STAY FOREVER!

Revisiting LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH!

Top: Jessica (Zohra Lampert) moments before making a brutal discovery in the orchard, near the film's climax. Above: Somewhat exaggerated poster art from the film's original release

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IT'S 1971. TRICKY DICK IS IN THE WHITE HOUSE, THREE DOG NIGHT'S "Joy To The World" is blaring on the radio, and Hot Pants are *in*. It's a banner year of obvious contrasts—from the highs of Apollo XIV's moon landing, to the lows of Muhammad Ali's 15-Round massacre by Joe Frazier. And this mood of opposites is most blatantly discernible in the media. Competing head-to-head for prime book store shelf space is *The Exorcist* versus the *Better Homes and Gardens Blender Cook Book*. On the big screen, popcorn munchers could choose between such wildly contrary blockbusters as ***A Clockwork Orange*** and ***Fiddler on the Roof***. Meanwhile, the boob tube offered portraits of two very different American family units with *All in the Family* and *The Partridge Family*. So it is no wonder that the 1971 horror film ***Let's Scare Jessica to Death*** is composed of a variety of divergent elements. And now, over 30 years after its initial release, it remains a beautifully constructed, wonderfully acted, and uniquely resonant work.

Told in flashback, ***Jessica***'s narrative begins with the arrival of a hearse in a country cemetery. Instead of mourners, the black vehicle contains a ragtag trio—Jessica (Zohra Lampert), her husband Duncan ⇒

Duncan (Barton Heyman), Jessica, Woody (Kevin O'Connor), and Emily (Mariclare Costello) get acquainted during their first night in the farmhouse.

(Barton Heyman), and their friend Woody (Kevin O'Connor). They have stopped *en route* to their new home in rural Connecticut. Separated from her companions while completing a gravestone rubbing in the cemetery, Jessica begins to hear disembodied voices calling to her, and then witnesses the appearance of a mysterious young woman (Gretchen Corbett). In the first of several voice-overs, she questions her own mental stability, having recently returned from an asylum after recovering from a nervous breakdown. Jessica decides not to share her fears with the other two as they continue their journey.

Upon arriving at their destiny, a lake side farmhouse, they discover it already illegally occupied by a pretty drifter named Emily (Mariclare Costello). Since it is late, and the redheaded stranger has nowhere else to go, Jessica asks her husband if Emily might sleep there just for the night. He agrees. Over dinner, the four bond in their shared condition as refugees from urban blight. Duncan, formerly a bassist for the New York Philharmonic, explains how he has spent his life savings to acquire the slightly dilapidated farmhouse. Helping in this effort to live a simpler existence, Woody has agreed to undertake repairs and establish the apple orchard before moving on. Emily describes a wayward existence ambiguously, one with no definite plans, and then displays her own musical skills by accompanying herself on a lute while singing the haunting song "Stay Forever." When Duncan joins her on bass, Jessica suspects her husband's attraction to her. Afterwards, Emily suggests holding a séance. All agree, and during it, Jessica is prompted to summon the spirits of anyone who had died in the house, but to no avail. Duncan and Jessica retire for the night to make love. Obviously smitten with Emily, Woody suggests the same to her before being politely refused.

Jessica and Duncan spot the mute girl by the waterfall where she found the antique dealer's body.

The next day, the four bathe in the cove near the farmhouse, and while Jessica is swimming by herself, she encounters what might be some form of supernatural apparition, which touches her from beneath the waters before disappearing. Since there is no evidence to support her hysterical claims, all are obviously, but silently, concerned about Jessica's psychological condition. Next, they conduct a scavenger hunt throughout the farmhouse in search of salable items to convert into much needed cash. In the attic, Jessica discovers an old wedding dress and a knife in a steamer trunk. She also finds a large silver-framed, century-old photograph of a man flanked by two younger women, one of which bears an uncanny resemblance to Emily.

Journeying into town with their odds and ends, Duncan attempts, without success, to locate an antique shop by questioning several of the uncommunicative locals. At the same time, Jessica purchases eggs from a chicken farmer. The couple notice how the necks of all of the male residents they encounter are bandaged. They do find an antique dealer, Mr. Dorker, to buy the items. Upon seeing the sepia-toned photograph, he identifies the subjects as members of the Bishop family—former owners of the farmhouse. Dorker then identifies the woman resembling Emily as Abigail Bishop, who drowned tragically in 1880, in the cove, before her wedding day. The antique dealer concludes by noting the strange legends that have arisen surrounding Abigail over the years—namely, that she is a vampire feeding off the local townspeople.

