

The Stepford Wives Reality is Stepford

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Reality is Stepford: So Why Not Try Comedy?

In Hollywood's current mood of viewing the world via the rear-view mirror, the return of Ira Levin's *Stepford Wives* provides a curious commentary on social change during the last 29 years. Bryan Forbes original film, with William Goldman as scriptwriter, served as a paranoid riposte to the wave of feminism that emerged during the early 70s. The sci-fi/thriller proved controversial during its initial release, before being comfortably accredited cult status, in large part due to the patronage of gay audiences. Flash forward 29 years and Frank Oz's timing for the remake seems oddly out of place. How does one scare a modern audience with the spectre of feminism in a world already engrossed in the reality of "Stepford"—extreme makeovers, Martha Stewartism, and Oprah's soft-love. It simply can't be done and Oz doesn't even try. Sadly, Paul Rudnick's script for the updated film elicits little in the way of comedy, but it does restore to "Stepford" a renewed rationale for fearing aspiring women. More on this later...

The new improved *Stepford* is, not surprisingly, filmed in the same Connecticut town of Norwalk, which, true to its "back to the future" calling, has resisted any pressure to change in response to feminism, post-modernism, transcendentalism or any other "ism" for that matter. The perfect homes and perfect lawns of the very real Norwalk embody the ideals of fictional Stepford. Of course, not all remains the same in Oz's version of the film: a notable inflation informs the character of Joanna Eberhart. In the original film, Joanna was an aspiring semi-professional photographer. In retrospect, her feminist threat to patriarchal order was barely in

its infancy, posited on an attempt to secure a quiet afternoon for herself to develop some photos in the family's hall closet. In the update, Nicole Kidman's Joanna could never be such a slacker; modern Joanna is a network president providing images for the entire world!

Oz attempts a modicum of surprise, by offering Kidman not in the image of her ubiquitous fashion magazine cover star persona, but as a bland and repressed figure who takes delight in offering America dismal television content. Under the skin, this Joanna aspires to be the successor to Diana Christensen from Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), but never displays the ruthlessness and conviction that Faye Dunaway's character offered a generation earlier. Thwarted in her design to swamp America with crass "reality" television, Joanna is obliged to move to Stepford, ostensibly to convalesce, but we know better: this sleepy "perfect" community is little more than a purgatory for the decidedly urbanite Eberhart.

Once ensconced in her model home in Stepford, Joanna is immediately suspicious of her neighbours and community, but the source of this suspicion is telling. For her part, Katherine Ross' Joanna found her suspicions grounded in the explicit chauvinism of the Stepford community. Kidman's Joanna reacts less to this than to Stepford's penchant to celebrate the uncomplicated image of Norman Rockwell's America. Stepford's problem isn't a matter of the inequality of the sexes: the problem is it's the suburbs—and that ain't hip. Aided by her urban posse, Joanna proceeds to mock Stepford by attempting to dress like the natives

and match their obsession for home maintenance; her and her girls find the exercise demeaning and foolish, all the while remaining oblivious to their peril at the hands of the avenging suburban nightmare around them.

In the end, Oz eschews any pretence at engaging the thriller genre, but in a nod to the current trend in (what passes for) script writing, he does offer audiences the proverbial “surprise” ending, one which exposes the doyenne of the community, Claire Wellington (Glenn Close), to be the real villain. The choice of Close and her rationale for wreaking such havoc on the community speaks volumes about the new Stepford—post-feminism, indeed.

Close, who notably played Alex Forrest in Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* (1987), was the Reagan era poster-girl threat to the wandering and lustful male. The choice of Close for the role of the puppeteer of Stepford is deeply ironic. As Alex Forrest, Close embodied the threat that the unrestrained, sexually aggressive female posed to patriarchal authority. As Claire, Close damns her former identity as an abomination in her call to restore the image of patriarchal authority. In Claire’s world, it is liberated women who lead men astray, and this can’t be allowed to happen, hence the necessity of a robotic makeover on a community-wide scale.

With the election of Bill Clinton, America got both a philandering President and the recognition of the power of the “soccer moms.” Oz’s re-telling of *The Stepford Wives* seeks to bring these two cultural moments together in a story that once again assigns blame for society’s ills on the danger of the libidinous female. *Stepford* articulates that happiness is to be found in order and simplicity: a boxstore bought salve for the complications of the modern world.

The final irony of the film is found in the timing of its release, in the same summer that saw Martha Stewart convicted and sentenced both to jail and house arrest in the affluent suburbs of Connecticut. Like her onscreen alter-ego, Stewart has been held up for public condemnation: a sacrificial lamb whose public shaming serves to protect her corporate male counterparts who committed crimes of a far greater scale. At the end of the day, society still feels more comfortable blaming the woman.