

White Witch Doctor

White Witch Doctor, the 1950 novel by Louise A. Stinetorf was one thing (an earnest and uplifting tale about a medical missionary's twenty-five years in the Congo), but the film version was something wholly other because Twentieth Century Fox studio chief Daryl F. Zanuck basically told the writers and director of the film, Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts and Henry Hathaway, to do what they had to do to come up with a story that had both action and romance. As he wrote in a memo when the movie was being prepared, "We do not want a picture of a woman struggling for courage in the African jungle. We want a picture about two interesting, exciting people, a story full of physical excitement, physical violence, and sex." As if that wasn't a clear enough dictum, his memo continued, "We do not want a picture about a woman's struggles to cope with sickness and locusts and other depressing things. We want a story of sex attraction and conflict between a man and a woman, against the background of this exciting country."

The writers and director naturally gave Mr. Zanuck what he wanted – a Technicolor adventure film filled with action and romance, and two stars, Robert Mitchum and Susan Hayward who were not only

wonderful actors, but who exuded sex appeal. Hathaway shot the film both on location and the Fox backlot (the two stars did not go on location) – the beautiful photography was by ace cameraman Leon Shamroy (with a small uncredited assist from Joseph MacDonald when Shamroy briefly took ill). But what sets the film apart from other African-set films of that era is the incredible score by Bernard Herrmann.

By 1953, Herrmann was already a Fox regular and both Alfred Newman and Zanuck were huge fans of his. For *White Witch Doctor* he delivered one of his greatest scores, yet not one that is known much these days. Of the score, Zanuck wrote, "one of the very best we have had on any of our pictures." The film begins with the kind of main title that just propels you into the movie – pervasive percussion and drums over exciting strings and brass, clanging bells, and winds run amok – no one did this kind of main title better than Herrmann. Much of the score is breathtakingly beautiful with Herrmann's amazing orchestral textures and colors. It also includes several appearances by the weird and ominous-sounding instrument the serpent to underscore suspenseful moments – an instrument he

would also make great use of several years later for *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Herrmann's harmonic sense was uniquely his own as were his orchestrations – there was no other film composer like him and the list of his masterpieces goes on and on, an astonishing body of work that ranks with the best of the best. Even at the end of his life, he was still creating masterpieces, going out with two of his best scores, *Obsession* and *Taxi Driver*.

White Witch Doctor's first release on CD was part of the big Bernard Herrmann at Fox box on Varese Sarabande. That set was a quick sellout and many fans missed out on its myriad pleasures, *White Witch Doctor* being among the best of them. It's presented in that wonderful Fox push-pull stereo and the score sounds absolutely splendid. But let's let Mr. Zanuck have the final word: "In every respect, this is a wonderful score. It captures realistically the mood and it has great class and distinction."

— Bruce Kimmel