

SERIALKILLERVILLE!



SUSPENDED ANIMATION (2001) 88 mins.
D: John Hancock. Alex McArthur, Laura Esterman, Sage Allen, Rebecca Harrell, Maria Cina, Fred Meyers, Daniel Riordan, Jeff Puckett, J.E. Freeman. 115 mins. (TBA)

More than 30 years after his over-the-top 1971 cult shriekfest *Let's Scare Jessica to Death*, director Hancock returns to the genre fold with a new flick that leaves the top but the merest speck in the (decidedly cracked) rear-view mirror. With enough goofy, gruesome twists to fill a half-dozen thrillers, *Suspended Animation* starts out as a cannibalistic Misery (complete with Kathy Bates clone Allen) as major Hollywood animator Tom Kempton (McArthur) finds himself a captive of a supremely scary middle-age sister act—backwoods Baby Jane variation Vanessa Boulette (Esterman) and her portly sib Ann (Allen)—following a Midwestern snowmobile mishap. After a couple of sadistic, squirm-inducing vignettes, the film suddenly veers into icy *Deliverance* terrain before time-and-place-shifting to L.A. and a profusion of additional shocks and surprises so extreme as to border on literal overkill, including a close-up pimple-popping moment to rival *Clean, Shaven*'s infamous fingernail-removal scene. To delve into specifics would seriously risk ruining *Suspended Animation*'s unapologetic Grand Guignol pleasures; suffice it to say that Hancock and scripter spouse Dorothy Tristan have the chops to pull off one of the most outlandish fearfests of recent years, one that would form a terrific twinbill with the Don Dohler gore-a-thon *Harvesters* (VS #42). Among the thespes, former screen psycho McArthur (*Rampage*) turns in strenuous work as an ultra-victim, rivaling Zohra Lampert's ordeal in *Jessica*. The Boulette Family—including serial-killer teen grandson Sandor (Meyers) and creepy jailbird brother Philip (Freeman)—can take its rightful place beside *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'s Sawyer clan as one of the nuttiest nuclear units in fright-film history. When we caught *Suspended Animation* at a Palm Beach International Film Festival matinee, the audience gasps were loud and frequent; this would have been a great flick to watch with a vintage 42nd Street crowd. Look for it wherever it turns up next, hopefully in time for Halloween 2002. **S**

—The Phantom

Filmmakers in Focus! LET'S SCARE THE AUDIENCE TO DEATH! DIRECTOR JOHN HANCOCK ON *SUSPENDED ANIMATION* As Told To The Phantom

The Phantom spoke with director John Hancock in April 2002.

PHANTOM You did *Let's Scare Jessica to Death*, then went into serious dramatic films. What drew you back to the thriller genre?

JOHN HANCOCK Well, I've always liked them. I mean, you know, there's a lot of accident in terms of what projects you're offered and I guess I got kind of typed after *Bang the Drum Slowly* as warm and human. And I don't feel warm and human especially. *Suspended Animation* gave me the chance to scare people again.

PHANTOM Do you have any particular memories of making *Bang the Drum Slowly*? De Niro was just reaching stardom at that point.

HANCOCK Yeah, he was wonderful, he was very easy to work with. The producer on that was very difficult but consequently everybody involved in it artistically got along very well. The difficulty was all focused on one guy!

PHANTOM Do you like this genre more than the dramatic films?

HANCOCK I like it all. Whatever I'm working on I'm tending to like. I felt a little weird doing *Prancer*, about a little girl and a reindeer! But I got into it. I love to switch—you know, do one thing, then do quite a different kind of thing. Between *Weeds* and *Prancer* felt like the biggest switch of all.

PHANTOM *Suspended Animation* is an indie. How did it come about?

HANCOCK Well, you know, *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* and *Bang the Drum Slowly* were both independent productions.

PHANTOM And this one was written by your wife [Dorothy Tristan].

HANCOCK Well, we wrote *Weeds* together, and she wrote *A Piece of Eden*. Then the last draft of *Prancer* and a project for HBO called *Steal the Sky*.



All Trussed Up With No Place to Go: Alex McArthur stars in John Hancock's *Suspended Animation*. (Photos courtesy of John Hancock)

PHANTOM Is her novel *Suspended Animation* available?

HANCOCK It's not published yet.

PHANTOM Is it pretty close to the script?

