The tragedy of 3-D cinema

Rick Mitchell

Imost overlooked in the bicoastal celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the introduction of CinemaScope and the West Coast revivals of Cinerama was the third technological upheaval that occurred fifty years ago, the first serious attempt to add real depth to the pallet of narrative techniques available to filmmakers.

Such attempts go back to 1915. Most used the anaglyph system, in which one eye view was dyed or projected through red or orange filters and the other through green or blue, with the results viewed through glasses with corresponding colour filters. The views were not totally discrete but depending on the quality of the filters and the original photography. this system could be quite effective. In the mid-1930s Dr. Edwin Land began applying the light polarising filters he'd developed in 1932 to 3-D projection. This system did a better job of isolating the correct eye views, resulted in better image contrast, and was adaptable to colour. A 3-D short, Motor Rhythm, was shown by Polaroid projection at the New York World's Fair of 1939. In 1951 or 1952 director-producer-writer Arch Oboler, best known for the often terrifying 'Lights Out!' radio program of the 1940s. saw a new camera for 3-D photography developed by Friend Baker and camera operator Lothrop Worth with financing from Milton L. Gunzberg and decided to make the first American sound feature intended for Polaroid projection in the format.

Oboler's independently made film, *Bwana Devil*, opened on Nov. 30, 1952 at Hollywood's Paramount Theater (now the El Capitan) to the proverbial lines around the block two months after *This Is Cinerama* had had a similar opening in New York. As 3-D seemed more practical for most theatres than Cinerama, by Christmas 1952, the industry had embarked on a year long flurry of 3-D production. By Christmas 1953, the 3-D boom was nearly over with many of the last productions being released 'flat'. Two attempts to revive 3-D, in the early 1970s and the early 1980s, were similarly short-lived. What happened?

The reason most commonly given was that audiences hated to wear the glasses, a necessity for 3-D viewing by most large groups. A little research reveals that this was not totally true. According to articles that appeared in exhibitor magazines in 1953, most of the objections to the glasses stemmed from the initial use of cheap cardboard ones that were hard to keep on and hurt the bridge of the nose. Audiences were more receptive to plastic rim glasses that were like traditional eyeglasses. (The cardboard glasses are still used for anaglyph presentations.)

Another problem cited at the time and usually blamed on the glasses was actually poor projection. Anyone seeing a 3-D film anyplace other than in a first run movie palace in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, where distribution representatives oversaw the proper presentation of their companies' films, was likely to encounter projectionists who didn't care enough to give their very best. Any significant mismatch between the two images would induce eyestrain: a horizontal misalignment between the two prints, one print receiving less illumination or being out of focus, etc.

3-D Expo

However, a recent event in Hollywood offered a more significant clue as to why 3-D failed to catch on both in 1953 and in later years. This was the 3-D Expo held in September 2003 by SabuCat Productions at the American Cinematheque's Egyptian Theater. Over an intense ten day period 33 of the features made between 1952 and 1955, plus a number of shorts and rare clips, were presented by polarised twin projection with both original and new prints. While a number of these films had been revived in the Hollywood area over the last thirty years, because no permanent

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facility for twin projector Polaroid projection exists in this area, this Expo marked the first, and apparently only, opportunity for the evaluation of the films from that period as a body of work and even though between 1952–54 all genres were tried, including musicals, comedies, and dramas, unlike the later attempts to revive 3-D exclusively with action/sex/horror/science-fiction films, one thing became obvious: most of them were bad films!

Tied to this was the emphasis on 'in-your-face' gimmicks, an enduring problem with regard to 3-D motion pictures. Some silent analyph footage from the 1920s shown in the Expo's 'Rarities' program consisted mostly of items being poked, thrown, or shot 'into the audience's eyes', as did test footage from MGM's Audioscopiks, New Audioscopiks, and Third Dimensional Murder, shorts made between 1936-41, here shown by Polaroid apparently for the first time. As director Richard Fleischer pointed out in the question and answer period after the screening of his film Arena (1953), this only works if the object is either smaller than, or doesn't break the edges of the frame. If it does, the image immediately pops back to the plane of the screen, with everything behind it receding accordingly. Bwana Devil did attempt to live up to its advertised claim of giving the audience 'a lion in your lap' and 'a lover in your arms', but the results were rather absurd. This didn't stop subsequent filmmakers from throwing chairs, lamps, bodies, spit, and anything else they could think of at audiences, especially in the initial wave of films, usually via camera setups that telegraphed what was about to attempt to come out. (Personal note: the author has always had problems with objects coming out of the screen, especially when done very fast, though not with material at or within the plane of the screen, so, with rare exceptions like the rockslide in It Came From Outer Space (1953), such shots never work for me.)

