



History of 3-D

Part One: The Best... The Making of House of Wax

When Arch Oboler's low-budget 3D jungle adventure, *Bwana Devil*, burst out of movie theatre screens in late 1952 and caused a box office sensation, it was predictable that other studios should sit up and take notice of the United Artists release. Warner Brothers, who had pioneered the use of sound in the late 20s, saw in the 3D medium an opportunity to try to regain some of the ground lost to television.

Studio head Jack Warner was keen to have Andre de Toth direct the company's first 3D outing. De Toth, a solid craftsman with a reputation for bringing films in on time and budget, had

professed his belief in the 3D process in an article for *Variety* in 1956.

Choosing a subject for the feature also posed little problem. The science fiction boom was underway and with it, a revival in the popularity of horror films. In 1933 Warners had a minor success with Michael Curtiz' *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, an uneasy blend of barnstorming horror (a la Warner's previous success *Dr X*) and crude comic relief. It told the story of a mad waxworks owner (played by Lionel Atwill at his overblown best) who builds his displays using corpses covered in molten wax. He's also badly scarred from an earlier conflagration and disguises himself with a wax replica of his own face. This interesting, if simple plot, based on a story outline by Charles Belden was worked up into a full screenplay by Carl Erickson and Don Mullaly.

But speed was of the essence, as far as Warner was concerned, for his studio wasn't the only one keen to get the next 3D movie on the market. Harry Cohn's cut-rate Columbia set up was readying their own 3D entry; a hastily re-written "flatty" called *Man in the Dark*. Screenwriter Crane Wilbur was given the job of re-shaping the Mullaly and Erickson script, now to be called *The Wax Works*. Wilbur did little to the original, other than combining some characters and bringing the 30s dialogue up to date for its supposed "period" setting.

