



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Let's Scare Jessica to Death

We are pleased to be screening an original 35mm distribution print of this film. Given its age, the colour of the picture has now faded to a pink hue. We hope this does not take away from your enjoyment of what is quite a unique opportunity to view such a rare print.

A young woman, newly released from a psychiatric institution, moves with her husband into a country farmhouse on an eerie, rural island. There, they encounter a mysterious drifter, whose presence seems to trigger Jessica (Lampert), who begins to hear voices and experience a series of chilling visions. The longer she stays on the island, the more Jessica suspects this strange woman is not as she appears. John Hancock expertly builds up tension in the film as it edges towards its white-kuckle climax. Part gothic horror, part psychological thriller, John Hancock's dream-like vampire tale is a meditative, quietly terrifying exploration of escalating paranoia and anxiety.

Kelli Weston, bfi.org.uk

In *Sight and Sound's* 2012 poll, John Hancock's *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* (1971) ranks as the 894th Greatest Film of All Time. A further click on the BFI website reveals 'one critic voted for this film'. Reader, I am that critic. I've voted for it again in 2022. In the build-up to the big reveal, I'm almost more interested to see if the needle moves for *Jessica* – which has had more attention in recent years – than in whether *Vertigo* (1958) gets bumped from the Number One spot.

Everyone asked to vote has their own criteria: varying definitions of greatness, personal enthusiasms balanced against reverence for the canon, a zeal to overturn established pantheons and elevate less familiar films to cobwebbed plinths, even a listmaker's nagging need to ensure a top ten represents a range rather than a cluster from a favourite filmmaker or area of specialisation. The diva who took seven of her own records to that desert island on the wireless has few equivalents in the diverse international electorate. No matter how much consideration the voter might give to the notion of 'greatness' as being distinct from 'favourite', it is, in the end, a personal choice.

The higher reaches of the list, with films whose votes are up in the hundreds, are where some sort of consensus emerges. Yet even that is arbitrary and fragile. In the inaugural 1952 poll, Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948) was joint fifth in the top ten; by 2012, it was ranked 588th, with a vote of two (one more than *Jessica*, admittedly). A key change is simple: *Sight and Sound* now polls a lot more critics than it did at the outset (*Louisiana Story* got its place with only 12 votes) and makes an effort to solicit votes from a wider range of voices. This inevitably means a longer list, with many, many more one- and two-vote titles.

So, do I really think that a 1971 horror movie is one of the Ten Greatest Films of All Time? Yes, of course I do. I wouldn't have voted for it if I didn't.

But it's complicated. And personal. I first saw *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* at the Palace Theatre, Bridgwater, in Somerset, in 1973, when I was 14

(i.e., underage for the X certificate). It was the first grownup horror film that genuinely terrified me. It combines the relentless approach of George Romero with the quieter chills of the classic ghost story as shuffling townsfolk (bearing scars that show they've been bled by the local vampire) besiege a New England farm and mentally fragile incomer Jessica (Zohra Lampert) finds her friends taken from or turned against. A sequence shot in broad daylight in which Jessica and her nemesis Emily (Mariclare Costello) take a swim is among the most purely frightening moments of cinema, with a payoff as Emily disappears under the water while wearing a black bathing suit only to bob up moments later in a soaked 19th-century wedding dress and advance, zombie-like, out of the lake.

It's a movie unconstrained by genre, made by people who wanted to do something scary but for whom that wasn't the limit of their ambitions. The lasting impact of a horror film can be gauged by how often subsequent horrors riff on it – decades on, not a week passes without a film xeroxing *Psycho* (1960), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975) or *Halloween* (1978). *Jessica* is evoked less often, but Alex Ross Perry's *Queen of Earth* (2015) and A.D. Calvo's *Sweet, Sweet Lonely Girl* (2016) use it as a touchstone.

For ages, it was a film only I seemed to have seen, though its stature as a minor classic has become more secure (it's central to Kier-La Janisse's 2012 book *House of Psychotic Women*). Horror films work on specific fears and interests. Certainly, there are connections between Jessica and my own experience: as a child, I was moved from the city to the country by craftsman parents who bought a derelict farmhouse (with an orchard) and made a going concern of the place despite a certain hostility from the locals. This, loosely, is what happens in *Jessica*. I had a similar, immediate, personal connection with Don Taylor's terrifying TV episode *The Exorcism*, part of the anthology series *Dead of Night* (1972).

I can also see how random circumstance – unconnected with the quality of the film but all to do with me – dictates my conviction. I recognise that polling people for the Ten Greatest Anything is inherently absurd, but it's also interesting. We learn a lot from these lists, about ourselves as much as the films we vote for (or don't).