That Bwana Devil was a bad film was acknowledged by both critics and audiences at the time of its release, yet the public flocked to it. And with boxoffice revenues decreasing annually since 1947, anything that brought people into theatres was considered worth pursuing, as soon as possible. As a result, the initial batch of 3-D films were low budget quickies shot in 11–18 days and though some higher budgeted, higher quality 3-D films appeared toward the end of 1953, the process has never really escaped its association with poorly made exploitation films, an association that would also negatively im-



pact the attempts to revive 3-D in the 1970s and 1980s.

Rush to production

There was actually a practical reason why most of 1953's initial 3-D films were so poor: the mainstream industry was not geared to putting together quality films as fast as they'd like to capitalise on the Bwana Devil hype. At that time, an average of eight features began their first run engagements every Wednesday. On a monthly basis, one or two of these would be high budget star vehicles from the five companies then making the most films of this type: Columbia, MGM, Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, and Warner Bros. Another one or two would be borderline 'A's'. from the same companies or RKO, Republic, United Artists, or Universal-International; they were usually genre films: Westerns, comedies, or films noirs, that played the upper half of first run double bills in major cities. The rest were 'B's' that played the bottom half of double bills from the studios' 'B' units or companies that specialised in such films like Monogram and Lippert.

The industry was still following a distribution plan adapted forty years earlier from the legitimate theatre, a seasonal release pattern beginning in September. Each Spring they would announce their upcoming slate of releases which would include pure 'A's', some of which were already shot, and the borderline 'A's' and 'B's'. Some of the announced titles in this area would not be made and it was possible to plug in promising pickups from independent producers or slap together a quickie to take

Fig. 1. The Egyptian Theatre, site of the World 3 Film Expo [Richard Greenhalgh].

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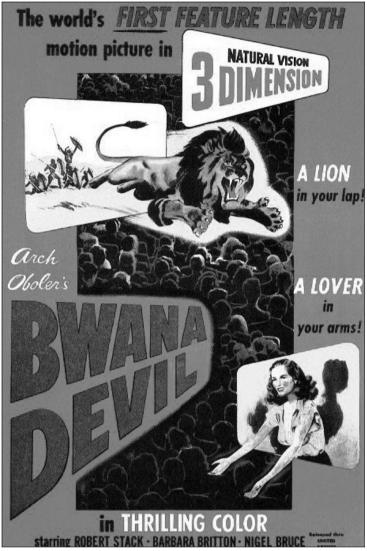


Fig. 2. 'A Lion in Your Lap ... A Lover in Your Arms' . Poster for Bwana Devil [SabuCat Productions].

advantage of another film's unexpected success or an event that had film potential.

Lacking access to production files on the 3-D films of 1952–54, only Bwana Devil, The House of Wax, Man in the Dark, Robot Monster, and The Mad Magician seem to have been specifically conceived as 3-D projects. Man in the Dark (1953) was rushed into production to beat Wax into theatres; in the case of Robot Monster (1953), it's implied by the name of its production company, Three Dimensional Pictures; and Mad Magician (1954) was clearly an attempt by producer Bryan Foy to duplicate the success of Wax. On the other hand, the initial 3-D films made by the studios appear to have been either borderline 'A' and 'B' projects about to go into pro-

duction, or scripts in development that seemed to offer possibilities for the 'in-your-face' gimmicks associated with the process. For example, in the question and answer period that preceded the Expo screening of *It Came From Outer Space*, Ray Bradbury stated that there'd been no mention of 3-D when he was working on the script, and Paramount's *Sangaree* (1953) was half finished as a 2-D film before the decision was made to redo it in 3-D.

