

LET'S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH

Directed by John Hancock
(1971) Scream Factory Blu-ray

Science fiction was a hot topic in late Sixties and early seventies film, but fantastic cinema in general was also still popular. Satanism and demonic possession (*Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*), new and classic monsters (*Night of the Living Dead*, Hammer's continuing "Dracula" and "Frankenstein" series, etc.), and even non-supernatural *Psycho*-inspired thrillers were much in evidence.

Let's Scare Jessica to Death—despite the misleading title which suggests some sort of *Gaslight*-ing plot will be involved—combines the psychological thriller with the supernatural. While the open-ended conclusion of the film leaves room for an "it's all in her mind" interpretation—the last lines of the film are Jessica saying "Nightmares or dreams? Madness or sanity? I don't know which is which"—the script also allows for a supernatural explanation of the odd events (some of which are not solely shown from Jessica's point of view, and thus cannot easily be explained away as her imaginings).

Jessica, recently released from a mental hospital after a long stay (it's unclear exactly what her illness was), her husband Duncan, and their friend Woody move from New York City to a rural farm to raise apples. The nearest town is inhabited by cranky old men who don't make their new neighbors feel welcome. Jessica and the others discover Emily, a free-spirited young woman, living in the farmhouse. She offers to leave, but they ask her to stay (Woody is a little tired of being a third wheel).

A few vaguely strange things happen. Jessica thinks something grabbed her leg while they're swimming in a nearby cove. Jessica sees a young woman in white wandering near the farm. The locals continue to be hostile. They also all have strange scars or wounds on their necks or faces. An antiques dealer—like Jessica and Duncan, a recent immigrant from the big city—says their farm has a bad reputation, with rumors that previous inhabitants (many years before) were vampires. Jessica hears voices in her head. Is Jessica crazy or are there actually vampires around? Oh, why can't it be both?

The film takes the middle road between portraying Jessica as an unreliable narrator due to her previous psychological problems and depicting the events in a straightforward manner. As noted, Jessica hears voices (and talks to herself) in voiceover, and at various times feels compelled to assure her husband Duncan that she's not imagining things, that she hasn't had a relapse. Duncan is at the same time over-protective and all too ready to assume his wife is slipping back into mental illness, even though her assertions aren't that egregious. As mentioned above, Duncan also sees odd things, including the woman in white and the bandaged townspeople, but—par the course for such films—skeptically tends to dismiss their significance until it's . . . too late! (Whether Jessica is correct or merely imagining things, Duncan loses out in the end.)

Let's Scare Jessica to Death was shot in Connecticut by a crew and cast largely drawn from the New York theatre and television community. Director John D. Hancock had previously mostly directed stage plays (although he did make a short film nominated for an Academy Award in 1971); Zohra Lampert (Jessica) was Hancock's ex-girlfriend and the actors playing Duncan, Woody, and Emily had all worked for Hancock in the theatre before being cast in the picture.

Cinematographer Bob Baldwin was also New York-based; *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* was just his second feature credit. His later genre filmography includes *Basket Case 2*, *Frankenhooker*, *The Werewolf of Washington*, and exploitation favorite *The Exterminator*. Baldwin's work on *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* is considerably more restrained and naturalistic than some of his more outré efforts. The film's locations contribute considerably to the overall atmosphere of uncertainty and dread, despite a surface veneer of pastoral normality. Also important in establishing the overall tone of the film is the sound design, including almost omnipresent, non-diegetic wind noise, voice-over murmurings, and Orville Stoeber's semi-electronic score, filled with discordant sounds (Stoeber has only 4 composer credits on IMDB, and 3 of them are on films directed by John D. Hancock).

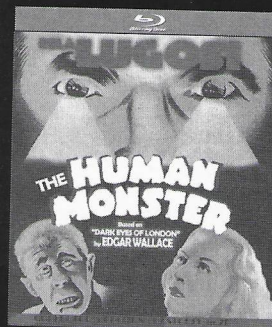
Unlike the previous bare bone DVD from Paramount Pictures, Scream Factory provides a wealth of great extras on the Blu-ray. Featurettes include "Scare Tactics: Reflections On A Seventies Horror Classic," where author/film historian Kim Newman speaks about his love for *Jessica*; "She Walks These Hills" examines the film's shooting locations (then and now), and, "Art Saved My Life," an informative interview with composer Orville Stoeber. An insightful audio commentary with director John Hancock and producer Bill Badalato is provided, as well as a theatrical trailer, TV spot, radio spot and a still gallery.

