

Let's scare audiences to death again,
says director John Hancock.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION

Cannibal Hangup

By ABBIE BERNSTEIN



It's no Disney film when animator Tom Kempton (Alex McArthur) becomes a captive of the Boulette sisters (Sage Allen and Laura Esterman).

Appearances can be deceiving. By now, most horror fans know to beware of wholesome-looking cabins in the backwoods, but what shall we make of this scene? High in the Malibu hills, with a spectacular view of the cliffs and crashing waves below, in a beautifully maintained yard, a married couple sit in quiet discussion. Are they talking about their stock options, family planning or perhaps Aunt Alexis' latest wicked scheme? No, they're discussing the husband's quest for insight into the daughter of one of two cannibal women who tied him up, cut off his finger and nearly ate him.

Welcome to the set of *Suspended Animation*, the first horror film in 30 years by director John Hancock, who previously brought 1971's well-respected *Let's Scare Jessica to Death*—before moving on to everything from the Robert De Niro-starrer *Bang the Drum Slowly* to the prison

drama *Weeds* to the Christmas reindeer fantasy *Prancer*.

Between camera setups, Hancock explains why he wanted to return to the horror genre: "I felt like I got kind of typed as warm and human for a long time, and I felt like breaking out, because I'm neither," he laughs. "I wanted to do something scary."

Hancock didn't have to search far for material—*Suspended Animation* (beginning a platform release October 31 from First Run Features) is written by his wife and frequent collaborator, Dorothy Tristram, who estimates that she began work on the script five or six years ago. "I wrote the script, and then I wrote a novel of it, and then I redid the script. Done other things in between, but [worked on it] a long time."

Tristram says her inspiration for *Suspended Animation* was "the desire to have fun with evil. Because in my opinion, we're always trying to be good. It's normal

for most people to be good. We rarely give ourselves the right to be evil, and I found it very satisfying. The idea came to me, and I said, 'I'm gonna write this.' And it wrote itself. The first draft was very different from the final draft, because I wrote a novel in between. I fell in love with the story as I wrote it. It was a mean-spirited thing to begin with. And as I got into it, the obsession with those who do us evil took me over. I went deeper and deeper into that, until finally it came out in a loving way. So my feeling about it is, as evil as many people are, there's love all the way through."

In *Suspended Animation*, animator Tom Kempton (Alex McArthur) survives an ordeal that is something like a cross between *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Although he has escaped his tormentors, Tom becomes fixated on learning more about them and tracks down Clara (Maria Cina), who seems to have no idea that she's descended from psychotic man-eater Vanessa Boulette (Laura Esterman). Then again, Clara's 15-year-old son Sandor (Fred Meyers) shows signs of being a chip off the old (chopping) block.

Tristram didn't run the premise past Hancock before embarking on the script. "I never ask him," she laughs. "I assume that if I'm interested in it, he will be, too. We've been married for 25 years and we think alike, and if he didn't like it, he would say, 'I think that stinks.'" Then

SEAL OF APPROVAL
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again, so far it has not occurred. "I mean, that situation has not come up—has it?" Tristan asks Hancock. "Can you remember anything where I had an idea and you thought it stank, and that stopped it?"

"No, never," Hancock replies. "Well, I remember you were working on something when [people] were being beaten in it constantly, and I said, 'That's too many beatings.'"

"John was right," Tristan recalls.

The narrative for *Animation* may be grim, but it's an unmistakably happy set—filmmakers, actors and crew people all cheerfully tease and add observations

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Norman Bates would never approve of the way Sandor (Fred Meyers) treats his mother (Maria Cino).

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during each other's interviews. Although there's a consensus among the production team that *Suspended Animation* is not all that violent for the genre, it still has its share of gory moments. Faith Marie, part of the makeup FX crew who is also production coordinator and one of the 2nd assistant directors, cites some highlights: "Our main cannibal gets shot in the face. We had a gelatin prosthetic that covered part of her face and marred her beauty."

"The character is stuck on herself," Tristan adds. "Not an endearing quality."

Leading man McArthur, perhaps best-known to genre fans as the psycho killer Charlie Reece in William Friedkin's *Rampage*, says he wanted to play Tom largely because of director Hancock. "He directed me in an episode of *Hill Street Blues* 15 years ago, and I just have always wanted to work with him again." McArthur didn't have much time to prepare for the role, as his casting was a last-minute affair: "They sent me the script and I auditioned for it and didn't meet again with them until the end of January. I met with them at 11 a.m. and was on a plane at 3:30 to Indiana."

