

Ghost Stories: "Step Sister"

US TV series : 1997 : dir. Stuart Taylor : New Dominion : 17 min
prod: : scr: Tim Minear : dir.ph.:

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Megan Gallagher; Mimi Dykes; Jim Jacobson

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ∅	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Radio Times listing:

"A young girl is haunted by the ghost of her
jealous stepbrother."

The *Radio Times* note is just twelve words in length but still manages to get its facts wrong. "The grave is not always silent" ring the sonorous words of the narrator, "If we listen we can sometimes hear the dead speaking to us. We must listen closely, with an open mind and an open heart. For what may at first sound like a threat may in fact be a message."

Hmm. The Americans just can't do ghost stories. Robert Wise's "**THE HAUNTING**" (probably the best ghost film ever made) was merely the exception that proves the rule. A country needs to be rather old, rather staid, rather past its prime, to invest its structures with the weary watchfulness of the ghost story. "**POLTERGEIST**"-style trick effects do nothing to offset this, as this short ably demonstrates.

Jessica Hodges (10) sees her widowed mother pair off with a widower whose young son Andy died "of pneumonia" a year after his mother's death in a road accident. Jessica moves into her step-dad's home, and is given the bedroom formerly belonging to Andy, but now festooned in welcoming pink. That night, Andy's toys fling themselves about the room, and Jessica watches the words "get out" scribble themselves on a toy blackboard. Spooky eh? Jessica naturally assumes her presence is not welcome. She gets trapped in the boarded-up attic, where she finds a ghostly boy cringing in one corner and begging his dad to let him out.

Rescued next morning chilled to the bone, she is put to bed while her anxious mother hares off to the drug store for some medicine. Meanwhile, kindly step-dad reaches for his belt to explain to little Jessica about trespassing in "the punishment room". He chases her up there, is confronted by the spook of his maltreated son, and has the decency to plunge to his death from the attic window. Scratch husband no.2 for Jessica's peerless mom.

So it's another little "child abuse" homily dressed up in ghost story clothes, is it? Another wicked stepfather yarn, from a country teeming with stepfathers. Another men-are-not-to-be-trusted tale, written and directed by men. If we're being charitable, it also recalls M.R. James' "**Lost Hearts**" – in which the ghosts of two former sacrificial child victims return to spare the next victim in prospect, and avenge themselves on their perfidious benefactor.

No need for that level of analysis here, though. It's a lamely-scripted one-acter without atmosphere, subtlety or discernible purpose, except to reinforce the anti-male agenda implicit in all US "child abuse" films, which must number many hundreds by now. It's not known whether Megan Gallagher or Mimi Dykes played Jessica, and the boy playing Andy isn't credited at all.

See subject index under **CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT, DEATH / DYING CHILDREN, GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS, MOVING HOME** and **STEPMOTHERS / STEPFATHERS**.