

FILM

Stepping all over Stepford

Despite the compelling addition of a gay couple, this classic story was better left alone

BY LISA BRADSHAW

I read Ira Levin's 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives* when I was about 12. My mother wasn't exactly into feminist literature, but she certainly was into horror, and *The Stepford Wives* is both.

Levin's popular fiction and plays have been consistently mined by filmmakers to great effect: *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Boys from Brazil*, *No Time for Sergeants*. Not only do his novels reflect deeply seated cultural attitudes most Americans would rather ignore, he possesses an enviable ability to push the "what if" button without destroying suspension of disbelief. He's an artist utterly adept at illustrating what happens

when you take the darker parts of desire one step further than you thought you could.

The Stepford Wives is such a story. Joanna is a Manhattanite who moves with her husband and kids to an idyllic Connecticut suburb only to find the women there are all creepily "perfect" housewives, always in a dress and full makeup with no ability to converse about anything but cooking and cleaning. Witnessing the "change" of seemingly intelligent, normal women like her, Joanna has to figure out just what the hell is rotten in Stepford.

The resulting 1975 movie was a perfect adaptation of the chilling story with a feminist edge. Which makes it more puzzling how the remake screwed it up so very, very badly.

Certainly an update of Stepford wasn't a bad idea: Women have more economic and social choices than they did in 1975, but the backlash against the feminist movement can be found today as easily as it could when Levin, who is one of very few postmodern male writers to articulate the issue so effectively, explored it again and again.

Gay screenwriter and playwright Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey*) teamed up with director Frank Oz (the two also conspired on *In & Out*) to bring Stepford into the 21st century. This time the story's two heroines, played by Nicole Kidman and Bette Midler, aren't just looking to join a consciousness-raising group, they're a television network president (albeit fired) and a famous writer, respectively.

These women's husbands (Matthew Broderick and Jon Lovitz), always in the shadow of their wives'



Can Nicole Kidman save Roger from becoming the perfect Stepford wife?

glory, have new, more modern reasons to want to recreate their spouses according to the standards of the prestigious Stepford Men's Association.

And Rudnick, MO intact, wrote a gay couple into the script. At first this seems antithetical to the point of the war of the Stepford sexes, but when you realize that the flamboyant Roger Bannister's (Roger Bart) partner feels Roger is just a bit *too* gay, you begin to understand the parallel and enjoy this new intriguing twist.

Where Rudnick and Oz go terribly wrong is in veering from black comedy (which *might* have worked) into a rushed slapstick that insults the pacing as well as the story. So desperate to ensure laughs, they've spent more time proving how "robotic" the Stepford women are than in exploring what made them that way.

They have also made the mistake, as they did with *In & Out*, in slapping on an ending that seemingly has nothing to do with the rest of the film (and certainly nothing to do with the original material).

The four lead actors do have a lot of chemistry together, and Midler and Kidman are wonderful at dishing with gay Roger. But snappy one-liners will only take a movie so far.

What's missing from this new *Stepford* is the tension, the mystery, the slow but steady onslaught of audience and character realization that should pervade the story—regardless of the year it's set in. Rudnick and Oz's movie certainly looks pretty (at \$90 million, it ought to), but it's missing its soul. Which is pretty ironic. [M]

Creating a perfect world

Screenwriter Paul Rudnick on the allure of the suburbs and Bette Midler's faux pas

Lisa Bradshaw: The original *Stepford Wives* is very much a cult classic. Is it intimidating to remake it?

Paul Rudnick: It is...and that's why it's good to have a large-scale new take on the material... Thankfully, women have made certain strides in the past 30-odd years, so my new version is about the genuinely powerfully women—women who are CEOs and supreme court justices and senators—and why they've given, you know, your more timid heterosexual men big new reasons to be terrified and vengeful.



Paul Rudnick

LB: The original story is about gender oppression and backlash to the feminist movement. How does a gay male couple fit into that?

PR: The idea of the gay couple in the suburbs was juicy because there's that whole issue nowadays of gay assimilation. The fact that now that gay people have kids, that they may very well be able to marry, you wonder, are gay people turning into a mirror image of the straight world? Is that a desirable thing, is that just a natural part of equality?

I know lots of people who are wrestling with that idea of being gay solely an urban phenomenon and suddenly they want lawns and SUVs and strollers. So it seems right at home in Stepford—in a way that, personally, I find a little scary.

Then there's the idea of controlling your partner.... That it's about a power struggle, whether it's between men and women or same-sex couples, there are certain universal urges at work.

LB: You've definitely upped the camp in this *Stepford*.

PR: There is a certain campy potential in the fact that the suburbs are fetishized, which happens in the original, and we've taken it further. Because nowadays the suburbs include these ridiculous McMansions where people are spending \$11 million on...40,000 square feet of Tudor French chateau, and there'll be a couple and their one child living in all this splendor.

That seems both absurd and also weirdly attractive, which was something I wanted the movie to address. Even when the suburbs seem utterly evil, there's also something very alluring about them...it's beautiful to look at.

LB: You wrote *Isn't She Great* starring Bette Midler....

PR: Yes, I did, and I apologize deeply. [Laughs] Bette Midler is a wonderfully talented woman, and we shouldn't hold *Isn't She Great* against her.

LB: Or you?

PR: Or me. We've served our time in movie-making house arrest for that one.

LB: Well, that was just my segue into talking about Bette Midler, who you also worked with in *The Stepford Wives*. I just saw an interview with her in *The Advocate*, and she refused to say she supports gay marriage.

PR: I read that, too, and I found it pretty appalling 'cause Bette is, you know, a very good person, and I was shocked, actually, at her waffling on that particular question the way I'd be shocked at anyone, gay or straight, imagining that it's an issue with a pro and con. You know, it's like an *easy one*.

LB: I think you need to give her a call.

PR: Please, I'll give her a smack! I have the feeling that she'll now make amends, because she certainly needs to.... There is such an overwhelming relationship between Bette and the gay community.... That does come with a certain responsibility that she did seem to be shirking. I'm as stunned as anyone by that. [M]

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