The role's most difficult aspect, McArthur feels, is that Tom spends much of the film in a state of mortal terror. "The hardest thing to get up is fear," he says. "A lot of men spend most of their lives trying to control fear—when a situation arises, you keep yourself under control—so it's usually the hardest thing for me to work on. But considering the way the scenes were shot, the way I got the role and how fast I had to prepare for it, I had [no problem with] control," he laughs.

Sometimes exhibiting fear didn't require much acting, McArthur adds, discussing the scene where Tom loses a

We'd bet Ann Bouletta's (Allen) favorite movie star is Kathy Bates in *Misery*.



finger. "I had to have a prosthetic hand made so they could hack it off. It wasn't uncomfortable, but that was a little exciting, when they raised that cleaver and whacked off that fake finger, right next to my real one."

Actress Cina says of the shoot, "It's been an adventure, unlike anything else I've ever experienced, because of the storyline's dark nature and what we all go through, my character in particular. You're taught by acting coaches and teachers how to get to those places—but no one really teaches you how to come back!" she laughs. "So it has been interesting."

Playing scenes covered in blood has been particularly challenging, Cina notes: "Most of it, I think, is psychosomatic. We just used buckets and buckets of blood. And at first, you're like, 'Oh, fake blood,' but psychologically, after spending an afternoon being covered in [another character's] blood—at the end of the day, we went to the movies, and there was a gory scene. I couldn't take it, because the effect that spending an afternoon surrounded by blood had on me was something that doesn't shake off very easily."

"But at the same time," Marie chimes in, "I've got to tell you, it's a heck of a lot of fun doing it, just making blood pump from someone's neck."

"Yeah," Cina remembers, laughing, "she was squeezing it."

"We run a tube through the [appliance]," Marie explains, "and physically, by hand, were pushing it through there, basically with mustard bottles. We put tubes into the bottles and squeezed it up through there, and used a latex bladder glued to the neck with a prosthetic laid over it and blending into the skin, so we were putting tubes through the neck, covering it up with a fake neck and making incisions."

The scene was made

This may be the first shower scene in horror history where the threatened victim is fully clothed.



more complicated by the fact that the actor in question didn't like having his neck touched under normal circumstances. "We spent two and a half hours in makeup doing the scene," Marie recalls, "and he was just gripping the chair the whole time, but he was such a trouper—it actually made him physically sick, but he did it and he went through the scene. It was very scary, but it was cool."

Makeup artist James Lacey adds that it's part of his job to help the actors adjust to makeup that is physically and/or psychologically uncomfortable. "That's the thing—that's why makeup people get paid well, because we are psychologists. [Actors] come in here and we set the tone, we have soothing music, try to create a nice, easy atmosphere, positive, and it sets the tone for the day for them."

The appliances were made by Victor Cao. "Victor has a very large effects/makeup supply store [Fun FX] in South Bend, Indiana," Marie reveals, "which is about 45 minutes from where we house [the *Animation* production] company. I know him because I've been in prosthetic makeup as a hobby for quite a while. I called him up and said, 'Hey, would you be interested in doing a film?' and he said, 'Well, we'll see what we can work out,' and he built our prosthetics, which are wonderful, but he didn't have the time to do applications. We worked kind of tag-team."

The scary thing is that even escaping this situation won't end Tom's nightmare.



"I was shocked that we could find somebody like that in the Midwest," Hancock interjects.

Filming on *Animation* was originally intended to be divided between Indiana, where Hancock has a studio, and the Malibu location, but the production wound up visiting Canada as well. "We chased the snow," Tristan says. "We still had a snowmobile chase and an avalanche [to shoot]. We lost [the snow] in Indiana, so we had to go up there."

Assistant director Anthony Aguilera points with pride to the speed of production on the 48-day shoot: "This is a high-definition [video], two-camera wire deal, in the field, and these guys have been cranking out 20 setups a day. That's amazing for anybody, especially the conditions these guys have to shoot under. We've probably done 650 setups so far, and maybe we'll end up with a total of about 700 by the time this picture is through. But our best day was 34 setups in a 12-hour day."

