

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Current Edition: Friday, July 9, 2010

Jaws Returns to Show Lives Shaped by Film

By MEGAN DOOLEY

The U.S. Coast Guard issued an unprecedented warning to swimmers and boaters a week ago: beware of the great white shark.

He hasn't caused any trouble in these parts since the last recorded attacks, way back in the earlier half of the 20th century. Unless, of course, you count the mass hysteria he incited with his big-screen debut in the horror classic *Jaws*.



Steven Spielberg in the mouth that still feeds him.

Perhaps he liked himself on film, and he's only come back for a second helping.

On Tuesday night, the Martha's Vineyard Film Society's summer film series will kick off with the Island premier of *The Shark Is Still Working*, a documentary film that charts the massive cultural impact of the relatively simple scary story that became a summer blockbuster and changed forever the face of the horror film.

The title is a reference to the starring shark, who was not, in fact, a real fish, but a collection of highly uncooperative, enormous mechanical beasts. During the filming of *Jaws*, which in the early 1970s transformed the Vineyard into a makeshift Hollywood East for the better part of a year, it became frustratingly common to hear the announcement ring out over loudspeakers and walkie-talkies: "The shark is not working."

But this is not a "making-of" documentary. Instead, while the film does incorporate some elements of the filmmaking and production process, it spends more time focusing on the way the film has resonated in the minds of movie lovers everywhere. Respected directors call it the film that inspired them to pursue a filmmaking career. Children still shriek at the bloody beach scenes, which, by today's fright-film standards, are relatively tame. Adults still shudder at the thought of a moonlit swim in a placid sea.

What made *Jaws* such an effective thriller?

Maybe it all can be traced back to the fussy fish robot. If he'd been more cooperative, he might have gotten more screen time. And then the elements of suspense that made the film the masterpiece it is today might not have been so compelling.



“The brilliance of *Jaws*, and the suspense of *Jaws*, was merely sort of a counteraction to the fact that the shark never worked,” said film society executive director Richard Paradise this week. “They had to be creative, and work around it,” he said of *Jaws* director Steven Spielberg and his crew.

In fact, the shark doesn't even show up on screen until nearly an hour into the picture. Even after that, its presence is often merely suggested, rather than displayed. “Originally, the shark was going to be much more prominent. It was going to be a straightaway horror film,” said Mr. Paradise. “It became much more than that.”

This new film, too, is much more than a revisiting of the *Jaws* story. It includes interviews with several cast and crew members, including the late Roy Scheider, who starred in the film as Chief Brody, Mr. Spielberg and *Jaws* co-star Richard Dreyfuss.

It also includes home video footage from lifelong Islander Carol Fligor.

“They're strictly home movies. Nothing professional,” said Mrs. Fligor humbly from her home in Edgartown this week. In the early 1970s, she lived with her family next door to the Kelley House, where many members of the cast and crew lived during filming. When her children were asked to be movie extras, she tagged along, packing a video camera for her amateur recordings. She ended up taking such good care of all the young extras on the set that the film crew volunteered to pay her for her participation. “So it was \$20 a day. No big deal. But I had fun being a part of it, and my kids enjoyed it too,” Mrs. Fligor said.

In the years that have followed, her kids also enjoyed revisiting her live footage of the experience. She remembered one “awfully cute” shot she caught down in Edgartown. “I was taking a picture of the back of Richard Dreyfuss, and he happened to turn around and spotted me. So he presented himself with a big bow,” Mrs. Fligor said.



Summer of '74: weather was cool and shark sightings were numerous, in a mechanical sort of way.

The footage has been well-loved over the years, to put it mildly. “Let me tell you, it has been torn apart,” she said. But she’s thrilled that the people behind the documentary found a way to restore it for the film and preserve the legacy of a memorable experience in her life.

“When we knew that *The Shark Is Still Working* was going to be in New York this winter, my husband and I went to see it. It was interesting, and it was fun. I continue to be enthusiastic about keeping the spirit alive,” Mrs. Fligor said.

While her filmmaking remained an amateur effort, Jonathan Filley’s participation in *Jaws* led to a lifelong passion for film and a career in the industry. His tiny scene in the opening act quite literally changed his life.



“I was a local kid down there, a local summer kid, when they were making the film, and just happened to be in the right place at the right time and got cast as the drunk on the beach in the beginning of the film,” recalled Mr. Filley from his home in New York this week. He said he became friendly with a couple of crew



Take three: shark was often a headache in filming.

members and took on the job of operating one of the work boats used in the film's third act.

"I got bitten by the bug," Mr. Filley said. "I was 19 years old. I've spent the rest of my life in the business."

After filming wrapped on the Vineyard, he quickly switched from the college of liberal arts at Boston University to the film school. He majored in film and went on to become a line-producer. "I do what's called physical production, the nuts and bolts end of the business. When you're ready to make your movie, I do

the budgeting, the scheduling, get the thing set up and overseen and make sure it runs on time and on schedule," he said.

He has seen a successful career outside of his single acting role in *Jaws* that has included work for Woody Allen, Spike Lee, Ridley Scott and Martin Scorsese, to name just a few, but like so many others, the experience of *Jaws* remains the turning point in his life. "It's one of those things that has followed me the rest of my life," said Mr. Filley. "It's just such a novelty thing."

Novelty is just the word.

"To this day, *Jaws* continues to thrill, to horrify, to provide wonderful entertainment value," said Mr. Paradise. "*Jaws* was made on Martha's Vineyard and it still lives on."

The Shark Is Still Working will screen at 8 p.m. on Tuesday at the Tabernacle in Oak Bluffs. For more information and a full summer series lineup, visit mvfilmsociety.com.