The decision was made to shoot the

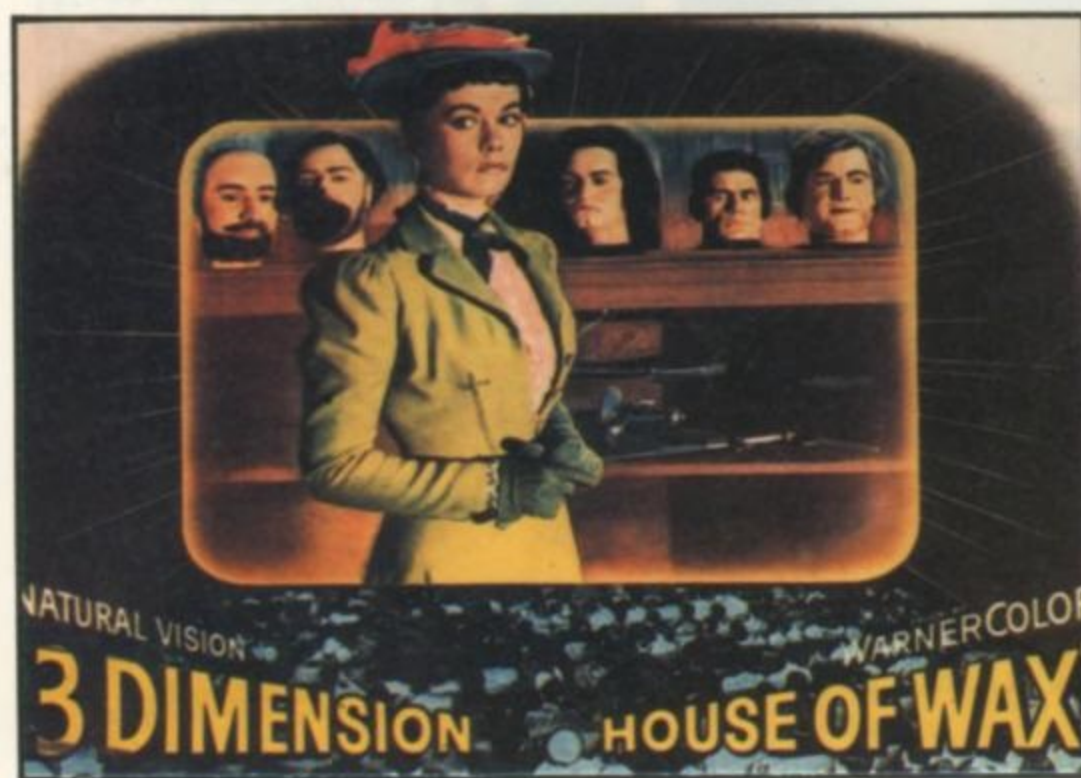
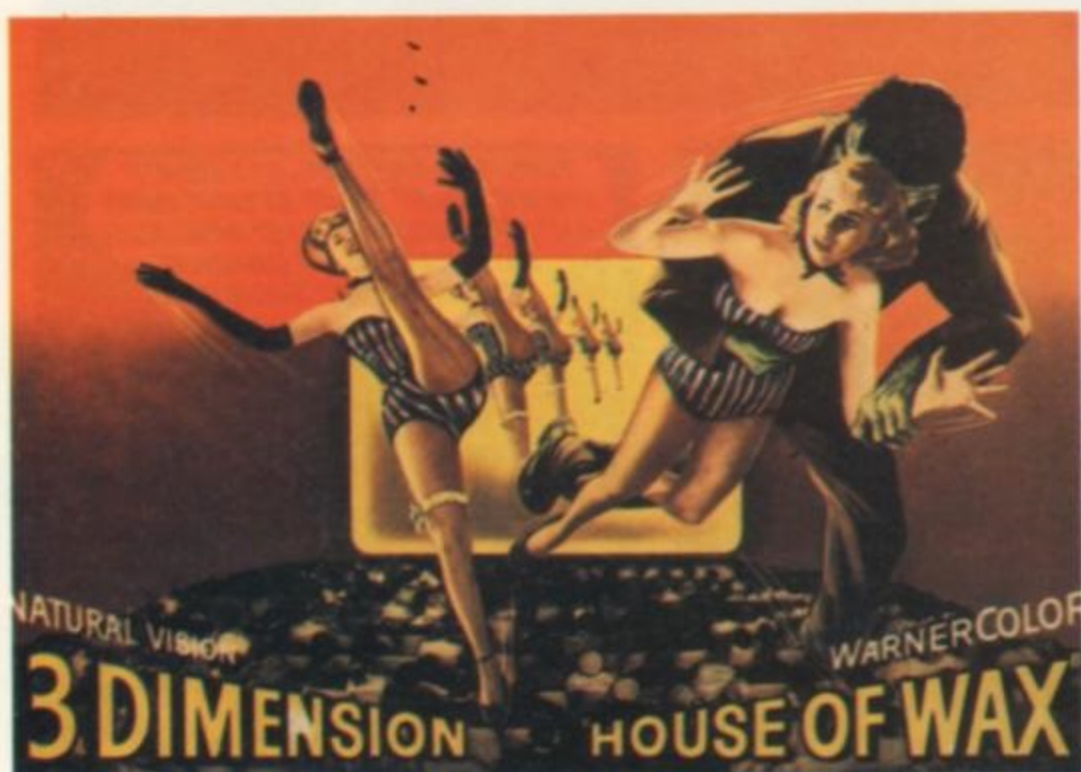
film in the Natural Vision 3D process (a two camera system) and Warnercolor, and the film went into active production on 19th January, 1953. By the time shooting was completed a scant 28 days later, it had a new title – *House of Wax*.

A small irony in the hiring of de Toth was the fact that he only has one eye and therefore was unable to perceive depth himself. But the Hungarian-American director understood a point that so many later 3D productions missed. "It (3D) can combine all the forces, all the possibilities of the motion picture and the theatre. It's not to throw things at you but to involve the audience. Instead of showing it (the story) to an audience, make them part of it; the feeling, the experience."

For the old Lionel Atwill role, de Toth chose Vincent Price whom, the director would later note, "... was absolutely superb. Never missed a minute. A real pro." Up till *House of Wax* Price had been usually cast in character parts, occasionally of a villainous nature. But with the success of *House of Wax*, all that changed and Price found himself on a road which would lead him into a multitude of horror and fantasy roles, right up to the present day. Oddly enough, the actor maintains that *House of Wax* is the only "real" horror film he's made. There are, I'm sure, millions of moviegoers who would dispute that.

