

House of Wax

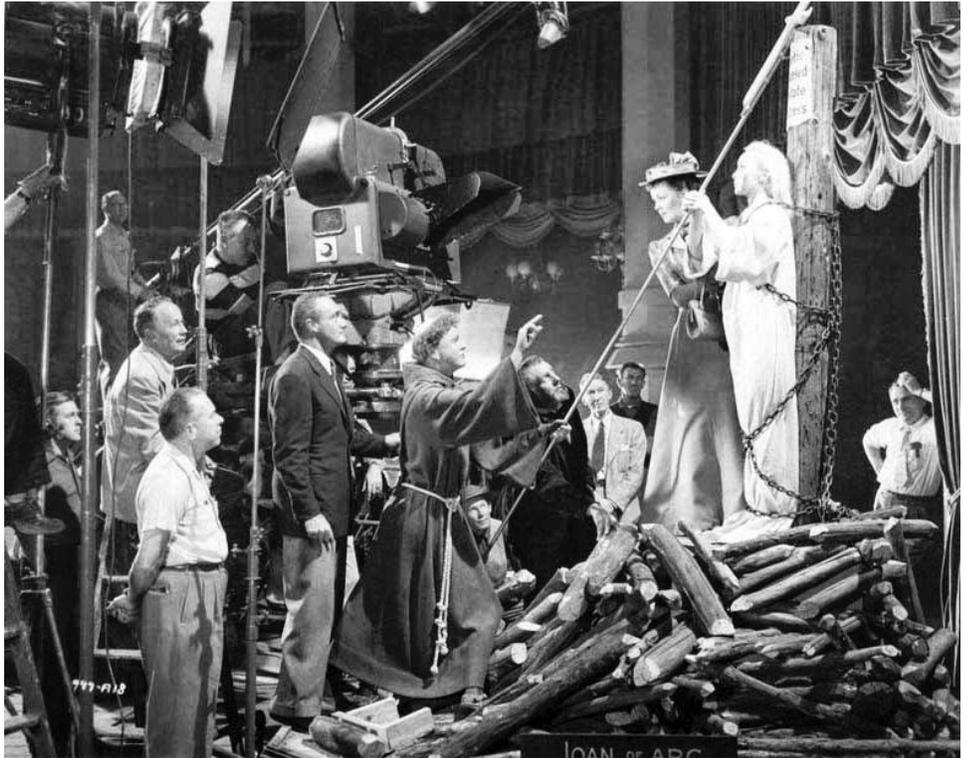
By Jack Theakston

Hollywood was in trouble in the 1950s. The Hollywood Anti-trust Case of 1948 severed the movie studios from their parent theater chains. Attendance dropped by tens of millions after a banner period between 1946 and 1948. That same year, a newly growing medium—television—was beginning to appear in many American households.

If great storytelling wasn't going to save the industry, the very thing working against it would—technology. A couple of veteran cameramen were spending the winter and spring of 1951 out of work and tinkering on a new idea—an easy-to-operate stereo movie camera that could reproduce the same interocular movement as that of the human eyes. Lothrop Worth was an out-of-work camera operator feeling the recession, as was Friend Baker, cinematographer-turned-studio camera doctor. The two teamed with Milton Gunzberg, a Hollywood screenwriter with some interest, and his Beverly Hills ophthalmologist brother, Julian, forming the Natural Vision Corporation.

The first Natural Vision test films were shot in 16mm and were shopped around Hollywood. No one was interested. Twentieth Century Fox executive produced Darryl F. Zanuck famously turned it down because he felt that no audience would stand the glasses. Zanuck was proven wrong when Natural Vision's last hope, radio producer Arch Oboler, decided to take a chance and use the process on his next picture, "The Lions of Gulu." Natural Vision tooled the first of several 35mm versions of the rig for the production. Re-titled "Bwana Devil," the film premiered in November 1952.

The critical reception to the film was almost unanimous—it stunk. But as is frequently the case, it was the film that the critics hated and the public loved. The film was a box-office smash across the country. Jack Warner of Warner Bros. recognized the potential. The company that had pioneered sound and color would blaze trails in film's next frontiers—stereoscopic photography and stereophonic sound.



Technicians prepare to film a scene from Warner Bros.' "House of Wax," the first feature shot by a major studio in 3D. Courtesy Jack Theakston.

No time was wasted for an agreement with Natural Vision to be worked out on a two-picture deal.

The selection of the first script was an interesting one—a horror story by Charles Belden called "The Wax Works" that had been made as "The Mystery of the Wax Museum" twenty years previously. Like the new Natural Vision production, "Mystery" was a pioneer feature in another technological technique—the new Technicolor system, which at that time only exposed red and green color records. Although strictly of the horror pedigree, "Mystery of the Wax Museum" played up the mystery and sex angles in its pre-code advertising campaign. Taking a chance on a horror film, considered up until that point to be mainly 'B' movie fodder, was risky.