Based on the 1952-53 borderline 'A's' and 'B's' with which the author is familiar and contemporary trade paper plot summaries of those with which he is not, the 3-D films, especially those made in the first six months of 1953, were no better or worse than their 2-D counterparts. Their short schedules and tight budgets precluded the degree of action and spectacle found in higher budgeted films, except where gleaned from stock footage libraries. Depending on the cinematic skills and ingenuity of their directors and cinematographers, they tended to be talky and slowly paced, it being faster and cheaper to shoot actors delivering pages of dialogue than the many individual setups required for effective action sequences. But the nature of 3-D raised audience expectations for interesting visuals that were as time consuming to set up and shoot as the gimmick shots. And, with the exception of Hannah Lee (1953), all the 3-D films had the additional handicap of being shot with big, bulky non-reflex cameras, two blimped three-strip Technicolor behemoths being used in two instances. As a result the quality of the resultant projects, as films as well as 3-D films, was dependent on how seriously the directors and cinematographers took the new process.

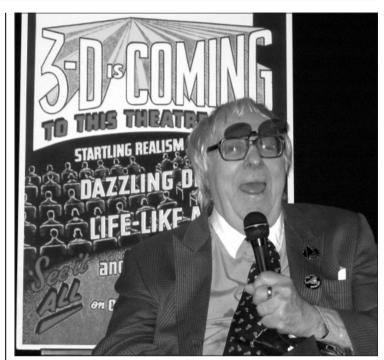
Warner Bros.

Overall the best 3-D films were those made by Warner Bros., which is really to be expected considering that, in addition to being an irrepressible ham, Jack Warner was an old fashioned showman, quick to exploit anything that would draw an audience to his company's films. Just before the release of House of Wax (1953), Warners had been the first company to mount a national radio and tv campaign, successfully, for The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms (1953). But Warner also knew that the films had to live up to the ballyhoo or the customers would stop coming. As a result, even Warners' least expensive 3-D film, The Phantom of the Rue Morgue (1954), had both a higher level of production value and more 3-D friendly compositions than many of the other studio's

high budget 3-D features. (The Moonlighter (1953), considered the worst of the Warner films, was actually an independently made pickup.) Apparently the paddleballer was included in The House of Wax at Warner's insistence, but he otherwise left director Andre de Toth alone. Though having only one eve. de Toth had long been interested in 3-D (his 1951) 2-D western Man in the Saddle is composed and staged as if it were a 3-D film) and understood how staging and composition could be far more effective than gimmicks in making the format really work for audiences. Though it had more obvious gimmicks, including the famous cutaways to handfuls of spears and arrows being thrown at the camera, Warners' second 3-D film The Charge at Feather River (1953), directed by Gordon Douglas and photographed by Peverell Marley, who had started House of Wax, also emphasised staging and composition while taking advantage of what had been learned in the production of Wax. Warner reportedly forced Alfred Hitchcock to shoot Dial M For Murder (1954) in 3-D. As it played most situations in 2-D in 1954, only after it was reissued in 3-D in 1979 did it become the second or third best known film in the format and a subject of controversy because it's basically a photographed play with few gimmicks. But Hitchcock and cinematographer Robert Burks chose a photographic style that emphasised depth: very low camera angles shot past lamps and couch and chair arms, which interestingly was copied by the makers of a later sex-oriented 3-D film, Prison Girls (1973).

Universal

All four of Universal's black-and-white 3-D features were shown at the Expo. Universal, known as 'MGM of the B's', was arguably a 'B' studio, and unlike Columbia, was not always able to get the best first run rental terms for its higher budgeted films. Thus it was interested in anything that could add to the value of its product. It was the first studio to release a dramatic feature with stereophonic sound, Thunder Bay (1953) shown with three track stereo from a separate playback dummy running in sync with the projector, and the first to advocate the faux wide screen projection format of 1.85:1, on the same film, released in April 1953. All of the Universal black-andwhites were directed by Jack Arnold who made dramatic and suspense-heightening use of the possibilities of staging in depth. The underwater shots of Julie Adams in her tight bathing suit in Creature From the Black Lagoon (1954) and the underwater



ballet shooting upward past the Creature toward Ms. Adams, for example, are as effective in 3-D as one might expect. Arnold generally eschewed gimmicks that did not come naturally out of his staging, except for a sequence in *The Glass Web* (1953) in which a dazed John Forsythe narrowly escapes a series of such events, clearly spoofing their overuse in other films. (A surviving 3-D clip from the Budd Boetticher-directed colour film *Wings of the Hawk* (1953) was shown in the Rarities program but it was really not enough to demonstrate Boetticher's use of the format).