To support him in his bravura dual role, de Toth cast Frank Lovejoy as the cop investigating the series of strange

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murders which are somehow linked to the wax-works; Phyllis Kirk as the nervous heroine pursued by the mysterious, limping killer; Paul Picerni as a young sculptor and romantic interest for Kirk and the late Carolyn Jones in a small and effectively scatty performance as Kirk's roommate and early victim of the killer. Charles Bronson (then Buchinsky) also appeared as Price's mute/brute assistant.

De Toth may not have been able to "see" 3D, but he understood it and, for the most part, *House of Wax* is free of gimmicks. The major exceptions to this are the Can Can sequence (featured on the original posters oddly enough, considering it's a horror film) and the famous pin-pong-paddle busker, inviting passersby (and the cinema audience) into the wax museum. Price, in character, even says of this gimmick, "Crude but effective.", obviously speaking for de Toth. Otherwise, the feature employs the 3D gimmick to enhance the action, not stop it as was so often the case in later dimensional outings.

One of the most spectacular sequences occurs early in the film when Price's original waxworks is destroyed by fire by his unscrupulous partner. A variety of historical (and non-macabre) wax exhibits were sculptured by Katharine Stubergh and her daughter who were Burbank-based artists. De Toth had three of the bulky Natural Vision cameras set up to record the inferno, the idea being

to start with small fires on the spacious set. But the fire almost got out of control, resulting in a hole being burnt in the studio roof and Vincent Price suffering from singed eye-brows. But the risks seems almost worth it on viewing the completed sequence. The burning of the wax figures, their faces appear to run out of the 3D screen, has a genuinely eerie quality and the scene is rightfully regarded as one of the finest of sustained horror in the genre.

House of Wax is superior in almost every way to *Mystery of the Wax Museum* and a good example of this is the sequence in which Phyllis Kirk smashes Price's "wax" face still carries a punch, despite the fact that we have been treated to several shots of Gordon Bau's superb make-up throughout the film.

House of Wax completed production on February 20th, 1953 at a budget of \$680,000. The Warner Brothers publicity machine went into action, advertising the movie as being in 3D Natural Vision, Warnercolor and Warnersound. The latter was a form of stereo sound consisting of three magnetic tracks (for broadcast behind the screen) and a "surround sound" optical track. This addition, apart from bumping up the shock value of sound effects also made the most of David Buttolph's rousing and atmospheric score.

For the British publicity campaign, the local distributors (also Warners) suggested a series of stunts to tie in with

the film's release. For example, there was a series of cartoon teaser ads to foster art school competitions. Other ideas included hiring a local barker to demonstrate the "fly-back paddles" seen in the film or "team up with your local waxworks" to present foyer displays.

House of Wax premiered April 10th, 1953 in New York. Six days later it opened in Los Angeles at a special "Premathon", cramming 12 screenings into 24 hours. Although Columbia's *Man in the Dark* beat *House of Wax* into theatres by a couple of days, nothing could detract from the Andre de Toth horror show. The British press echoed their American counterparts: "The best 3D film yet." – *The People*; "... a spine tingling experience." – *News of the World*; "Quite outstanding entertainment." – *What's On*.

With the end of the 3D boom, *House of Wax* slipped into semi-obscurity, at least in its dimensional presentation, though it would become a regular on American television. It was successfully shown in 3D at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood in 1971 and was again reissued in 1982, with a new ad campaign, to capitalise on the current 3D explosion.

No doubt, when another 3D revival rolls around (at my guess in the mid-1990s, but probably then with the addition of holographic techniques), *House of Wax* will once again be trotted out from the archives. You can't, after all, keep a classic down! ■



