

= The Screaming Skull =

The Screaming Skull is a 1958 American horror film directed by Alex Nicol . The film stars John Hudson , Peggy Webber , Russ Conway , and Nicol . The film focuses on a neurotic woman who believes she is being haunted by the ghost of her new husband 's previous wife . The Screaming Skull marked Nicol 's directorial debut ; he decided to try it because he felt that he was not acting in the roles which he wanted .

The film was shot at the Huntington Hartford Estate in six weeks on a low budget , with each actor being paid \$ 1 @, @ 000 . The film has received negative reception from critics and from Webber herself , though Nicol enjoyed the finished product . The film was later featured in a ninth season episode of Mystery Science Theater 3000 .

= = Plot = =

The film opens with a narrated disclaimer over footage of an opening coffin . The narrator explains that the film 's climax is so terrifying that it may kill the viewer , and reassures the audience that if they die of fright while watching the film , they will receive a free burial service , and it closes on the casket which has a card inside reading " Reserved for You . "

Newlyweds Jenni (Peggy Webber) and Eric (John Hudson) move into Eric 's palatial country home . Jenni is Eric 's second wife ; his first wife Marion died when she accidentally slipped and hit her head on the edge of a decorative pond on the estate . At the home they meet Eric 's friends , the Reverend Snow (Russ Conway) and his wife (Toni Johnson) , as well as Mickey (Alex Nicol) , the developmentally disabled gardener . Eric privately mentions to the Snows that Jenni spent time in an asylum following the sudden death of both her parents , and Mrs. Snow reveals that Jenni is very wealthy .

Jenni is disturbed both by Mickey 's belief that Marion 's ghost wanders the estate and by Marion 's self @-@ portrait inside the house , which Jenni believes resembles her mother . When she begins to hear unexplained screaming noises and see skulls around her house , she believes that Marion is haunting her . Though Eric speculates to Jenni that Mickey , who was a childhood friend of Marion and thus dislikes Jenni , may be behind the trickery , Jenni worries that she is going insane . Eric then suggests to remove Marion 's self @-@ portrait from the home . Eric and Jenni take the painting outside and burn it . While they clean up the remains of the painting , a skull emerges from the ashes . While Jenni panics at the sight of the skull , Eric denies that the skull is there . Jenni faints and Eric withdraws the skull and hides it , revealing that he was responsible for the trickery all along in an effort to get hold of her wealth .

Believing she has finally lost her sanity , Jenni resolves to be committed . She tells Eric that the entire property will be meticulously searched for the skull as a last resort . Before Eric can retrieve it , Mickey secretly steals the skull and brings it to the Reverend , revealing Eric 's plans . That night , Eric prepares to murder Jenni and stage it as a suicide . Jenni sees Marion 's ghost in Mickey 's greenhouse and flees back to the house . When she enters , Eric begins throttling her . The ghost then appears and chases Eric outside and about the property ; it finally corners and attacks him , drowning him in the decorative pond .

After Jenni regains consciousness , the Snows arrive . Mrs. Snow comforts a hysterical Jenni and the Reverend discovers Eric 's body in the pond . Some undisclosed time later , Jenni and the Snows depart from the house . Reverend Snow declares whether or not Marion 's death was an accident will remain a mystery .

= = Production = =

The Screaming Skull was directed by Alex Nicol , an actor who had roles on Broadway productions and often played supporting characters . He decided to try directing a film , as he felt that he had not been performing the roles that he desired . Nicol noted that " as an actor , you 're in perfect position , if you choose to do so , to watch the directors you 're working with setting up the shots , making

decisions as to where to place the camera , and so I picked up a lot over the years . "

John Hudson stars as Eric , Jenni 's new husband . Jenni is played by Peggy Webber . In order to get Webber interested in starring in the film , Nicol told her that he was planning to do a remake of the Alfred Hitchcock film Rebecca and brought a copy of the screenplay to her house . Other cast members include Russ Conway as Reverend Snow and Toni Johnson as Snow 's wife . Nicol also stars as Mickey , the gardener .

The film 's cinematographer was Floyd Crosby , who had previously won an Academy Award for his work on Tabu . John Kneubuhl wrote the film 's screenplay ; he also produced the film alongside T. Frank Woods and John Coots . The music was composed by Ernest Gold , and the film was edited by Betty Jane Lane .

The film was shot over a period six weeks at the Huntington Hartford Estate , with a small budget . The film did not have a large crew , and according to Webber , the actors were paid around \$ 1000 for their performances . During the production , Nicol promised the actors a cut of the film 's ultimate box office earnings , but due to an issue with the film 's distributor this never occurred . During filming , Webber discovered she was pregnant with a son , and so several scenes had to be re @-@ written like one where she was meant to fall down a staircase .

The Screaming Skull 's opening disclaimer that a free burial would be provided to anybody who died of fright while watching the film was inspired by a gimmick that had been used by William Castle in his film Macabre (1958) , in which he offered every viewer who bought a ticket life insurance in case they died watching the film . Unlike Castle , Nicol did not actually contact an insurance company .

= = Release and reception = =

Distribution of The Screaming Skull was handled by American International Pictures . The film was released in August 1958 , on a double bill with the thriller Terror from the Year 5000 . The Screaming Skull was never copyrighted , despite the presence of an onscreen copyright notice belonging to Madera Productions . As such , it has seen many DVD releases , by companies such as Alpha Video , Echo Bridge Home Entertainment , and Mill Creek Entertainment .

Erick Harper of DVD Verdict remarked that the film was " of questionable value " and opined it was a " truly awful example of drive @-@ in cinema . " He believed that the film was not " worth the time to watch " . Leonard Maltin gave the film one and half star , calling it " dreary " , but he believed that it became " reasonably eerie toward the end , with a twist that 's actually a surprise . " Authors Phil Hardy and Tom Milne wrote of the film , " Nicol , an actor here directing for the first time , lets the action spin out much too slackly , dissipating the grasp of moody tension he displayed in his unpretentiously excellent war movie , Three Came Back . "

Film historian Steven H. Scheuer graded the film with one star and a half , writing " Wife is terrorized by unexplainable happenings . Or is it inexplicable ? Both describe the film . " VideoHound 's Golden Movie Retriever by Jim Craddock also gave the film one and half stars , and TV Guide gave it two . Webber herself did not like the film , stating that " it didn 't impress me " and she " wanted to throw up " after watching it . However , Nicol took a more positive stance , saying : " I liked it ; it had some nice dolly shots , a good atmosphere . So I was happy with that ; it was a nice change from the films I 'd been doing . "

The Screaming Skull was featured in a ninth season episode of Mystery Science Theater 3000 , a comedy television series which features a human and his robot creations watching bad films while providing a running commentary which mocks it . It was featured alongside an episode of The Gumby Show entitled " Robot Rumpus " . Series writer Bill Corbett disliked the film , saying that " making someone watch this even once is specifically outlawed by the Geneva Convention " .

= = Legacy = =

Though it is never credited , the film is based on Francis Marion Crawford 's classic horror story of the same title , first published around 1906 . Crawford 's inspiration for the tale , in turn , came from

the folklore surrounding the so @-@ called " screaming skull " that was kept on display at Bettiscomb Manor in Dorset , England . The actual skull that inspired both the story and the movie is said to be that of a black slave whose request for burial in his native country was denied following his death and was subsequently followed by strange occurrences and unexplainable shrieking noises that emanated from the wooden box in which the skull was kept . The death @-@ mask on Marian 's tombstone is a reproduction of the famous " l 'Inconnue de la Seine " , reputed to be the face of a young French suicide who , like the deceased wife in the film , died in the water .