Hancock had not worked with high-definition digital video before, but feels it suits *Animation* for reasons of both texture and budget.

"This digital technology sees into shadows so well, it really gets wonderful detail there and I thought that would be good for something scary. I was so impressed with the [photography] tests. It looked so rich and deluxe and you save the cost of the film up front; you can shoot as much of it as you want and blow up the final movie. I shoot a lot, big [number of takes] ratio. [High-definition was a] big cost-saver up front. It costs quite a bit later to blow it up, but you end up only blowing up the final product." Cinematographer Misha (*The Runestone*) Suslov notes that high-def is easier to light than film: "It's so wonderful."

The digital medium has made itself felt in all aspects of the production, Marie explains. "It affects everything—it affects wardrobe, it affects makeup, it affects locations. It picks up certain things—we have not really been able to use red in the film, especially in the chase scenes with the snowmobiles. We're afraid of it bleeding in the picture. [The movie blood] is maroonish—we have to be very careful about the bright red blood."

"Yeah, you don't want the

blood to be bleeding," says Lacey, playing on words but sincere. "You can quote me on that."

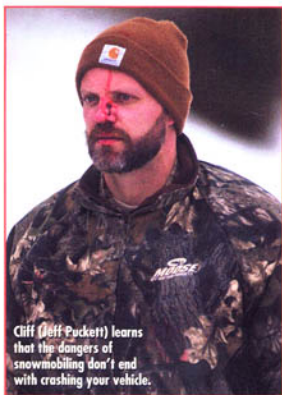
"We had to tone down the bright red," Marie adds. "We had to use a darker-colored blood, because a bright red looked so vibrant—we'd put it on and they'd go, 'Eh, I don't think so,' and we'd go back to the monitor and go, 'No, no, no,' and use a thicker, darker blood."

Hancock and Tristan used to live next door to the estate where today's filming is taking place, until the catastrophic Malibu fire in 1993 left their home in ruins. They haven't rebuilt on the property, Hancock explains: "We're afraid it will burn again. We have two mobile homes that we use [on the grounds], one as an office and one to live in." The couple divides their time between Malibu and LaPorte, IN, where their production company is based. "We always had in mind filming *Suspended Animation* in northern Indiana, where we shot *Prancer*. We learned on that movie that it was a good place to do a snow picture, because you have snow and it's not too cold to work, so we always thought we'd shoot it right here [in Malibu] and in Indiana."

"And that was part of the genesis of it, really," he continues. "We wanted to do a winter thing, and it started out with guys on a snowmobile. Then these crazy ladies enter and it really took off when they began to talk. Originally, the novel started with the fire that burned this house. We wrote it to film in our dead house." At the time, they hadn't realized that the next-door neighbors' home would be available as a location: "We lucked out."



As Tom's wife Hilary, Rebecca Harrell (left) returns from director John Hancock's *Prancer* for a much more chilling snowbound tale.



Cliff (Jeff Puckett) learns that the dangers of snowmobiling don't end with crashing your vehicle.

Over two years after the Malibu shoot, *Suspended Animation* has turned out to be one of those rare horror films made without a distributor to be picked up for theatrical release—on Halloween, no less. "Which is really the perfect time," Hancock notes, speaking by phone from his Indiana office. "It was always my hope that it would be released on Halloween. I was determined to have a theatrical release. Sometimes you can get more money quickly if you just go to cable and give them a premiere, but I didn't really want to do that."

Hancock has known First Run executive Seymour Wishman for decades, although this is the first time the company has put out one of the director's films. "We invited [Wishman] to a screening as a friend, and then he said, 'Well, I think I can sell this,'" says Hancock, who observes that prerelease reaction has been strong. "We've won Best Feature at the Haunted Newport Festival—we've won three different first prizes at film festivals. People were scared, or horrified—they would say, 'It ruined my day,' that kind of thing," he laughs.

It seems unlikely Hancock will go as long between horror projects again as he did between *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* and *Suspended Animation*. For one thing, he points out, "I don't think I'll live long enough!" At present, he is working on screenplays about the Civil War and drugs in high schools, but he and Tristan do have another horror script in the offing: "It's about a couple living in Malibu, and the guy's sister comes and there's a creature from someplace else. There are beheadings."

For now, Hancock has simple hopes for *Suspended Animation*'s audiences: "Just come and have a good time—and wear a Halloween costume to the opening."