3-D: The Early Days

Part Two: The Rest... It Came From Outer Space to Revenge of the Creature



It Came From Outer Space, along with *Creature From the Black Lagoon* and *House of Wax* forms a triumvirate of the best 3D movies of the 50s. It's the story of a do-it-yourself astronomer (Richard Carlson) who witnesses a UFO (in this case, what looks like a giant flying flaming golf ball) land. But of course, no one will believe him, least of all Charles Drake, the local sheriff who still carries a torch for Carlson's girlfriend, Barbara Rush. *ICFOS* is too well known by most people to warrant detailed plot outlines (see my feature on Jack Arnold in *Starburst 25*), but it is worth noting that the movie is one of several 50s films on which Steven Spielberg drew for the inspiration of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Harry Essex' script, from a Ray Bradbury story, is very much pedestrian, B-movie standard, although Richard Carlson manages to invest his lines with something approaching a sense of wide-eyed conviction. But the real star of the movie, as has been noted by every film journalist since John Baxter in his *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (1968), is the Californian desert (both real and studio) locale — Jack Arnold's Alien Earth.

One of the pleasures of *ICFOS* is that it's a fine entertainment, even in its "flat" version. But the art direction of Bernard Herzbron and Robert Boyle fairly leaps to life with Cliff Stine's 3D monochrome, polarised photography. First run prints of *ICFOS* were tinted sepia, presumably as an added gimmick and supposedly to reduce the eye strain occasioned by dimensional presentation.

Arnold wisely decided to underplay the 3D gimmicks for *ICFOS* and instead to use it as enhancement of key scenes in the film — most spectacularly with the fiery flying golfball (shown twice in the opening five minutes) and the rock slide which buries the UFO from sight after it lands. At the movie's premiere in Los Angeles, on May 27, 1953, the theatre proscenium was rigged with styrofoam boulders which were unleashed from above on the unsuspecting and already excited audience. Good old-fashioned showmanship — where are you today?

It Came From Outer Space cleaned up at the box office, becoming Number One film for a short time, knocking the 3D western *Fort Ti* out of first place after it had replaced *House of Wax*.

3D was booming, with some studios even announcing that *all* their future features would be in the dimensional process. The 3D gimmick was ripe for exploitation and in 1953 alone there were 32 features and 30 short subjects — from cartoons to travelogues — released in the process.



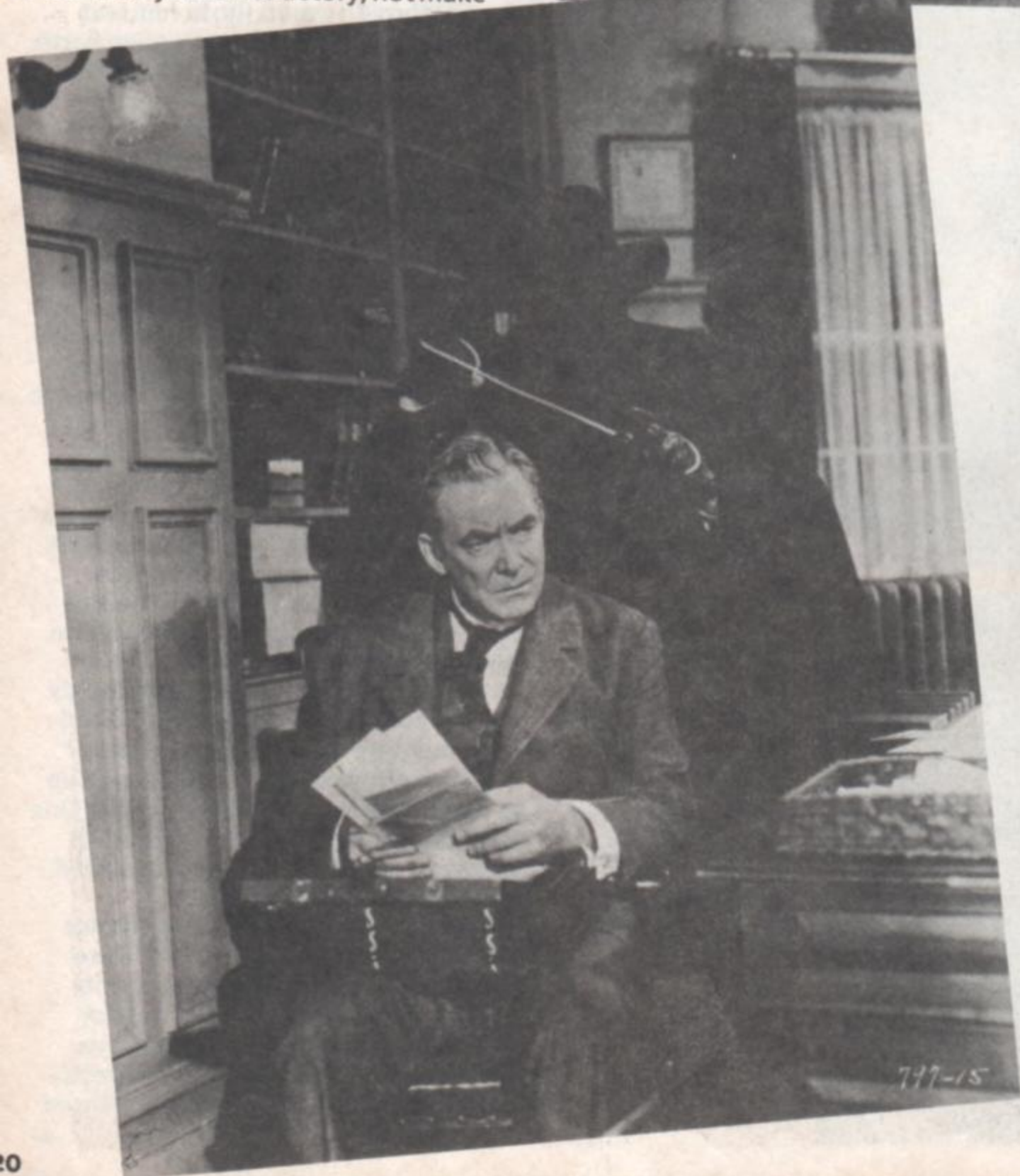
Top: This group of B-movie actors strike a dramatic pose when they discover *It Came from Outer Space*. Above: Director Andre de Toth confers with Phyllis Kirk on the Waxwork Museum set of *House of Wax*. Left: The front of house display at the Warner Rendezvous for *Phantom of the Rue Morgue* on its initial release in 1954.