HANCOCK Yeah, it is. Obviously, it has a lot of stuff in it that the script doesn't have.

PHANTOM *Suspended Animation* starts at a very high pitch and continues to top itself. Of all the over-the-top elements, I think the top-per is the pimple-popping.

HANCOCK Yes!

PHANTOM Was that in the original script?

HANCOCK Yeah, sure—that's my wife!

PHANTOM And you had to bring in a pimple FX person?

HANCOCK Yeah, sure, it would have been disgusting if it had been his own. Yeah, that was good.

PHANTOM And the kid was something.

HANCOCK Yeah, he's good. He has some Disney television series [*Even Stevens*]. Much different part!



Psycho sister Sage Allen casts warm and fuzzy glance in scene from *Jessica* director John Hancock's *Suspended Animation*.

HANCOCK Across the street, yeah, and on the lot. We lived there for 20 years and it burned in that big fire in '94. Four hundred houses burned in Malibu. The house across the street was rebuilt and the guy loaned it to us. We did not rebuild ours for fear that it would burn again. It seemed like a huge investment of time and money just to see it burn again. 'Cause that area burns periodically.

"I guess I got kind of typed after *Bang the Drum Slowly* as warm and human. And I don't feel warm and human especially."
John Hancock

PHANTOM Now, *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* was released directly to theaters. That wasn't a festival entry.

HANCOCK No, God—Paramount bought it, changed the title from *Jessica* to *Let's Scare Jessica to Death*. It was really Frank Yablans' campaign, with the wonderful poster.

PHANTOM Today you have an independent and it goes the gradual film-festival route. What does that process add to the film's final fate?

HANCOCK I don't know. It seems to me this kind of picture is better if it's bought by an entity with some advertising money. That was the intention and it still is. Maybe the festival thing will work—I haven't really been through this. Both *Bang the Drum Slowly* and *Jessica* were bought by Paramount. So my experiences are with a large entity with a lot of money to put behind a campaign. But we're making the rounds here. I'd love to see it come out on Halloween.

PHANTOM The ending of *Suspended Animation* leaves a sequel possibility.

HANCOCK We weren't really serious about that. We just put a little zinger on the end. ☿

PHANTOM About the casting: I remember Alex McArthur as the psycho in *Rampage*.

PHANTOM What did you think of the digital video experience?

HANCOCK I never saw that. He played the villain in a *Hill Street Blues* I did years ago. I've read him for things over the years. I've always liked him.

PHANTOM It's kind of a thankless role.

HANCOCK Getting the sh*t beat out of him the whole time!

PHANTOM How'd you find the two sisters?

HANCOCK Well, I'd do it again in a minute. I mean, it's so wonderful to not use such heavy lighting equipment and to be able to see right on the set what you're getting. No surprises. I was very happy with the look; the process of converting it to 35mm went very smoothly. To me it looks like 70mm. It's a great process. It saves a couple hundred thousand dollars. Which on this kind of budget is, you know, a nice piece of change. I mean, if I had paid for that many feet of 35mm, it would have just been grotesque. You can do another take, you can improvise, shoot all the second unit you want. What you're shooting on is very inexpensive. There's extensive cabling, which was kind of laborious in the snow, but that was really the only downside.

PHANTOM Had you directed an all-out action sequence before?

HANCOCK Well, in *Weeds* and I guess in *Baby Blue Marine*, but I don't think I'd done a chase like that.

PHANTOM When I saw *Suspended Animation*, there was more audience gasping and squirming than I'd seen in a long time.

HANCOCK Well, that's good! I wish I could've come! The best screening we had was on the South Side of Chicago, in a roller rink. We had an invited audience. The best experience I've had with an audience was the opening of *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* in the Criterion Theater on Broadway right near 42nd Street. I love an audience that goes, "Oh no, don't go in there!"



A loony Laura Esterman menaces Rebecca Harrell.

HANCOCK Well, Sage Allen—the casting director in Los Angeles, Rosemary Weldon, found her. It turns out I had known her in New York. She had read for some plays that I did in New York. She was married to Lester Lanin for many years, was the singer with his band. He did, like, every deb party on the East Coast for about 30 years—more, probably. Laura Esterman works all the time in New York theater and is an old friend of my wife's, and mine as well. She was wonderful in an Off-Broadway play, *Marvin's Room*. I think she won an Obie for that. She really is terribly good.