Paramount

The 3-D films of Paramount and RKO exemplify most of the other studios' attitude toward 3-D. Paramount made six 3-D features, two of which were shown in the Expo, though its last, *Jivaro* (1954), was only shown flat at the time of its release. Their first, *Sangaree*, was half completed when the decision was made to finish it and reshoot the earlier footage with a rig adapted from process cinematographer Farciot Edouard's 1937 prototype for a dual head process projector. Aside from some gimmick shots in a barroom fight, director Edward Ludwig seems not to have changed his staging and compositions for 3-D. Though *Flight to Tangier* (1953) and *Money From Home* (1953) were better in this regard, they also

Fig. 3. Ray Bradbury at the Expo [Juan Tallo, @SabuCat Productions].

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Fig. 4. 'Need we say more?' Poster for *The French Line*[SabuCat Productions].

didn't make any significant use of the format. In fact, the first, an ultimately pointless amalgam of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*, was a very strange project to have been made at all, much less in 3-D. It's one of the few, if not only, non-Westerns produced by Nat Holt, and writer-director Charles Marquis Warren was noted for doing films, mostly Westerns, which set up tense situations through excessive talk that are ultimately resolved, not through the action that's been built up to, but by the villain backing down! Warren is best remembered as the creator of the tv series 'Rawhide' and the writer-director of Elvis Presley's last film *Charro!* (1970). Unfortunately, unavailable was *Cease Fire!*, a documentary feature shot at the front lines in Korea. It

would have been particularly interesting to see how 3-D photography was accomplished under wartime conditions with those cumbersome rigs. The Expo's screening of a rare print of *Doom Town* (1953), a short about an atomic bomb test, gave some idea of what it might have been like.

RKO

RKO made five 3-D films, three of which were shown in the Expo, and released an independently made sixth, Louisiana Territory. RKO had been reduced to essentially the status of a 'B' studio thanks to the mismanagement of Howard Hughes, its only claim to 'A' status stemming from its owning the contracts of popular stars Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell. Its first 3-D film, Second Chance (1953), is a perfect example of using the format to gild a lily. Though directed by ex-cinematographer Rudolph Mate, virtually no use is made of 3-D beyond a couple of obvious gimmick shots. Long at 82 minutes, it's the kind of dull, talky film that turned off many customers who couldn't understand why they needed to don glasses to view it. Their second, Devil's Canyon (1953), wasn't much better, even though shot by legendary cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca. Naturally Hughes made certain that the Jane Russell-starring The French Line (1954) lived up to its advertising tagline 'J.R. in 3-D - Need We Say More?', though, ironically, this was one of the films that had more flat than 3-D playdates. RKO's last 3-D film, Dangerous Mission (1954), was the first dramatic feature produced by Irwin Allen and while not as elaborate as the films for which he would become famous twenty years later, like a lot of the films made after July 1953, it clearly benefited from what had been learned from the first batch of 3-D films to be released, as reflected in the staging and compositions of director Louis King and cinematographer William Snyder, and is probably more exciting when viewed in 3-D than flat despite a somewhat nonsensical script that was typical of 'B' programmers of the time. Interesting historical note: composer Roy Webb reused his main title music from Cat People. including the lullaby, to open this film!

MGM

The other two majors made two 3-D films each, both benefiting from reserve and caution. MGM's first, *Arena*, was one of the unique finds of the Expo. As noted, director Richard Fleischer realised he couldn't throw everything at the audience but com-

pensated with staging and compositions which raised what twenty years later would be a tv movie about a day in the lives of rodeo performers to a highly emotionally involving film. Their second 3-D film, *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), came from what was essentially their 'B' musical unit, that of producer Jack Cummings, but it was not denied the lavishness of their bigger budgeted tuners. It was put into production when 3-D was still considered viable and the format was used with restraint. Unfortunately by the time it was scheduled for release in December, the excitement over 3-D had passed and most of its playdates were flat.

Fox

There's a certain irony in that the film that many consider the best 3-D feature of all time was made by the one studio least interested in the format: 20th Century-Fox's Inferno (1953). As with the Warner films, a good deal of the credit must go to production head Darryl Zanuck, who wanted to get briefly on to the 3-D bandwagon while preparing for Cinema-Scope and no doubt encouraged director Roy Baker and cinematographer Lucien Ballard to make dramatic use of the possibilities of depth, though Ballard claims that it was Zanuck who insisted on the film's few very well integrated gimmick shots. Gorilla at Large (1954), Fox's other 3-D film, was a quickie made by Panoramic Productions, a division it set up to make non-CinemaScope 'B's' to fill out the company's release slate. It also benefited from what filmmakers had learned about doing 3-D films but still had the poor, talky script flaws that plagued low budget quickies.