Phil Tucker's *Robot Monster* came and went with little more than a whimper and a barrel of laughs in 1953. Its two-bit story of alien invasion was only topped by its two-bit effects – a man in a gorilla suit and diving helmet provided the thrills and 3D added nothing. It wasn't until Michael Medved's lionisation of this lost piece of dreck in the *Golden Turkey Awards* and the *Fifty Worst Films of All Time* books, that *Robot Monster* is remembered at all today – as one of the most lamentable inept films ever made.

Allied Artist's *The Maze*, also released in '53, was directed by William Cameron Menzies, who the same year lensed the cult favourite *Invaders From Mars* – a film not actually shot in 3D but often credited as being in the process.

Shot in B&W polarised 3D, *The Maze* displays none of Menzies' talent in the design department, although he also acted as art director on the film. It's one of those "something in the attic" sub-genre movies and the revelation of the semi-human frog creature is quite well executed. There's a slightly Lovecraftian edge to the story, although I think it's safe to assume that this is purely coincidental. Richard Carlson is as wooden as ever and the 3D effects are heavy-handed, adding little to the low impact level of the film.

Cat Women of the Moon may have a score by a budding Elmer Bernstein, but the Astor release has little else to recommend it, not even Sonny Tufts. As usual, the producers failed to realise that 3D could only enhance a story, not make



a bad picture better. But then it's not likely that the producers of *Cat Women of the Moon* wanted more out of the movie than a fast buck.

The next 3D fantasy feature to see release was *Creature From the Black Lagoon*. Universal-International once more turned to Jack Arnold to helm a Harry Essex script which was co-authored by Arthur Ross. As with *It Came From Outer Space*, Arnold used 3D to add to the interesting, and in the case of *The Creature*, more original story. While the 3D set-pieces are indeed spectacular – spearguns fired point blank at the camera; the Creature appearing from the bottom of the frame, en relief, and the much written about underwater "love ballet" performed by the Gill Man, with Julia Adams as his unwitting partner – the film remains an entertaining blend of science fiction and horror (primordial monster sub-genre) when seen flat. The film was also the first 3D feature to have its double dimensional image printed on a single strip of celluloid, instead of the often troublesome two strips previously required.