Afterwards, Jessica and Duncan find a mole scurrying about the cemetery they had visited earlier, and decide to keep it as a pet. Just then, the mysterious young woman spotted there earlier appears to Jessica again, this time beckoning her to follow. She does, and is lead to a waterfall. There she sees the lifeless and mutilated body of the antique dealer. Jessica screams and runs from the scene, and is met by Duncan. When they return to the waterfall, Dorker's body has vanished. Duncan catches the girl, who reappears once more, before she can flee. However, the frightened waif is mute, and will not respond to Jessica's pleas to corroborate her claims regarding the supposed murder of the antique dealer. When Emily arrives, the girl immediately bolts frantically upon seeing her.

Jessica strikes back at a seemingly supernatural assailant who turns out to be Duncan.

Later that night, someone sadistically kills the pet mole with a knife, possibly using the same blade discovered in the attic trunk. Meanwhile, the tension growing between Jessica and Duncan surfaces in their bedroom. He suggests that she should return to the city to seek professional psychiatric help, but she is devastated by the idea, and Duncan retreats to the parlor to sleep alone, where Emily appears, and they consummate their mutual attraction. The following day, to her horror, Jessica finds the mole dead, and later notices the flirtatious manner between Emily and her husband as he departs for town. Alone in the attic, Jessica rediscovers the old photograph. When Emily joins her, she notes the drifter's similarity to Abigail Bishop, and urges Jessica to join her for a swim to ease her obvious anxiety.

Out on the dock, Emily suddenly pushes Jessica into the cove, and proceeds to dunk her repeatedly, seemingly in a playful, yet unrelenting manner. Emily then completely submerges herself, only to rise inexplicably wearing the wedding dress. Stunned into immobility, Jessica cannot escape Emily, who attempts to bite her throat. Finally, she breaks away and flees to the farmhouse, where she barricades herself into the bedroom. When Duncan does not return after several hours, Jessica hitchhikes into town with the aid of a passing trucker, who also bears the strange scars. Duncan is nowhere to be found. Instead, Jessica is confronted by the weird townsmen, including the thought-to-be-dead antique dealer. Meanwhile at the farmhouse, Emily and Woody make love.

Night is falling as Jessica escapes into a forest where she drops from exhaustion. Upon awaking, she is found by Duncan and they return to the house where she sees that he also has the scars on his neck. And then, as if in a nightmare, the room is filled with the menacing men from the village. Running from the house, Jessica nearly falls over the lifeless body of the young girl from the cemetery, crammed into the case of Duncan's bass. Jessica's last hope for help is destroyed when she discovers Woody, dead, his neck slashed, and still seated in the moving crop-spraying tractor.

In the farmhouse attic, Emily observes Jessica's discovery of an old photograph—a possible key to strange happenings.

In desperation, Jessica flees to the ferryboat landing, only to realize that the driver there is scarred as well. As she escapes in a small rowboat, a hand rises from the water to grip the side. Defending herself with a net hook, Jessica repeatedly strikes the assailant until he is dead, and her husband's bloody corpse bobs to the surface. Along the shoreline, silently observing, are the townsmen and Emily. Repeating the same tableau of Jessica alone in the rowboat, accompanied by her voice-over that began the narrative, the story ends: "I sit here, and I can't believe that it happened. And yet I have to believe it. Dreams or nightmares. Madness or sanity. I don't know which is which."

Distributed by Paramount, ***Let's Scare Jessica to Death*** premiered in August 1971 at the Criterion Theater in New York's Times Square. This was no accident, since the film's producer was 26-year-old Charles B. Moss, Jr.—whose father operated the Criterion and actually plays ***Jessica***'s chicken farmer; his grandfather was involved in film production since 1912, and was founder of the B.S. Moss Enterprises theater circuit. ***Let's Scare Jessica to Death***'s combined second week gross came in at $40,248, undoubtedly boosted by an aggressive advertising campaign. The most curious promotion was a competition for the most attractive funeral hearse for a $100 prize—no less than eight arrived at the premiere.

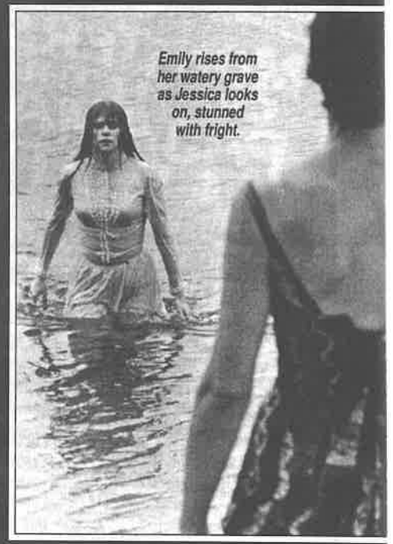
John Hancock today, 31 years after directing Let's Scare Jessica to Death.

Critical response was decidedly mixed. The New York *Times* dubbed it "The thinking man's vampire movie...although a disappointment generally, there are several things going for it;" while *Show* commented, "John Hancock's first feature delivers more than the usual number of boos." But ***Jessica*** proved critic-proof among younger audience members, making it an over-all financial success.