Independents

It might be expected that the worst films would come from low budget independents (Cat Women of the Moon, 1954, for example), but this was not always the case. Robot Monster (1953) pretty much lived up to the claim that it was one of the worst movies ever made, but the 3-D photography, by 'B' and 'C' movie veteran Jack Greenhalgh was suprisingly good. Hannah Lee, shown in a surviving faded original print, was interesting as one of the first tough noir-influenced Westerns and the 3-D photography by the legendary Lee Garmes (who co-directed with star John Ireland) was compromised more by problems with the camera system used, which involved two French Éclair Camerettes, or CM-3s, than his use of the format.

More controversial is Allied Artists/Monogram's *The Maze* (1953), which has a laughable plot that has guaranteed its inclusion among any list of 'Golden Turkevs' but is a must see in 3-D for anyone interested in the format because it was designed and directed by William Cameron Menzies. While Menzies' production sketches made King's Row (1942). For Whom the Bell Tolls (1943), and the second half of Gone With the Wind (1939) watchable. as a director he was never fortunate enough to get a script worthy of his talents, though all his films are worth watching by anyone for whom a film is more than just a recording of actors delivering dialogue. Menzies' approach to camera placement, composition, and lighting were especially suited to 3-D and, in many ways, The Maze is a textbook example of how to shoot a 3-D film.

United Artists

United Artists was in the process of climbing back from the economic and artistic depths to which it had fallen to being the industry's no. 1 company by the late 1950s. It was supporting its occasional distribution of 'A' product like High Noon (1952) and Moulin Rouge (1952) with almost anything it could pick up. including the national distribution rights to Bwana Devil in March 1953. Several of the low budget producers with whom it had distribution contracts shot films in 3-D, but not all were released that way. The Expo ran two that were. I, The Jury (1953) was another of the Expo's revelations. It was shot by the legendary John Alton, who well applied his noted high contrast, deep focus style to 3-D. Writer-director Harry Essex, who had written the screenplay for It Came From Outer Space (Ray Bradbury says Essex only put Bradbury's treatment into screenplay form) either gave Alton his head or had learned something about 3-D from Jack Arnold. Gog (1954), on the other hand, is notable primarily as the first film as director of photography of Natural Vision's co-developer Lothrop Worth, who'd been camera operator and stereoscopic supervisor on all the previous Natural Vision films. Editor-director Herbert L. Strock, who turned out to have only one eye like House of Wax's Andre de Toth and Gun Fury's Raoul Walsh, says Worth was a great help to him in staging the film and the 3-D photography is very good; unfortunately the film isn't. The premise is interesting as is an opening sequence in which a computer apparently murders a scientist, but after that, like so many low budget 2-D and 3-D science-fiction films of the 1950s and 214 Rick Mitchell



Fig. 5. 'The Dynamite 3-D Thriller'. Poster for *I*, the Jury [Jeff Joseph].

1960s, it quickly becomes bogged down in talk, often of a scientific nature that is laughable today.

Columbia

And then there is Columbia, the studio that, with three exceptions, made the most 3-D films that gave 3-D a bad name. Columbia's studio persona was split in three ways at this time. Starting in the 1920s as a 'B' independent equivalent to Monogram, president Harry Cohn was able to raise the studio to 'A' status by the late 1940s through a series of high profile dramas and comedies equal, and to some, better than those of MGM, and demanding comparable first run rentals for them. But the company's financial bedrock was borderline 'A's' starring its own Glenn Ford and/or the freelance stars it could attract, and an endless output of 'B' and 'C' feature West-

erns, mysteries, and comedies, various series like the Blondies and Boston Blackies, and serials and shorts, which by 1952 were basically the province of the two producers who would make their first 3-D films. Wallace MacDonald and Sam Katzman. While MacDonald's Man in the Dark (1953), directed by Lew Landers and photographed by Floyd Crosby, and Katzman's Fort Ti (1953), directed by William Castle and photographed by Lester H. White, who was behind the camera on almost all of Columbia's other 3-D features, took a 3-D friendly approach to staging and composition despite their short schedules (Dark is rumoured to have been shot in either six or twelve days), with three exceptions, their subsequent films fell into a pattern of an hour or so of dull talk and five to ten minutes of gimmicks. Even 3-D buff Andre de Toth couldn't add much in the way of 3-D quality to The Stranger Wore a Gun (1953). And more than anyone else's, the Columbia films went overboard on the gimmicks.