PHANTOM You've relocated to LaPorte, Indiana.

HANCOCK Yeah, we've done three pictures in Northern Indiana. We did the Christmas picture, *Prancer*. And then a couple of years ago we did *A Piece of Eden*, and now this one. The price is right here, boy. That's a big advantage. You get so much more for the buck here than you do out there.

PHANTOM According to the press notes, you filmed some of the L.A. scenes on the lot of a house you used to live in.

Suspended Animation

by David W. Thompson

SYNOPSIS: Shot on Sony's 24P HD, *Suspended Animation* is a full-length feature based on the riveting novel by Dorothy Tristan. In this edge-of-your seat suspense thriller, Thomas Kempton is a successful Hollywood animator. His hit movies are of the grand tradition of fairytales replete with evil witches, dark forests, and innocent victims. On a much-needed vacation, Tom takes a snowmobile trip with some pals to get away from his work for a while. The relaxing weekend takes an unexpected turn when he gets lost in the woods and finds himself in a real-life "grim" fairytale of his own. At the hands of psychotic sisters his nightmare begins. Barely escaping with his life, his unsettling brush with death leaves him obsessed by the experience and one of his captors. His twisted psychological journey on the dark side eventually leads him into the life of his captor's estranged daughter and her psychotic son. Trying to turn his bizarre experience into a hit animated feature only endangers him and his family by luring his captor back to her original prey.

HighDef.Org recently interviewed John Hancock at FilmAcres, his studio and home, located in LaPorte, Indiana.

HighDef.Org: (HD) What are the advantages and disadvantages of being located in Indiana instead of LA/Hollywood?

John Hancock: (JH) You get so much more for the dollar here - location fees are very cheap and salaries are smaller, you can put more up on the screen per dollar. I run my studio, FilmAcres, from my home. This is another advantage. My parents were in the fruit business here for 60 years. That's where the farm-oriented

name, FilmAcres, comes from.

HD: Your background has mainly been in film, having directed many features, who or what finally sold you on using electronic cinema, 24P HD, specifically, to shoot *Suspended Animation*?

JH: A couple of years ago at Cannes I saw the Sony demo. I followed that with a visit at Fletcher/Chicago and saw some of the same clips as well as additional footage and I just liked the quality of it. It worked out so well, the relief of not having to pay for the film up front and being able to shoot all you want is a big advantage for me, because I tend to shoot a lot. The people at Fletcher were helpful. Mainly it was just looking at the demos.

HD: I also understand that this was the first time that Misha Suslov, Director of Photography, shot with 24P HD?

JH: We both had certain trepidation about a new thing. It seemed to work out. Fletcher was helpful in showing Misha how to use the equipment.

HD: What was Misha's experience using the 24P HD camera?

JH: He'd do it again in a minute. I think he would rather do that than go back to film at this point. Misha liked the fact it took less time in lighting and how responsive it was at low light levels. He also likes the look of it... it's beautiful.

HD: What concerns did you have going in?

JH: Well, I was concerned, since we have a very physical picture with a lot of snowmobile mounts and working in the cold. We were concerned that the equipment would malfunction or fall apart from vibration. But

it proved to be quite rugged.

HD: What disadvantages, if any, did you experience while shooting in 24P HD?

JH: The monitoring system is still fairly elaborate and difficult to move around in the snow. But, you'd have that with video assist on film too. You just don't have to be cabled quite so much. You also don't get a good image through the eyepiece, yet.

HD: Would you say that the 24P HD format proved itself to you?

JH: Absolutely. By being able to see what you're actually getting, right away. And the cost savings out front is so big. To not have to worry about how much you're shooting is a big factor for me.

HD: What do you feel the future of electronic cinema is?

JH: I think it is going to take over the world, I really do. I think it has so many advantages.

HD: Do you plan on using 24p HD on future projects?

JH: Yes, absolutely. It is my preference.

HD: Will you use film again?

JH: I doubt it. I will use film only if someone insisted.

HD: Do you think you would be limited with 24P HD on certain projects versus film?

JH: I can't think of any.

HD: It sounds like you have been converted?

JH: Absolutely. You know a lot of things are not all they're cracked up to be, but this one is.

HD: Let's assume that some of your colleagues are