequel The Curse of the Cat People due to the unavailability of key performers . RKO production chief Charles Koerner did not want Lewton to be idle once filming on The Seventh Victim ended nor did he favor the idea of Lewton working on comedy , so Koerner suggested that Lewton direct a horror film set at sea , utilizing the studio 's existing ship set , built for Pacific Liner (1939) . According to Robert Wise , a longtime collaborator with Lewton , it was this set that gave Lewton the idea for the film . " He would find what we call a ' standing set , ' and then tailor his script to the set , whatever it was . That 's how he made The Ghost Ship . He walked onto a set and saw a tanker , then cooked up the idea for this ship with a murderous captain . " One scholar has suggested that Lewton accepted the assignment in part because , as an amateur sailor himself , the ship captain 's behavior mirrored Lewton 's own views on how to manage a ship , but also because Lewton saw the plot as a way of criticizing his micro @-@ managing superiors at RKO . The budget , as with all of Lewton 's films , was set at \$ 150 @,@ 000 .

At the time screenwriting began , Lewton claimed that the idea for the film was an original one attributable to himself . Leo Mittler did the treatment and Donald Henderson Clarke wrote the script , although Lewton significantly revised the screenplay and wrote many lines of dialogue himself .

Mark Robson was assigned to direct in June 1943 . Robson was the RKO director " most in tune with [Lewton 's] idea of psychological terror " . Robson had just finished editing Orson Welles ' Journey Into Fear , and there are distinct stylistic similarities between the two films . Robson and Lewton chose to use single @-@ source lighting throughout the film in order to make the sets and performances more interesting , and sets were designed to utilize this type of lighting . The two men also agreed to continue Lewton 's emphasis on unseen and implied terror . Cinematographer

Nicholas Musuraca , art directors Albert S. D 'Agostino and Walter E. Keller , and composer Roy Webb all regularly worked with Lewton , and did so on The Ghost Ship as well . Richard Dix was cast because he was already on contract with RKO to do several " quickie " pictures at a set fee per film , and doing The Ghost Ship would help fulfill his contract without much effort . Russell Wade had provided a disembodied voice in The Leopard Man , and this was his first starring role in a Lewton production . His performance here led him to be cast in Lewton 's later The Body Snatcher (1945) . Edith Barrett , Ben Bard , Dewey Robinson , and Charles Lung all had worked with Lewton before . Skelton Knaggs , Edmund Glover , and future film noir star Lawrence Tierney , whom Lewton had seen modeling clothing in a Sears , Roebuck catalog , all made their motion picture debuts in the movie . Sir Lancelot , a well @-@ known calypso singer , who later influenced the career of Harry Belafonte) , had already appeared in singing roles in three prior films (including I Walked with a Zombie) . Atmosphere is created in the film by the contrast between murder and the joviality of the calypso songs sung on board .

Production began on 3 August 1943 . Many details about the performances , lighting , camera angles , action , and effects were worked out ahead of time in order to not only keep the film under budget but also help achieve suspense on such a low budget . Dr. Jared Criswell , former pastor of the Fifth Avenue Spiritualist Church of New York City , served as a technical consultant on the film regarding psychic phenomena . The picture 's final fight scene between the Finn , Pollo , and the mad Captain was shot on a dimly lit set to heighten the suspense and keep the audience from guessing who the victor might be , similar to the way Jacques Tourneur and Lewton had shot a similar scene in Cat People .

= = Release and lawsuit = =

The film was released in theaters on Christmas Eve , 1943 . The poster art was most likely painted by William Rose . The film did well at the box office until Lewton was sued for plagiarism in February 1944 by playwrights Samuel R. Golding and Norbert Faulkner , who claimed that the script was based on a play that was submitted to Lewton for a possible film . Because of the suit , The Ghost Ship was withdrawn from theatrical release . Lewton disputed the claim , but the court ruled against him . RKO paid the authors \$ 25 @,@ 000 in damages and attorney fees of \$ 5 @,@ 000 , and lost all future booking residuals and the right to sell the film for airing on television . Elliot Lavine , a film historian , says that losing the lawsuit deeply disturbed Lewton , leaving him depressed for a significant period of time .