The exceptions were: Gun Furv (1953). directed by legendary Raoul Walsh. According to L.Q. Jones, Walsh just loved making movies and his post-1950 filmography, when he was no longer under contract to a particular studio, is highlighted by a number of oddball films for someone who could pick and choose his projects. Yet he approached films like The King and Four Queens (1956) and The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw (1959) with the same serious professionalism as Battle Cry (1954) and The Tall Men (1955) and, despite being one-eyed, brought the same visual dynamics to Gun Fury and 3-D that he had brought to wide screen with The Big Trail in 1930 and again in the 1950s. Miss Sadie Thompson (1953) was Columbia's only 'A' 3-D film, a vehicle for declining star Rita Hayworth. And yet it turns out to be one of the best 3-D films ever made, because director Curtis Bernhardt and cinematographer Charles Lawton, Jr. chose to use depth to enhance the drama and eschew the gimmicks. In fact, the closest thing to a gimmick in the film is a shot in which Miss Hayworth, facing the camera and smoking a cigarette, lets out a puff of smoke in exasperation. And in 3-D her performance of 'The Heat Is On' is as sensual as her simulated striptease in Gilda (1946).

It's not clear if *The Mad Magician* (1954) could actually be considered a Columbia film since trade paper production reports at the time listed it as an independent production with a Columbia release; it was even shot at the Goldwyn Studios. However it has long been unfairly maligned as producer Bryan

Foy's ripoff of his earlier *The House of Wax*. But its director, John Brahm, was as much a visual stylist as Menzies, de Toth, Fleischer, or Arnold (check out *The Lodger*, 1944, and especially *Hangover Square*, 1945) and his collaboration with cinematographer Bert Glennon resulted in one of the most watchable of the last of the 1950s' 3-D films.

Quality product

Except for Hondo (1953), the 'quality' 3-D films which were released at the end of 1953 and the beginning of 1954 (Kiss Me Kate!, Miss Sadie Thompson and The French Line) were shown both flat and in 3-D in their first run and general release engagements. Dial M For Murder was released flat. Though Creature From the Black Lagoon and The Mad Magician had a number of 3-D engagements, there's some confusion about many of the other 'B' films announced as being shot in 3-D, especially from the smaller independents. By Summer, 1954 3-D was considered dead, though Universal made a last ditch effort with Revenge of the Creature (1955) and independent producer Edward Alperson released what was advertised as the first 3-D film in CinemaScope. September Storm through 20th Century-Fox in 1960; it was actually shot in the Superscope/Super 35 format.

As many did not know that the 'quality' films mentioned above, as well as Inferno, Arena, and I, The Jury had been shot in 3-D, the format continued to be associated with exploitation films and gimmicks, to which sex was added in the brief revival of the early 1970s that began with The Stewardesses (1970). This, and the later 1980s revival took advantage of new camera and projector lens systems which exposed the eye views over and under each other within the standard 35mm frame, resulting in images with a CinemaScope-compatible 2.35:1 aspect ratio. Unfortunately, by using a single projector. these systems put out half the light of the two projector systems, resulting in dimmer, often eye straining images. (House of Wax was reissued at this time converted to a system which placed its images side-



by-side with an anamorphic squeeze on 35mm film, and unsqueezed in 70mm; *Dial M For Murder* was later converted to the one-strip 35mm format.)

Though these new lens systems, as well as the availability of lightweight Arriflex cameras, allowed 3-D filmmakers greater mobility than the cumbersome camera rigs of the 1950s, the concentration on gimmicks resulted in an initial acceptance, then quick rejection by audiences. And although a twin projector, Imax version of 3-D is popular in those special venues, the fact that few 35mm theatres have two projectors virtually eliminates the possibility of a contemporary general market revival of 3-D in any format other than the less satisfying single film Polaroid or anaglyph systems. It's doubtful that the qualified success of *Spy Kids 3: Game Over* (2003) will cue such a revival.

Fig. 6. Rita Hayworth sings 'songs your mother never taught you' in Miss Saie Thompson [SabuCat Productions].

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