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from *Cabaret* to *Zorba the Greek*, many musical movies begin life as dramatic films, become plays, then stage

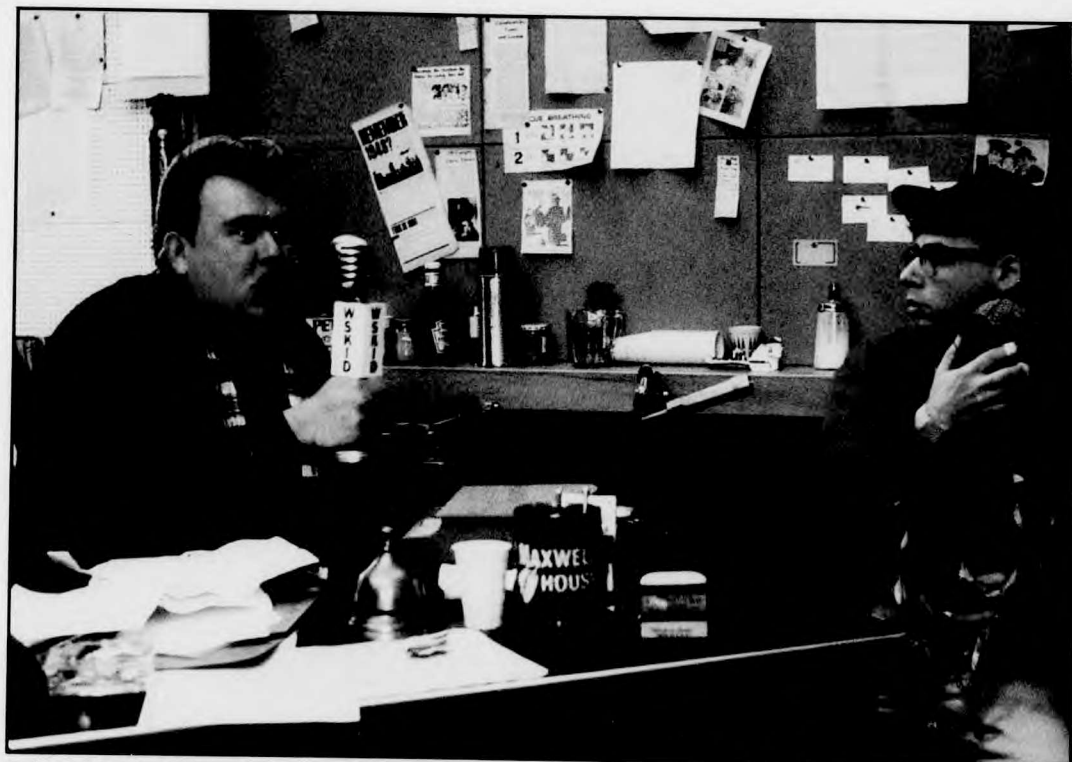
musicals, only to return to the screen in their musical form. The latest to reach us in time for Christmas fun and games is *Little Shop of Horrors* which isn't so little anymore!

Moviegoers with a taste for the unusual and the unlovely still remember Roger Corman's cult quickie "B" picture *Little Shop of Horrors*. Made in 1960, it offended the squeamish of the day and introduced a new character to the screen, a certain pain-loving Jack Nicholson, for whom it was predicted, there would be no future! The movie was made in two-and-a-half days for \$30,000 (and has since brought back seven million to Roger Corman) and was all about a weird plant in Mushnik's Flower Shop which had an ever-increasing appetite for blood. As it grew, it kept asking for more and the phrase "Feed Me" (the voice of the screen-writer Charles Griffith) has become a popular slogan.

From this tiny horror-comedy emerged a highly successful off-Broadway musical (now in its fourth year) adapted by Howard Ashman who also wrote the lyrics to the music of Alan Menken. Now, producer, William S. Gilmore has brought the musical to the screen.

But to recreate Mushnik's Flower Shop (which was a real shop in the original film) it was necessary to use the entire 007 studio (between Bonds) at Pine-wood, London, Europe's largest studio. An enormous section of Manhattan with decaying mansions, littered roadways and dingy shops was convincingly recreated by designer Roy Walker (*Barry Lyndon*, *The Killing Fields*). Here, on a budget of well-over \$20 million dollars, director Frank Oz (*The Muppets Take Manhattan*, *The Dark Crystal*) spent almost a year putting this musical-comedy-horror fantasy together with a cast of players including Rick Moranis, Steve Martin and Ellen Greene who played Audrey in the stage production.

For Rick Moranis, who remains faithfully and quietly Canadian, this is his first starring role since *Strange Brew* although he is remembered for *Ghostbusters* among his other Hollywood films. "After I left SCTV," he recalled "I made a couple of projects that didn't work out too well (*Streets of Fire*, *The Wildlife*) and I realised that I was missing a good, healthy working environment. I'm not interested in working for autocratic directors. Frank is like a co-performer.



LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS



WARNER BROS.

WITH RICK MORANIS

"I still don't think of myself as an actor" continued Moranis. "I'm a writer and the first thing I did on *Ghostbusters* was write all my own material. *Little Shop* is a new terrain for me. Now I'm trying to breathe life into a character whose lines are good already." Appearing in a cameo role is Moranis old friend, John Candy.

Producer William Gilmore (*Jaws*, *White Nights*) says that he's making this essentially American subject in London because it has become the centre for a whole roster of talented creature-makers. The star of the picture, of course, is the plant (Audrey II) something which no one has seen before and Frank, with his Muppets experience, was the man to bring the plant to life. Frank wanted a 'design movie', no exterior shots, no locations, and Roy Walker has

done a brilliant job of heightened reality on the settings and the style, which hovers in period between 1958 and 1963.

"The other star" adds the producer "is the music. The lyrics are more important than the melody, as in Steve Martin's hymn to masochism (he's the mad dentist) which has a musical basis of spoofed rock-and-roll. One of the main additions to the original story has been a trio of streetwise teenagers who act as a kind of Greek chorus to the action. We auditioned more than a thousand girls to find these three and they are great. They have to tell the story as it goes along and blend their voices in the manner of those groups from the early sixties, the Ronettes or the Supremes."

Ellen Greene (a one-time New

York cabaret singer who made her film debut in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*) found that the biggest challenge the movie presented to her was "in preventing her larger-than-life stage portrayal of Audrey from becoming too big on the screen. *Little Shop* is really about innocence. I envision Audrey as someone ripe enough to fall off a tree."

And what about the plant (whose voice this time around is provided by Levi Stubbs, lead singer of the Four Tops)? Well, it is under the care of Lyle Conway, who created the *Alice in Wonderland* figures for *Dreamchild*. "There are actually several plants" he says "maturing to one which is over 12 feet high. In her early stages I thought Audrey II had to be appealing. She was made of foam rubber and acrylic with silk leaves and I gave her Audrey's lips so that Seymour (Moranis) would find her irresistible. At full growth she's a real monster with 15,000 leaves and eight-foot tendrils which move with special help from the Atomic Research Centre. It takes 40 people to operate her and we rehearsed for four months. You see, her mouth doesn't just flap up and down as it did on stage. She actually has to pronounce the words when she's singing."

Note to the cultists: Will we ever see Corman's original again? Yes. He signed an agreement permitting Warners Bros. to re-release it six months after the opening of the musical version. Happy shopping!

— Gerald Pratley