The film did not see release for nearly another 50 years due to the suit . The Ghost Ship did make it into a package of RKO films sold by " C & C Television Films " to local TV stations , but it was quickly withdrawn . It was not until the film 's copyright was not renewed and it entered the public domain in the 1990s , that it began to be available again . The film was released as part of the Val Lewton Horror Collection DVD set in 2005 .

= = Reception = =

At the time of its initial release , the film had a mixed reception , with both positive and negative reviews . Bosley Crowther of the New York Times enjoyed the film , calling it " ... a nice little package of morbidity , all wrapped around in gloom . " Paul Meehan calls it " a tepid potboiler of malfeasance and murder on the high seas . " John Brosnan described The Ghost Ship as " a more conventional mystery @-@ thriller involving a number of deaths on board a ship , but was produced with Lewton 's customary attention to atmosphere . " The script has come in for significant praise , with Captain Stone being compared to Captain Queeg in The Caine Mutiny , Captain Ahab in Moby @-@ Dick , and Captain Wolf Larsen in The Sea @-@ Wolf . Other critics have pointed out that Stone and Merriam seem to have a father @-@ son relationship , but that the perverseness of the script is that the father @-@ figure becomes so enraged at his " son 's " failings that he seeks to murder him .

Modern film critics have also praised the picture 's acting , cinematography , and lighting , as well

as its ability to scare . Actor Richard Dix is almost uniformly praised for bringing a depth of character , moodiness , and pathos to the role of Captain Stone . The film 's direction , cinematography and lighting , too , display a depth of artistry not usually seen in cinema . Cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca won high praise for his chiaroscuro lighting design . Film historian Edmund Bansak has written one scene in particular which is highly effective :

An excellent set @-@ piece early in the film showcases Robson 's underrated directorial skill . Robson creates a dynamic sense of menace from a physical object : a massive giant hook hanging from upon an enormous chain , pendulumlike , inches above the deck [The] hook remains unattended and unsecured In a tightly directed , genuinely exciting scene , the monstrous hook sways back and forth in a direct path toward the camera , making one wonder how cinematographer , Nicholas Musuraca , kept his camera (and head) intact during the shooting The lighting is also used to great advantage , the shadows and fog accenting the terror . Half the time the swinging hook is so hidden in the darkness that aside from the creak of its sway , there is no telling which direction it will take .

The set design , too , has been praised for being " suitably claustrophobic . " Robson 's direction has earned kudos for heightening the suspense by leaving certain actions and motives vague . In the scene in which Seaman Parker (Lawrence Tierney) dies , crushed by the anchor chain , Robson left it unclear whether Captain Stone committed murder by trapping Parker in the anchor chain locker or whether he merely shut the door . The vagueness leaves the audience unsure whether to believe Merriam 's accusations against the Captain , and builds an atmosphere of paranoia and doubt which is critical to the picture 's success . Contemporary critic Gary Giddins has pointed out that the film incorporates classic Lewton scare tactics but in new ways . " His trademark scare tactic , a high point in practically all of his films , is a long , dark , nightmarish walk , where every sound is magnified and every object threatening . In *The Ghost Ship* , that " walk " is transferred to the cabin of the victimized third officer ... " Others have pointed out another Lewton device , the gradual stalking of a main character by a murderer , as another deft touch in the film .

Modern critics have also pointed out that the film , unlike so many motion pictures of the 1940s , has an almost exclusively male cast and avoids the trope of a man " redeemed by the love of a good woman . " The picture is " entirely concerned with male conflict " , one critic noted , and at the end of the film a woman appears only in shadow and fog " as the possibility of salvation " rather than bringing emotional closure . Other film critics have made sustained arguments that the film is a lengthy if coded study of repressed homosexuality , similar to that in Herman Melville 's novel , *Billy Budd* . Indeed , the focus on men and men 's problems has led one modern critic to declare the film " one of the most homoerotic films Hollywood ever made . "

Contemporary film programmers seem to have a high opinion of the film as well . A 1993 Film Forum series , " Val Lewton : Horror Most Noir " , screened *The Ghost Ship* 42 times , while *I Walked With A Zombie* screened only 10 times and *Cat People* a mere eight . Film director Alison Maclean chose *The Ghost Ship* for a retrospective of classic RKO films , arguing that the film was " genuinely eccentric " and a cinematic revelation . When *The Ghost Ship* was shown on French cable television in the late 1990s , it was introduced as a prime example of Val Lewton 's genius at presenting " unseen horror . "