John Hancock's vision, coupled with the crew's proficiency, results in a film distinguished for its ability to capture the rhythms of the deceptively idyllic countryside setting. This vivid sense of place is not only rare in American film, but, with few exceptions, is almost non-existent in the U.S. horror genre. Undoubtedly inspired by a childhood spent in the farmlands of the Midwest, Hancock conveys a palpable landscape as well as the best European filmmakers. But as the film's title reminds us, this *is* a horror film, and no coyness is displayed in the handling of the equally memorable shock scenes.

For many viewers, ***Let's Scare Jessica to Death*** remains a fondly remembered cinematic experience closely associated with the tumultuous times in which it was released. Whether first seen at the local drive-in or from a pre-multiplex movie theater balcony, it has a power that resonates over three decades. Ω

Director JOHN HANCOCK Talks About LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH



FAX: Where was ***Let's Scare Jessica to Death*** shot?

HANCOCK: We filmed in two Lower Connecticut River Valley villages, both of them quite historic—Essex and Chester.

FAX: The farmhouse used as the primary setting is perfect—both homey and menacing at the same time. How did you locate it?

HANCOCK: As I recall, by just driving around the area. Our production manager, Bill Badalato had a weekend house near Chester, and he was the one who proposed shooting in that scenic region of New England. So it may have been him who actually found the house. Bill later became one of my best friends—producing ***Bang the Drum Slowly***, ***Weeds***, and many others of my pictures

FAX: Were the interiors filmed in the same farmhouse?

HANCOCK: No, actually the interiors were shot in a different house altogether—the Dickinson's Witch Hazel Mansion in Essex. Quite simply, there was more room for proper lighting equipment. ⇒

FAX: How long was the shoot?
HANCOCK: Let's see...about 30 or 32 days.
FAX: And what was the film's final budget?
HANCOCK: $250,000. And it should be noted that Paramount Pictures made several huge contributions to the film's ultimate success—most notably the titles, and funds for a fairly extensive promotion and advertising campaign.
FAX: The script was written by Norman Jonas and Ralph Rose. Norman Jonas was a pseudonym for Lee Kalcheim, who also wrote for television, but I've had a devil of a time tracking down Mr. Rose.
HANCOCK: Well, that's understandable, because I am Ralph Rose. Kalcheim's draft for ***Jessica*** was an original idea, not based on previous material.
FAX: Does the finished film resemble his concept?
HANCOCK: No, not really. His draft was more or less a parody of various scary pictures. I—or shall I say Ralph Rose—re-wrote it entirely, the major difference being that now the idea was completely serious.
FAX: I recently saw a still in which the Emily character appears to be about to kill the mole with a knife, but when the pet is slaughtered in the actual film, it is done by an unseen attacker.
HANCOCK: Clever fellow! Mariclare *did* kill the mole in the dailies, but not on-screen in the final version—I felt that some shred of mystery seemed preferable.
FAX: Very true—the viewer is never sure if the strange goings-on are genuinely supernatural or a product of Jessica's possible derangement. How closely did you work with editor Murray Solomon on putting the movie together?
HANCOCK: Very closely. I was there with him every day, all day throughout the editing process.
FAX: ***Jessica*** features so many memorable sequences, and not all of them of a horrific nature. One lovely moment is when Emily performs the brief song "Stay Forever." Was that written specifically for the film?
HANCOCK: Yes, by composer Orville Stoeber, who not only wrote the film's score, but the one for ***Weeds*** as well.
FAX: In ***Jessica***, you achieve such a strong feeling of a genuine locale, that the locales used become palpable for the viewer. Are there any specific elements in the film that have specific relevance to you?
HANCOCK: Let's see, there is the coffin-like bass case—my father played double-bass at NBC Studios in Chicago. And the apple orchards are very much like the ones of my family's fruit farm. In fact, the spray machine that appears in the film is a memory of him using such an apparatus on our farm. I guess there are all sorts of personal stuff involved!
FAX: What about any of the characters?
HANCOCK: Well, my college roommate, John Casey—who, by the way, went on to win the 1989 National Book Award for his novel *Spartina*—once told me that if I didn't realize that Mariclare Costello as Emily was my mother, I was crazy! I guess they do resemble one another.
FAX: The gravestone epitaph, of which Jessica does a rubbing, is so touching. Was that created for the film?
HANCOCK: Now *that* has a fascinating history. Several years before the making of ***Jessica***, while in Kentucky to attend the Derby, I happened to have been driving around the countryside there with my girlfriend when we came to an abandoned farmhouse—the fields all over-grown, roof falling in, broken windows. In the long grass, there were several graves. And there was one gravestone in particular that caught our attention. On it, the first letter of the surname was broken off at the top—and this could only have been an H. With it, the stone would have read "Hancock." Spooky. And below it, the inscription read: "Frail as the leaves that shiver in a spray, like them we flourish, like them decay."
FAX: What a perfect way to finish. Ω