Among die-hard horror aficionados, there are certain films that have been lost to the masses, yet are championed by the fanatics—obscure works of cinema that stand as secret passwords within those closed circles of terror purists. Name-drop 1971’s LET’S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH to any die-hard, and consider yourself a member of the club.

This morsel of ’70s celluloid seems to be savored by a devout few so passionately, so ardently, their overprotectiveness is eerily reminiscent of the victims lost in the vampire-like trance of the succubic centerpiece of this cult classic. For every benchmark horror film like Robert Wise’s THE HAUNTING, you’ll find a little sister flick like JESSICA tucked within its shadow—a movie that shares the same predispositions as its predecessor, but sadly remains eclipsed by its bigger cinematic sibling’s success. So please pay heed to this humble horror honcho when I say that this little sibling deserves our attention for being the frightening diamond in the rough that it truly is.

JESSICA is a quiet film that favors restraint over flash. There is no gore, no violence to tantalize the eye. But it rewards its audience’s patience by offering up a portrait of ghosts both living and dead, phantasmal and sociopolitical—a time capsule of a nation in transition, where the hippies of the ’60s are now refugees of their own generation, leaving behind their ideals to enter a new decade homeless and haunted.

The first ghost we see in JESSICA is Jessica (Zohra Lampert) herself. Freshly discharged from a psychiatric ward where she spent a spell for reasons never illuminated, she is a wandering spirit who, along with her free-loving compatriots Duncan (Barton Heyman) and Woody (Kevin O’Connor), leaves New York City for small-town tranquility in hopes of starting over. Husband Duncan has just bought an apple orchard in Connecticut, sinking everything he owns into “the

old Bishop place”—a Gothic mansion bordered by a massive lake that holds some ghosts of its own.

Upon their arrival, the crew quickly encounters Emily (Mariclaire Costello), a dead red-headed ringer for Beverly D’Angelo circa COAL MINER’S DAUGHTER. A look of relief sweeps over Jessica’s face once she realizes that Emily is in fact flesh and blood and not just another one of her flights of fancy, saying, “Oh! You can see her too!” But it’s not long before Jessica is hearing voices once more, and the film begins its descent into one woman’s frantic madness. “The nation was mentally and morally ill in the early ’70s of America,” composer Orville Stoeber says over at www.letsscarejessicatodeath.net . “[Director John Hancock] used Jessica as a metaphor for our moral confusion of that time.”

Lampert’s unnerving turn as our titular victim displays strains of Diane Keaton at her most manic—a haunted ANNIE HALL. A two-time Tony Award nominee, Lampert endows Jessica with a delicate sense of mental fragility oft lost amongst her overly bombastic scream-queen contemporaries. There is a level of nuance to her performance that is so engaging to watch, so rich with minute detail; every flutter of the eyelid, every pitiful lift of her upper lip in an attempt to smile is yet another striking display of her character’s crumbling sanity. Voiceovers combat against the voices in Jessica’s head, leaving the audience to ascertain just who’s talking to whom here. Is Jessica just hearing things? Or is Emily really the houseguest from hell? Given the strength of Lampert’s turn, we feel as if the camera is capturing as many ghosts as it can—and yet, still, we are only privy to a fraction of the spirits swarming about Jessica’s fragile mind.

For all intents and purposes, LET’S SCARE JESSICA TO DEATH should have been dead and buried in an early VHS grave. How it survived video-store limbo and made the leap to DVD at all is something of an anomaly that speaks more of its resiliency amongst its fans than anything else. Much like the soggy banshee that has lived for centuries at the bottom of Brookfield Lake, the film endures due to its hardcore devotees. FANGORIA itself ran a thorough love letter to JESSICA in 2005 (issue #241), citing it as one of “horror’s most overlooked gems.” The Chicago

Film Critics Association listed it at number 87 in its top 100 scariest films ever made. Even Stephen King stamped the film with his seal of approval. That it continues to resonate with this devoted few should hopefully convert a new viewer or two. Not for the proposed Robert Evans-produced remake that has been muttered about on-line, mind you but a return to the original in all its grainy celluloid glory.

In his very first feature, director and co-writer Hancock (who also scripted the film, as Ralph Rose, with Lee Kalcheim, who adopted his own pseudonym, Norman Jonas) creates a Gothic ambiance that should place his shaggy masterpiece alongside Jack Clayton’s THE INNOCENTS and Frank LaLoggia’s uneven-but-fun LADY IN WHITE. Hell, it’s safe to say even big sis would be proud.

{jcomments on}