

STEPMOM (1998)

Rated: PG-13.

Our content rating (1-10): Violence-0; Language3; Sex/Nudity

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Chris Columbus is best known as a director of funny movies that sometimes afford an insight or two into human nature and behavior, his films ranging from the cartoonish *Home Alone* to *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Only the Lonely*. If you came to his latest film because of the TV ads, you probably expected a comedy with a few revealing moments about the dynamics of divorce and remarriage. What you are met with instead is a comedy that turns into tragedy. This transition is not always handled well, the filmmakers apparently struggling with the original script to fashion a

three-handkerchief film that will send the audience away thinking they have witnessed something profound (the appearance of five names on the script credit line indicates that the producers thought it needed a lot of doctoring!). The title of the film should really be *Stepmom Vs. Supermom*, as the story is really more about Mom than *Stepmom*.

Stepmom is Isabel (Julia Roberts), a fashion photographer at the top of her profession who falls in love with Luke, a businessman with a daughter and a son. *Supermom*, Jackie (Susan Sarandon -for whom there ought to be a special award for the Ultimate Movie Mom. Witness her in *Safe Passage*, *Lorenzo's Oil*, and *Little Women*.), is a list-maker with the memory of two elephants. Everything is neatly organized and in place in her life and in the lives of those whom she loves when it lies in power. She is unable to abide the thought of sharing her children with another woman. Isabel has not been around children, but she is willing to accept and love them for the sake of her love for Luke.

This is not easy, because Anna and Ben have been turned into the Brats From Hell by their mother, always speaking ill of or criticizing Isabel. And there is plenty to criticize, as when Isabel takes the children with her to Central Park during a fashion shoot and becomes so engrossed in her work that she loses track of Ben. Supermom flies into orbit, vowing that she will go to court for an order barring all contact between Isabel and her children. Only the abject pleading of Luke stops her. Isabel's efforts to reach out to the children are rebuffed at first, but gradually she begins to win their trust and affection. And then matters become more complicated when Jackie learns that she has cancer, possibly a terminal case.

Despite a flawed script, the actors turn in powerful performances that make this a useful film for those wanting to explore the relationships of children and their divorced parents. There are so many split families in our churches that such issues ought to be aired. Certainly Stepmom presents a more realistic picture of divorce and its effects on children than Parent Trap, a film that served as the embodiment of the wish fulfillment of many children of divorce, such as myself.

There are also some neat moments of grace in the film: 1. Jackie has frequently castigated Isabel for her forgetfulness or tardiness. One day the school calls Isabel away from a photo shoot because Jackie has failed to show up. Over the objections of her boss, Isabel dashes off to the school to pick up the children. She tells the children that she is the forgetful one, and when Jackie does arrive, without giving any excuses, Isabel makes no comment to apprise the children that it was their mother who was at fault. 2. To connect better with Anna, Isabel broaches with Jackie her desire to take the girl to a Pearl Jam concert. Jackie nixes the idea of allowing her daughter out on a school night. The next thing we know Jackie tells Anna that she has two tickets to the concert. Anna is

ecstatic. Isabel makes no mention of the fact that it was her idea. 3. When Jackie is quite ill and cannot pick up the children from school, Isabel is called. Her director has had enough of her running off after the children. He gives her the ultimatum that it is either her work or the children. Isabel pauses for a moment, and then sets off for the children. 4. Isabel's gift to Jackie is a wonderful collection of life-sized blow-ups of photographs of Anna and Ben. Looking like cutouts of movie stars used for lobby displays, the figures have been placed around her room.

An interesting clash of values/ethics worth exploring: Anna, at the beginning of dating stage, complains of the cruel teasing by a boy she once liked. Jackie tells her to be mature and ignore the boy's public taunts, and he will give up. Anna does, but the public humiliations continue. When she tells Isabel her problem, her stepmom says she should not suffer in silence but do something. Isabel comes up with a plan involving one of the male models she has worked with. Anna is to tell the boy off and then to say that he can't compare to her high school boy friend. Her junior high friends and her tormentor will not believe her, so she is to walk over to the model, and they are to leave arm in arm. The plan works, boosting Anna's status greatly in the eyes of her classmates. This becomes one more bond between her and her stepmom. But Jackie is furious, telling Isabel that she has become a bad influence on her daughter. She has been trying to raise her to respect honesty and straightforwardness, and Isabel comes along and teaches her that she can lie and connive to get out of a difficult situation. What do you think: is this an example of the different values of different generations? Does Isabel's method sound similar to what we have been hearing coming out of the White House?

Also of interest: The farewell scenes between Jackie and her son and daughter are touching, but where is her hope in the face of death? Any sign of a faith in anything beyond the

human? How is this a reflection of the secular worldview underlying most Hollywood films?