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## Crew

Directed by **Richard Benjamin**  
Produced by **Ronald Parker** and **Franklin R. Levy**  
Written by **Jerico** and **Herschel Weingrod & Timothy Harris**  
and **Jonathan Reynolds**  
Executive Producers **Laurence Mark** and **Art Levinson**  
Director of Photography **Richard H. Kline, ASC**  
Production Designer **Charles Rosen**  
Film Editor **Jacqueline Cambas**  
Music by **Alan Silvestri**  
Costume Designer **Aggie Guerard Rodgers**



## A Family That is Out of This World: The Changing Face of Family in *My Stepmother is an Alien*

by Amanda Reyes

It was a Saturday night. December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1988, to be exact. The Cineplex Odeon Wisconsin Avenue Cinemas in Washington, D.C. had blocked out theaters five and six to host the premiere of *My Stepmother is an Alien*. Perhaps D.C. seems like an unconventional place for a Hollywood film to make its grand debut, but this was a very special screening. President-elect George Bush was in attendance.

Bush was continuing Ronald Reagan's long-standing tradition of presidential movie-watching. For the eight years prior to his election, Bush served as Vice President to the actor-turned-world-leader. During his tenure as President, Reagan was keen to host weekly film screenings at Camp David (with the venue changing to the White House on a few occasions). Many of the decade's biggest hits (*Top Gun*, *Roxanne*), along with a few stellar classics (*The Awful Truth*, *It Happened One Night*), were viewed by Mr. and Mrs. Reagan, along with a small group of trusted film fans (who nicknamed themselves the Aspen Movie Club). For two hours every week, this group of remarkably un-Hollywood types let the glitter of tinsel town wash over them, which probably does not seem unusual given the President's background in acting and his open devotion to the movies. Reagan even screened a few of his own movies for the Aspen Film

Club, including *Knute Rockne*, *All American*, *Hellcats of the Navy*, and of course, *Bedtime for Bonzo*.

The last screening Reagan hosted would turn out to be another one of his own movies. The 1954 western *Cattle Queen of Montana* featured the actor alongside the legendary Barbara Stanwyck. This film feels like a most appropriate send-off with its uncomplicated premise of a woman trying to hold on to her property. The cowboys thwart the Indians at every turn to save the day... and ultimately, to save the myth of America. A myth Reagan promoted throughout the eighties.

George Bush, a good friend of *My Stepmother is an Alien's* producer, Jerry Weintraub, attempted to keep the Hollywood glitz going with this premiere screening. And it would appear that Reagan's last film selection and Bush's first provide a sort of bridge between two ideologies. *Cattle Queen of Montana's* formulaic naivety was holding on tightly to an antiquated American dream, whereas *My Stepmother is an Alien* expresses just how much things were changing by the end of the decade.

In 1988, the year *My Stepmother is an Alien* made its historic opening, non-traditional family units were much more in the norm than when Reagan first took office, and film and television responded to these changes in a number of ways. It certainly wasn't unusual to see slightly more complicated domestic structures as part of the cinematic makeup. Movies like the 1988 horror film *Pulse* approached the stepfamily structure in a more realistic way (despite the technological chicanery), whereas *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) takes a much lighter look at how a trio of bachelors who may potentially be the father to a little baby girl all come together to raise her.

In fact, single fathers such as Steven Mills (Dan Aykroyd) are depicted in wide and varied ways. As two far-reaching examples, just look at Al Pacino's tough but tender turn as a suddenly solo parent to his blended family in *Author, Author* (1982), and then check out Schwarzenegger's devoted



gun-toting take on things in *Commando* (1985). There is also Harry Dean Stanton as the haunted, alcoholic dad in *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and Tony Danza as an overprotected pop in *She's Out of Control* (1989). Flawed, but loving fathers, each and every one. But they were also single men raising young women who needed them to be both parents. Each dad somehow rose to the challenge on their own, keeping their small family together, and possibly stronger than it was at the beginning of the film. These were the new microcosms of America, and there wasn't always a warm and loving stepmother waiting in the wings at the end either... although sometimes they may have arrived at the single father's home in a spaceship.

*My Stepmother is an Alien* attempts to embrace a sort of idealism within both the single-parent structure and the deep desire for a more traditional nuclear family, tackling both ideologies with charm, love and good humor. Yes, it is looking back to a simpler time, with its off-center but largely untroubled suburban domicile. Even the title is reminiscent of the 1950s (an era that America had a grand preoccupation with), calling to mind the 1957 film *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. Yet, despite its all-American (if newly configured) staples, it is a movie that comments on this changing face of the family. More so, it is an integral part of a trio of intriguing genre films from the late 1980s that sought out the issues of the stepfamily through genre storytelling.

An article appeared in a 1987 edition of *The New York Times* titled "80s Stepfamilies: Forming New Ties". Journalist Glen Collins surmises that blended families were on the rise and popular culture was seeking to represent these structures, from shows like *Cagney and Lacey* to the creation of stepparent greeting cards. We were living in different times, and whenever there is change, there is anxiety.

Three genre films explore this tension. The first to come out of the gate was *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1987), a classic straight-faced horror entry loosely based on a true story about a man who murdered his entire

family before fading into the sunset for several years. The filmmakers of *The Stepfather* envisioned what might have become of this man, and we find him living with a widow and her rebellious daughter. The stepfather is so obsessed with the ideological frameworks espoused by shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, he determines that if he cannot find that perfect family to oversee, he will simply kill them and seek out a more suitable match. It was a startling look at the tension between traditional family structures and the looser, less defined domestic set-ups of the era.

