

SERIALKILLERVILLE!



SUSPENDED ANIMATION (2001) ♂♂♂
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 exteme 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. ♂

—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!