The Creature From the Black Lagoon was a monster hit in both senses of the word. It gave Universal a bona fide and classic addition to their rogues gallery started by *Dracula* and the *Frankenstein Monster* in the early 30s. It also went to the top of the 3D grossers and spawned two sequels, of which the first ended the 3D craze of the 50s.



Far left: This man is about to have a Glose Encounter with a tall, dark strangler in *House of Wax*. Left: Way before *E.T.* ever had his adventure on Earth these scientists met the equally loveable alien, Gog. Above: Opening night at the London Pavillion for Jack Arnold's *It Came from Outer Space*. Below: Phyllis Kirk (as Sue Allen) is menaced by a monstrous shadow in *House of Wax*.

in polarised B&W, had little to offer, other than the Merchant of Menace's eye-rolling. Surprisingly, John Brahm's direction is uninspired and contains little of the fine atmosphere he brought to his other genre pieces, *The Undying Monster* (1942) *The Lodger* and *Hanover Square* (both 1944). It's interesting to note that the latter bears a certain resemblance to *The Mad Magician*, in the story department.

The Mad Magician proved a minor success, but by this time the writing was on the wall as far as 3D was concerned. Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M For Murder* was shot dimensionally but held back and released flat, after only a couple of screenings in relief. Its recent 3D resurrection has proved that Hitchcock was one of the few directors who went to the trouble to research the medium and make the most of it in a couple of startling scenes. Primarily the famous image, used on the poster art, of Grace Kelly reaching out from the screen for the scissors with which she kills her attacker.

20th Century-Fox's 1954 3D entry was *Gorilla At Large*, an obvious attempt to cash in on *Phantom of the Rue Morgue*. Once again, it looks like a killer gorilla is on the loose, this time in a seedy carnival. Harmon Jones' direction is mundane and there's stolid performances from Lee J. Cobb, Lee Marvin and Cameron Mitchell which further sink the film to the depths of mediocrity. The prime 3D gag in the movie was a high wire act and the usual ape in your lap. The thinking behind the ►

On the other side of town, Warner Brothers were keen to duplicate the success they had experienced with *House of Wax*. While it repeated some of the more atmospheric elements of the de Toth classic, such as fog-shrouded streets at the turn of the Century and a mysterious killer on the loose, *The Phantom of the Rue Morgue* must be considered something of an also-ran in the history of 3D fantasy.

Based on Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, it had already been filmed under that title in 1932, in an erotic S&M crazyhouse style by Robert Florey. *Phantom of the Rue Morgue*, under Roy del Ruth's pedestrian direction of Harold Medford and James Webb's script, makes the movie little more than a period detective yarn. Despite this, the film contains a couple of scenes neatly executed for the 3D cameras. In one, a body suddenly drops into view from under a chimney. In another there's a spectacular acrobatics sequence in which the police discover that they are dealing with something non-human.

The dull performances of Karl Malden (the closest equivalent to the Bela Lugosi character in the original), Claude Dauphin and Steve Forrest also go some way in adding to the plodding picture, although Charles Gemora puts in a lively appearance as the phantom/ape.

Over at Columbia, Harry Cohn had contracted Vincent Price for their effort to capture the *House of Wax* crowd. *The Mad Magician*, at a short 73 minutes and



latter being that there was more longevity for a flat colour film than a black and white one on the re-release circuits. For Hollywood knew that the 3D boom was about to go bust.

Fox had released *The Robe* in 1953 in an attempt to capture audiences with something that television couldn't offer – a huge screen. In many ways the development of the CinemaScope anamorphic lenses was also an attempt to create a more manageable form of the very popular but troublesome three screen Cinerama. Television, still very much the villain of Tinseltown, was gaining audiences hand over fist and as a result forced Hollywood into technical advancements after years of complacency since the introduction of sound. It might be labouring the point, but it must be said: the rise of video is responsible for the current boom in 3D and the continued success of the megabuck special effects films.

Son of Sinbad, from RKO (made in 1954 and released the following year) barely rates as a fantasy. But its gaudy Arabian Nights setting and Dale Robertson's derring-do (at least he *tries*) along with Vincent Price's villainies, give

Son of Sinbad at least a patina of fantasy. Ted Tetzlaff's direction is sprightly and the colour design is simply outrageous, benefitting from 3D.