If the stars had aligned slightly differently, Willard Huyck's *Messiah of Evil* (1973) might have got a UK theatrical release in the 1970s, but it was one of many, many American independent horror films that didn't (*Jessica*, in this respect, was lucky – it was made by Paramount). I didn't see *Messiah* until it turned up on poor quality VHS in the 1980s; I've still never seen it in a cinema. *Sight and Sound* didn't review it until 2010. Objectively, *Messiah of Evil* is close to *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* in quality. If I'd seen it at 14, in a cinema, it might have left as big an impression on me as Hancock's film. So when asked to nominate my favourite horror movies or film experiences or Greatest Film of All Time candidates, *Jessica* is confirmed in my mind while *Messiah* isn't.

Now magnify that by every choice made by every critic in the poll.

Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, November 2022

LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH

Directed by: John Hancock
©: The Jessica Company
Produced by: Charles B. Moss Jr.
Co-producer: William Badalato
Producer's Assistant: Judith Spangler
Production Assistants: Joanne Michels, Barbara Reynolds
Continuity: Randa Haines
Written by: Ralph Rose, Norman Jonas
Photography: Bob Baldwin
Assistant Cameraman: Sal Guida
Gaffer: Myron Odeguard
Grip: Melvin D. Noped
Film Editor: Murray Solomon
Assistant Editor: Ginny Katz
Set Decoration: Norman Kenneson
Costume Design: Mariette Pinchart

Make-up: Irvin Carlton
Colour by: DeLuxe
Music by: Orville Stoeber
Electronic Music by: Walter Sear
Sound: Joe Ryan

Cast

Zohra Lampert (*Jessica*)
Barton Heyman (*Duncan*)
Kevin O'Connor (*Woody*)
Gretchen Corbett (*girl*)
Alan Manson (*Dorker*)
Mariclare Costello (*Emily*)

USA 1971
89 mins

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Let's Scare Jessica to Death

Wed 2 Nov 20:45; Sat 19 Nov 20:45

Blacula Thu 3 Nov 20:55; Sat 26 Nov 13:00

Cronos Fri 4 Nov 18:30; Sat 19 Nov 12:10; Sun 20 Nov 18:30

Fright Night Fri 4 Nov 20:50; Tue 22 Nov 20:40 (+ intro)

Possession Sat 5 Nov 20:20 (+ intro by author Kier-La Janisse); Sun 27 Nov 15:30

Ganja & Hess Mon 7 Nov 18:00; Sat 26 Nov 15:20

La Llorona Mon 7 Nov 21:00

Frankenstein Tue 8 Nov 18:20; Sun 27 Nov 13:00

Viy Tue 8 Nov 20:50

Inferno Wed 9 Nov 20:40; Sat 26 Nov 18:20

The Entity Fri 11 Nov 17:55; Tue 15 Nov 20:30

Nightbreed – Director's Cut Sat 12 Nov 20:35

Nosferatu (Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens) Sun 13 Nov 15:50 (+ intro by Silent Film Curator Bryony Dixon); Sat 19 Nov 14:10

The Skeleton Key Mon 14 Nov 20:45

Def by Temptation Wed 16 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 26 Nov 18:10

Candyman Thu 17 Nov 20:50 (+ intro)

Kuroneko (Yabu no naka no kuroneko) Fri 18 Nov 18:15

Us Sat 19 Nov 15:10; Tue 29 Nov 20:40

Jennifer's Body Sun 20 Nov 15:15; Mon 21 Nov 18:00; Fri 25 Nov 20:45

Pontypool Mon 21 Nov 20:30; Sun 27 Nov 12:20

Under the Shadow Wed 23 Nov 20:40; Tue 29 Nov 18:10

Ouija: Origin of Evil Thu 24 Nov 20:40; Mon 28 Nov 18:10

Pet Sematary Fri 25 Nov 18:15; Mon 28 Nov 20:40

The Autopsy of Jane Doe Sat 26 Nov 20:40

28 Days Later Sat 26 Nov 20:45

Good Manners (As Boas Maneiras) Sun 27 Nov 18:10; Wed 30 Nov 20:25

A Nightmare on Elm Street Wed 30 Nov 20:50

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS EVENTS

City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors – Screen Monsters

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30-20:30

Matchbox Cine presents House of Psychotic Women

Sat 5 Nov 17:50

Son of Ingagi + Panel Discussion Wed 9 Nov 18:10

Live Commentary with Evolution of Horror, Brain Rot and The Final

Girls Sat 19 Nov 18:00

Big Monster Energy Tue 22 Nov 18:30

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