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FILM

**Which is witch?**

Remake straightens out one of the queerest shows in television history

BY GARY MORRIS

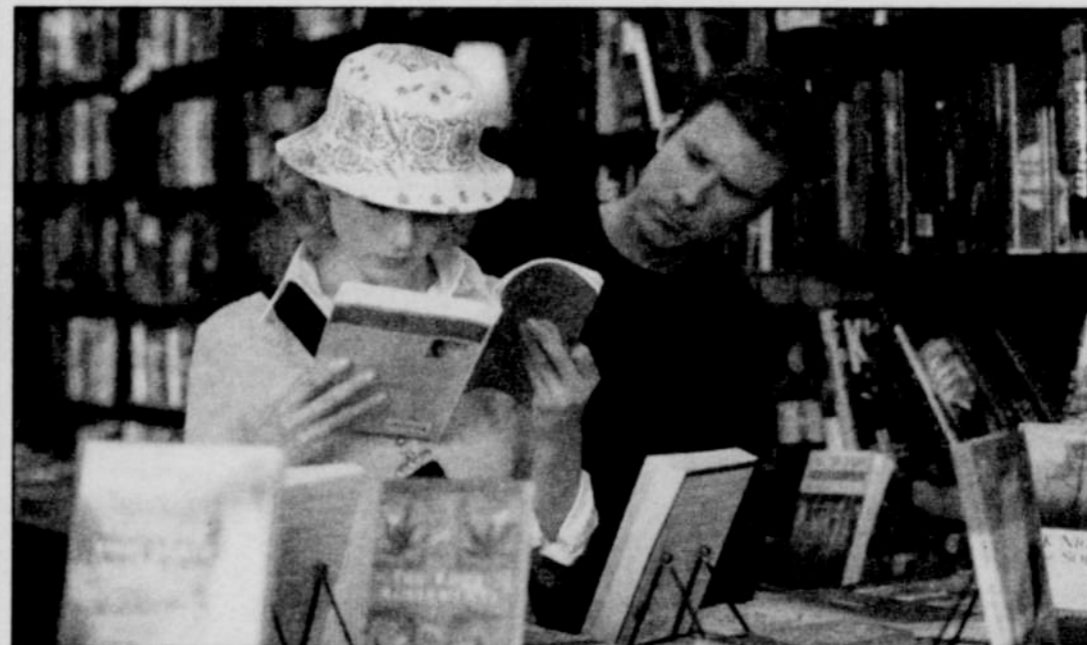
It's official: Remake Fever is raging in Hollywood, with clueless producers desperately mining baby boomer TV comedies, cartoons and thrillers to boost sagging profits. Some of these have fizzled (*Leave It to Beaver*), others have sizzled (*Mission: Impossible*), but the trend isn't exactly heartening. This is the tired Cult of the Familiar, playing to audiences' need for comfort, safety and cheap nostalgia. And there are plenty more—from *Home Improvement* to *The Huxtables*—in the offing.

The latest in this trend is *Bewitched*, an uneven retread of the '60s mega-hit starring one of the queerest casts of characters in television history. This time the filmmakers didn't try for a traditional remake, opting instead for a kind of homage in which egomaniacal star Jack Wyatt (Will Ferrell) unwittingly hires a real witch, Isabel (Nicole Kidman), to star in a TV remake of *Bewitched*, with the two of them playing Samantha and Darrin Stevens.

Evans (Samantha's father), along with the fey Doctor Bombay. Montgomery was an enduring, outspoken champion of the queer community who appeared at Gay Pride parades. And the other women in the cast—Endora (Agnes



Paul Lynde (right, with Dick York) helped make *Bewitched* TV's queerest comedy from 1964 to 1972.



Nicole Kidman and Will Ferrell reprise Samantha and Darrin Stevens in *Bewitched*.

While Kidman and Ferrell aren't supposed to be Samantha and Darren in the narrative proper, they're veritable doubles, with Kidman reprising *Bewitched* star Elizabeth Montgomery's mix of sweet and sultry, and Ferrell echoing Dick York's hysterics. Kidman, always likable, makes a middling Montgomery clone, though her character doesn't extend too far and her emotional explosions don't quite register. Ferrell is typically overanimated, with a few moments where some real emotion shines through his high jinks.

The rest of the cast is mostly wasted. Shirley MacLaine, given only a few scenes as Isabel's mother, Endora, looks lost, while talents like David Alan Grier and Amy Sedaris make little impression.

Still, there are enough laughs to make this a hit. Particularly funny is a scene in which Isabel uses her powers to make Jack impersonate a queen, a Mexican, a Brit—you name it—at an important production conference. Jack's nightmare of walking out naked onto *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* is also a winner.

Queer viewers may lament the lack of gay vibes in the movie. After all, this show was TV's Homo Central comedy from 1964 to 1972. It wasn't just the obvious queens—real-life gay men Paul Lynde (Uncle Arthur), Dick Sargent (the second Darrin) and Maurice

Moorhead), Esmeralda (Alice Ghostley) and shrieking shrew neighbor Gladys Kravitz (Sandra Gould and Alice Pearce)—look, dress and act like drag queens. If the movie version short-changes the queer motifs, fans can at

least comfort themselves with the original TV series, the first season of which has been released on DVD. The characters and their shtick make this show, and they're among TV's most memorable. Montgomery and York's chemistry remains a pleasure to watch after all these years. And the supporting characters are among TV comedy's most memorable: Darrin's conniving boss, Larry Tate, a sharp satire of the amoral Madison Avenue exec; Kravitz and her long-suffering husband, Abner, who never sees the witchery that drives his wife crazy; droll Endora and her witty attacks on Darrin; and, of course, all those homos.

Based on such Hollywood classics as *I Married a Witch* and *Bell, Book and Candle*, *Bewitched* broke ground on other levels besides the queer. It was the first sitcom in which a couple slept in the same bed and the first with a separated couple (Samantha's parents). And coming at the height of the civil rights era, it's hard not to read Sam and Darrin's "mixed marriage"—witch and mortal—as a sly comment on racism, which gives an added frisson to this sitcom classic. The four-disc DVD set includes a whopping 36 black-and-white episodes, a charming bloopers reel and an informative featurette, "The Magic Unveiled." **JM**

GARY MORRIS is a good witch, not a bad witch.