Following *The Stepfather* by a couple of years, Larry Cohen (*Q, Maniac Cop*) wrote and directed a tar-black comedy titled *Wicked Stepmother* (1989). Despite its many production woes (Bette Davis abandoned the film during the early stages of production!), the film still manages to root out the heavy anxieties of adapting to a new (and somewhat questionable) person basically overtaking your safe space. The magic was a metaphor for chaos and upheaval.

Sandwiched in between those two disparate titles is *My Stepmother is an Alien*. It is certainly not as cynical as the other two titles, and Celeste Martin (Kim Basinger) is anything but evil, but she is also literally an alien invading a single-parent home. It's no surprise that her stepdaughter Jessie (Alyson Hannigan) – the one who will be most affected by the changes – is the first to tap into the sci-fi hijinks and strange goings-on.

According to an article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1989, the original screenplay actually does fit more into the mold of the other two previously mentioned films. Jerico Stone (who simply went by Jerico in those days), a comic book fan, started his journey from script to screen in 1981 with a far darker story about an evil alien who ingratiate themselves into a single-parent home, wreaking havoc on the stepchild when no one else can see the damage being done. He used the elements of fantasy to explore childhood abuse in the hope that kids who were bullied or beaten could find an outlet for their own situation.



Paramount bought the pitch but decided they would prefer it as a comedy. Three more writers were brought on (Herschel Weingrod, Timothy Harris, and Jonathan Reynolds), and eventually Weintraub Productions saw the potential to make the whimsical, much-restructured tale a reality.

Despite the changes, director Richard Benjamin tapped into the underlying subtext of Jerico's earlier draft. In interviews to promote the film, Benjamin spoke about the tensions between a child coming to terms with a stepparent in the house and how the stories may grow big and tall in an effort to gain the attention of the biological parent. Benjamin found the theme psychologically satisfying while also seeing the humor in it.

Ultimately Benjamin, like the filmmakers who made *The Steppfather* and *Wicked Stepmother*, still utilizes the idea of the potentially wicked stepparent trope to explore what would appear to be a possible problem in the making of these kinds of families. For Jessie, Celeste is not just an alien, but she (quite literally) represents the alienation of the family she's become accustomed to.

While *My Stepmother is an Alien* eventually chose to ride along a more upbeat note than the other two films, this trio of films beautifully intertwines genre conventions to interrogate cultural concerns. The signs and images of the stepparent become symbols of a threat to the social order.

Celeste actually presents two distinct threats. The more obvious one is that she is a being from another planet whose only purpose on Earth is to save her own planet by obtaining information about Steve's intergalactic experiments. To do this, she must mask herself as a desirable human female, who willingly uses sex and her spacey powers to get into his good graces.

However, the other – stronger – warning is that, by interloping into the Mills' lives, Celeste has the power to destroy a perfectly functional domestic setup from within.

Unlike the other two films, what makes Celeste such a refreshing character is that, although she begins her life as a human in the body and mindset of something more akin to a Stepford Wife, the character actually develops in startling and notable ways. She is reminiscent of Kelly LeBrock's Lisa in *Weird Science* (John Hughes, 1985), first appearing as a male fantasy, wanting and willing to please Steven in every way imaginable, but in due time transforms from a blindly obedient (albeit quirky) alien to the hero of the film. It is Celeste who drives the plot forward and it is Celeste who creates a cohesive family unit by gaining Jessie's trust. And ultimately, she becomes the mother Jessie truly needs.

From horror to heartwarming, *My Stepmother is an Alien* manages to assuage all fears and trepidations. It is a happy ending only Hollywood would fabricate, but also one that many contented blended families could relate to.

It is unfortunate that, in the course of its rewrites, *My Stepmother is an Alien* buried the subtext. The deeper themes weren't as apparent anymore, and critics tended instead to home in on the similarities the film had with the popular 1984 Ron Howard movie, *Splash*. In fact, that seemed to be the most common comment in reviews, and the film was ultimately dinged for the comparison.

However, not all critics were as harsh. Some saw it as fun, light entertainment, and Kim Basinger got a lovely round of nods from those who enjoyed her unabashed dive into the broad comedic elements.

As the years have passed, it would seem Basinger's wildly hysterical turn as Celeste has been overshadowed by her sexier or more dramatic roles. She would go on to win a Golden Globe and an Academy Award® for her femme fatale turn in the neo-noir *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and had already cemented herself as a sex symbol in 1986 in Adrian Lyne's erotic *9 ½ Weeks*, but so little has been made about her incredibly intuitive comedic skills. Between the utterly hilarious *Blind Date* (1987) and the sweetly flighty *My Stepmother is an Alien*, Basinger has proven she understands how to formulate the proper beats of humor, and her wonderfully unabashed dive into the sillier moments of this film is both extraordinary in how well she achieves the ultimate laugh from the material, and how incredibly earnest and warm she is as well. Not to mention how well she stands up against comedy masters like Dan Aykroyd (going surprisingly straight for this role) and Jon Lovitz.

Jerico may have ultimately been disenchanted by the film's turn from horror to comedy, and the loss of his darker, otherworldly take on dysfunctional families. But I might argue that life here on Earth – and more importantly, the family – can still be saved as long as we have the likes of cosmic Celeste and comedic Kim Basinger to keep us entertained.

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## About the Restoration

*My Stepmother is an Alien* was restored in 2K by Sony Pictures Entertainment. 4K scanning by Picture Shop, Hollywood from the 35mm Original Picture Negative. Color grading by colorist Mike Underwood, and digital restoration completed at Picture Shop, Hollywood. Audio restoration was completed at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood, sourced from the original 35mm stereo magnetic tracks. Restoration supervised by James Owsley for SPE.

## Production Credits

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
QC **Alan Simmons**  
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
Disc Mastering **The Engine House Media Services / Bea Alcalá**  
Design **Scott Saslow**  
Artwork by **Colin Murdoch**

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