

STARMAN

Some thing romantic



Only scientist Mark Shermin (Charles Martin Smith) recognizes that the extraterrestrial visitor has come in peace.

In spring 1981, Columbia Pictures found itself considering two alien-centric scripts, in the end holding onto one titled *Starman* while passing on the other, a family-friendly tale called *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, which wound up at Universal. The latter studio, which was heading into production at the same time on John Carpenter's alien-invasion chiller *The Thing*, put *E.T.* into the pipeline immediately, resulting in the unique problem (one that Columbia had consciously avoided) of one company having two similarly themed pictures in theaters simultaneously. When the films went head to head in summer 1982, it was *The Thing* that suffered critical and turnstile blows, and while *E.T.* director Steven Spielberg was lauded by the masses, Carpenter was sent packing, released from his multipicture deal with the house that Laemmle built.

The response to *The Thing* hurt the young director, who thought he had taken care with the cornerstone sci-fi story he so treasured. Carpenter was no stranger to science fiction, and despite staking his territory in genre cinema with *Halloween* and *The Fog*, aliens and outer space have always commanded his heart. As a child, Super-8 camera in hand, the budding filmmaker made short after short, most little more than a single scene, all takes on the sci-fi classics he adored. *Terror from Space*, *Sorcerer from Outer Space* and *Gorgon the Space Monster* are just a few of the "inspired by" titles of his early celluloid exploits.

Such was Carpenter's reverence for science fiction classics that he initially hesitated when offered the remake of *The Thing from Another World*. He knew what the original story by John W. Campbell Jr. meant to fans the world over, and more so, knew what the 1951 Howard Hawks-produced film meant to him. Once he focused on a return to the source material and the idea that the creature could look like anyone and anything, Carpenter boldly

set out on an odyssey of bizarre creatures, craft-defining FX and claustrophobic intensity that is now impossible not to consider a benchmark in genre cinema. "If [they] aren't here to kill us, what good are they?" he laughed of alien visitors in his interview for this magazine (see page 10). Then came *Starman*...

After the critical backlash and studio retaliation in the wake of *The Thing*, Carpenter decided to head in a new direction. He signed with Columbia, which, teaming with producer Michael Douglas, promptly presented him with the *Starman* screenplay, originally written by Bruce A. Evans and Raynold Gideon, that had gone through years of development and re-writes. The story couldn't have been a greater departure from *The Thing*, telling of an alien who arrives peacefully on Earth to evaluate its people, and falls in love as he races against death to his mission deadline. Not knowing where to turn next, but sure he had much to prove, Carpenter signed on, and the project moved into production with Jeff Bridges and



Traveling across the universe, and then across the country, the *Starman* (Jeff Bridges) reaches out to Jenny (Koren Allen).



Karen Allen cast in the leads.

The story begins with the alien's craft crashing in a remote wooded area of northern Wisconsin, the passenger making its way into the nearest house, belonging to recently widowed Jenny Hayden (Allen). As she sleeps, the being, at this point merely a glowing orb, sifts through a photo album to find an appropriate form, coming across strands of hair clipped from Jenny's deceased husband Scott and picking up on the DNA within. Jenny wakes and comes across an infant writhing on the floor, followed in rapid succession by fast evolution through all the stages of human development, ending up an exact adult clone of her beloved. "Scott" asks her to take him to a meeting place in Arizona, where his mission will end, and the pair set out on a cross-country trek—discovering each other, evading the authorities and making a few miracles happen along the way.

The shoot spanned the United States, from Nashville, Tennessee to Cedar Rapids, Iowa on through to the desert outside Winslow, Arizona, where the film's climax was staged. The \$24-million budget allowed for this expansive production, possibly the most far-reaching in Carpenter's canon, but the stretch wasn't only



The Starman doesn't understand yet that the lights are supposed to be outside the car.

geographic. Above all else, *Starman* is a love story—virgin territory for the director at the time, and subject matter he has yet to re-approach. Romantic story be damned, though; Carpenter brought along his dastardly bag of tricks, filling *Starman* with a series of unforgettable, challenging moments and setting his story afloat on the dark underlying threat that Bridges' friendly visitor essentially spends the entire film slowly dying.

Setting the picture up is the incredible living-room transformation in which the alien transitions from glowing orb to fully fleshed-out adult human. For this setpiece, Carpenter assembled an A-list team of industry vets to pull off what has become one of *Starman*'s signature moments. In July 1984, FANGORIA



In *Starman*, John Carpenter introduced an alien that eats things other than humans.



Photos: © Vynjita/Corbis/Im

Three top FX talents raised the visitor from baby to adult in a matter of minutes.

caught wind that Dick Smith was doing some work on the picture, and got the legend on the phone. "Stan Winston, Rick Baker and I are collaborating on it," Smith reported. "Each of us will do a separate element contained in one scene." Initially choreographed by Smith on his own, it was broken down into three stages, with each FX artist taking control of one. Baker handled the first illusion (the infant), Winston created the second (infant turns into boy), and Smith tackled the third (boy turns into man).

"Our total screen time will be less than a minute, but it is certainly a unique sequence," Smith related. "The prospect of the three of us working on the same film together definitely adds to the excitement."

In addition to that evolution, there are other memorable moments sprinkled throughout the picture, including the opening UFO crash, the *Starman* healing Jenny when she is mortally injured and the emotionally stirring resurrection of a deer tied to the hood of a hunter's car in a restaurant parking lot. Bridges plays the alien as a fish out of water, but manages to mine pure innocence and sincerity from a character forced to speak in stunted sentence fragments. While the *Starman* journeys against his own lethal biological clock, he makes time to give life and restore health to every damaged living thing that crosses his path. It is a remarkably kind portrait of the potential in humanity, and a marked 180-degree turn from

the distrust and inner struggle that permeates every character in *The Thing*.

As *Starman* falls somewhere between romance and science fiction, the film is Carpenter's greatest triumph in presenting a genuine relationship between a man and a woman. His pictures are often populated with men doing manly things alongside women of similar grit, but here he gives us the fragile, fawnlike Jenny, damaged by the loss of her greatest love, forced to confront the overwhelming emotion encountered when he "reappears" in her life. Bridges' visitor earns her heart through acts of kindness, taking her from complete distrust and confusion to earnest affection by the adventure's end. It doesn't matter that he's only "Scott" in flesh; he is just as, if not more, amazing than her lost beau, and her ability to give herself to the being that only days prior had so terrified her is proof positive that Carpenter can hand audiences the sublime as deftly as the nasty.

Starman did decent business at the box office, enough to satisfy Columbia—but more importantly, it offered Carpenter a stage on which to prove he was about more than beasties and bogeymen; under his guidance, Bridges received his first Best Actor Academy Award nomination. *Starman* is a brilliant, hopeful outing for an icon who has made a career out of trying to satisfy the fireless auteur within himself, all while unable to ignore his innate ability to entertain the masses. Perhaps the *Starman* and his creator aren't so distinct after all.

—Justin Boehm