Overall, *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* holds one's interest, keeping the viewer guessing: is there actually a sinister secret or is Jessica imagining it all? The conclusion takes the viewer in one direction, only to add—at the very end—a touch of doubt to what we've just seen. Regardless of what each viewer concludes is "the truth," the film is memorable and unsettling and deserves a reevaluation that this Blu-ray offers.

David Wilt

THE HUMAN MONSTER

Directed by Walter Summers
(1939) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray / DVD



Re-released in the United States in March 1940 by Monogram Pictures, *The Human Monster* originally branched its source material title in the UK: *The Dark Eyes of London* (by the prolific Edgar Wallace). A chintzier title meant to attract less discerning spectators, *The Human Monster* is more of a classier mystery thriller than blood-curdling horror, though may prove to be appealing for those wanting to complete their Bela collections.

At the time, Lugosi had been frequenting poverty row features, and he wouldn't stray too far from these lower-budgeted affairs for the decade-and-a-half he had left to live. (Allan Dwan's horror spoof *The Gorilla* preceded, while a smaller role for Ernst Lubitsch's MGM comedy *Ninotchka* followed; the 1940s would be hit-or-miss—highs like 1941's *The Black Cat* and lows like *Zombies on Broadway*.)

The picture establishes Dr. Orloff (Lugosi) as the proprietor of an insurance agency claiming exorbitant returns after a number of his clients end up in the Thames River, naming the Dearborn Home for the Blind as beneficiary. Dr. Orloff is affiliated with Dearborn and the home, where the daughter of one of the victims - Diane (Greta Gynt) —is soon employed as secretary. Under a cheap disguise, we can soon distinguish that Orloff and Dearborn are the same individual, with a disfigured brute named Jake (Wilfred Walter) - a resident of Dearborn - aiding his criminal exploits. Diane gets too close, Orloff/Dearborn attempts to dispatch of her, but the slow-witted Jake refuses to help after he realizes Orloff/Dearborn murdered his only friend at the Home. Somewhere in the mix, Diane befriends a Police Inspector from Scotland Yard, who closes the picture embracing the girl.

Lugosi's first picture overseas is a mixed affair, a cheapie mystery about a clandestine operation with Bela as mastermind; when thought of that way, it's a perfect fit for the star of *White Zombie* (1932) some six years before. (In fact, a trailer for that film is included on VCI's disc.) To differentiate between the two characters, the more rote Dr. Dearborn is voiced by O.B. Clarence, an English actor with a long career but little to distinguish it. As some sort of legit rating system, but seems like some sort of novel ballyhoo, *The Human Monster* - back when it was known in England as *The Dark Eyes of London* - was rated H. As in, H for Horrific, earmarked for pictures that are "likely to frighten or horrify children under the age of 16." And it IS grisly for the period - as Michael Weldon noted in his capsule for "Psychotronic Encyclopedia" back in the 1980s: "Not at all like other Monogram films (they merely released it)."

A staple of Associated British productions, director Walter Summers is best known in North American for having helmed this work and the silent *Chamber of Horrors* (1929), a tale concerning a man losing his mind at Madame Tussauds. By no means strictly a horror filmmaker, he flitted from genre to genre, he began in silents after having served in World War I and would continue to do so when he came back to England. In the early 1940s, he re-enlisted and, after returning this time, decided to hang up his hat. Evidently, he grew tired of churning out low-budget quickies, and lived a quiet life until his death in 1973.

VCI's Blu-ray transfer of *The Human Monster*, unfortunately, isn't exactly pristine. A 2K transfer from a 35MM fine grain print, the quality on the film is more in tune with a VHS from the 1980s: soft and wobbly. But again, it's a 70-year old picture, and I'm sure VCI released the best that could be sourced out.

Extras include two commentary tracks on the 76-minute release. Film historian Gary D. Rhodes provides the first, which is a more sober intellectual track. Film historian David del Valle and writer/monster kid Phoebe Sutton take the reins on the second, and it's more of a rollicking spiel, a geek-out about Lugosi and what it meant to be a monster kid appreciating this stuff in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and beyond.

Liner notes by Patrick McCabe, advertising and photo galleries, and the US re-issue trailer round out the disc.

Aaron Graham