Another 1954 entry was the (recently deceased) Ivan Tors production for United Artists, *GOG*. Shot in polarised 3D and colour, it told the story of a rogue computer and its remote controlled killer robots. From all reports (I haven't seen the movie) it's a brisk little film, reasonably well-acted, with a tight plot and good special effects.

The following year, 1955, the bell tolled for the 3D phenomenon. Movie screens the size of aircraft carriers were being installed in theatres all over the world. CinemaScope had won the day with their simple but spectacular invention. All the problems of projecting 3D were gone, for where those films had to be constantly watched and kept in alignment and duplicate splices made in the two separate film strips whenever a sprocket hole tore. (The switch from Standard Academy to 'Scope was a relatively simple one. The aperture plate had to be changed and the special anamorphic lens locked into place and a normal arc projector became a

CinemaScope machine.)

Revenge of the Creature, from Universal-International, was only a fair sequel to the enormously successful *Creature From the Black Lagoon*. Jack Arnold again directed although the movie was little more than a violent exploitation feature. There's little attempt to use the 3D process in the thoughtful way it had been in the original. The witless script doesn't help, nor Joe Gershenson's strident musical score. There's a vague try at instilling the Creature with a modicum of sympathy, particularly in the scenes at Marineland and some interest is generated by having the Gill Man in an urban rather than primitive environment, but for the most part *Revenge of the Creature* is little more than thick-eared monster on the loose formula.

Although *Revenge of the Creature* was no megahit, it did return enough of the investment to warrant a further sequel, although by this time there were no apologies – *Creature Walks Among Us* is definitely B-minus quality. Released in 1956 it was shot in B&W and more importantly, flat.

For fantasy films in 3D, at least, it was the end of an era. ■

Right: Patricia Medina is terrorised by a pair of hairy arms belonging to the Phantom of the Rue Morgue. Far right: "Is she alright?" She certainly is, but these guys won't be after they suffer the *Revenge of the Creature*. Below: A gripping scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*.



3D IN THE 60s AND 70s

Feature by Phil Edwards

1960 saw a slight revival in 3D with the release of Fox's *September Storm*. Warner Brothers, perhaps seeing a chance to duplicate their *House of Wax* success of 1953, picked up the independent Beaver-Champion Canadian production *The Mask* (released in the UK as *Eyes of Hell*). The film is about an ancient mask which, when worn, plunges the wearer (and the audience, wearing red/green anaglyph masks of their own) into his subconscious and 3D. There's not a lot to recommend *The Mask*, apart from the three, five minute 3D sections. For the most part it's pretty unwatchable.

There was little activity in the 3D field until 1966 when Arch Oboler released *The Bubble*, a partial "depth" about alien invasion. A dull and overlong (112 minutes) movie, it failed to stir up much interest in that form or a later 1976 reissue under the title, *The Fantastic Invasion of Planet Earth*.

Although made in 1967, *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* (aka *Mark of the Wolfman*) didn't see release outside of its native Spain until 1972. Directed by Enrique L. Egulius and starring the prolific Paul Naschy, the film would appear to have little to recommend it other than the curiosity value: what would a 133 minute, low budget, 70mm, stereophonic and 3D monster movie be like? Don Willis, in his invaluable *Horror & Science Fiction Films* (Volume 1), sums it up succinctly – "Very bad."

Asylum of the Insane turned up in 1977, though probably wasn't released till '73, if even then. There's little information available on this production, other than what appears in Walt Lee's *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films* (1974) – a Lion/Dog Films production for Regal International release, produced and directed by Donn Davison. I think it's safe to assume that *Asylum of the Insane* added little to the horror genre or the history of 3D.

In 1974 Paul Morrissey directed *Flesh for Frankenstein* under the auspices of Andy Warhol. Shot in startling and often blood-drenched polarised 3D, the movie caused something of a sensation for its *outré* shock effects and seeming perversion of the classic Frankenstein story.

It would be another seven years before 3D would once more leap into the public lap.

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