Filming began under the working title of "The Wax Works" on January 19, 1953. One might think that hiring a director with monocular vision for a stereoscopic film would be a rather unusual choice, but as the film's director André De Toth put it in an interview with "Time" magazine, "Beethoven couldn't hear music either, could he?" Even more surprising, de Toth would go on to direct two more 3-D films.

The star of the film, Vincent Price, had previously specialized in character parts—foppish playboys, moustache-twirling antagonists, and costume roles. He'd dabbled in horror films a few times—in

Universal's "The Invisible Man Returns," and borderline titles like "Tower of London," "Shock," and "Dragonwyck." "House of Wax," and later "The Fly" and "House on Haunted Hill," would indelibly link Price to the genre. And although he didn't hold the title for most 3-D films, Price would soon be dubbed "The King of 3D" in Hollywood, appearing in the stereoscopic pictures, "The Mad Magician," "Dangerous Mission," and "Son of Sinbad."¹

Other cast included leading lady Phyllis Kirk, who had been previously at contract at MGM, and Paul Picerni, popular leading man at WB. Carolyn Jones, best remembered for her role of Morticia Addams on "The Addams Family" TV show, plays Kirk's bimbo friend who is murdered. Frank Lovejoy and Dabs Greer supplied the law, and Charles Buchinsky is Price's sinister mute assistant. Buchinsky would eventually become a household name after changing his name to Charles Bronson a couple of years later. One sad addition to the cast is Ned Young, who plays Price's alcoholic assistant. Young was stripped of credit in the film after pleading the Fifth during an appearance at a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing.

Production finished in 28 days, under time and under budget at \$680,000. Jack Warner was so pleased that he reportedly sent a case of Jack Daniels to de Toth's residence. Work started immediately thereafter on Warners' next 3D picture, "The Charge at Feather River."

The film made its way to the screen as "House of Wax" premiering at the New York Paramount on April 10, 1953 with the cast in attendance opening night. Its New York engagement lasted for forty days and grossed over half a million dollars. One week later, a Los Angeles opening at the Paramount (now the El Capitan) continued the premiere with an extensive round-the-clock screening campaign that attracted A-list celebrities on the red carpet by the show.

"House of Wax" used the same projection system as "Bwana Devil." 3-D projection using polarized filters and lenses had been used since the 1930s, but every stereoscopic film that had been released by a major studio until that point was distributed in the anaglyphic (red/blue) format, playable on any projector. The daunting task of synchronizing two projectors was feasible, but quality control would prove difficult for the first engagements of "House of Wax." In addition to the technical synchronization of the two films, both projectors were being utilized, making the standard 18-minute reel changeover from one reel to another impossible. Hour-long (6000-foot) reels and an intermission between these reels was the solution

for the 3-D features using this system.

The sound mix for "House of Wax" was the first time most of the US heard stereophonic sound reproduced. Walt Disney's "Fantasia" (1940) had a limited release using RCA's optical multi-channel system, "Fantasound," but WarnerPhonic was far more prevalent. "This is Cinerama" boasted a six-track stereophonic soundtrack, but was still in first-run in select big-city engagements. "House of Wax" used "WarnerPhonic" sound, a three-channel magnetic soundtrack that was run on a separate piece of film in synchronization with the two "eyes" of picture running in sync. One of the prints contained a standard, mono optical "backup" soundtrack, while the soundtrack on the other print contained a special "effects" soundtrack, similar to surround sound today. Sadly, the magnetic tracks for this film are now considered lost, but the "effects" track still exists.

"House of Wax" was a phenomenal success at the box office, the second highest grosser in 1953, bested only by that September's release of the first CinemaScope film, "The Robe." It helped firmly establish 3D as a commercial venture for studios during the early 1950s, and despite the format's quick fizzle (only fifty 3-D features were made domestically between 1952 and 1955), is perhaps the best-remembered 3-D film of that period. The film was theatrically re-issued in 1972 and 1981 respectively, and continues to sell out shows to eager audiences at repertory theaters to this day.

¹ Although photographed in 3D, RKO's "Son of Sinbad" was shelved by producer Howard Hughes because of censorship issues that arose from both that and Hughes' "The French Line" (also in 3D.) RKO converted it to "SuperScope" and release it flat a year later in 1955.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Jack Theakston has been a film exhibitor, author and archivist since 2005. He previously worked at Technicolor NY, and was a nitrate film handler for Sabucat Productions. In 2009, he and 3D archivist Robert Furmanek created the 3D Film Archive, an archive dedicated to preserving and restoring stereoscopic films. Mr. Theakston currently resides in Rome, NY, where he manages the Capitol Theatre, a 1928 movie palace that specializes in year-round stage and screen attractions.