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# MIB

**MEN IN BLACK**

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# MIB

## ALIENS, SMITH AND JONES

# MIB

BY JEREMY BLOOM AND JAQ GREENSPON

**S**ometimes, SF's magical sense of wonder can be accomplished without huge spaceships or "galaxies far, far away."

When we first meet Jay (Will Smith) in an early scene in Sony Picture's *Men In Black* (opening July 2 in the U.S. and August 1 in the U.K.), he's a perfectly average New York City cop chasing down a wrong-doer (OK, he's not average—he's in much better shape than the rest of the donut-snarfers in his unit, which is why *he's* doing the running). The perp, when finally cornered on the





roof of the Guggenheim Museum, starts babbling: "You don't understand ... the whole world will end...."

Then he blinks. And his eyelids close sideways.

Smith just stares ... and watches as the perp turns and jumps off the roof. Camera shot down: 20 stories. No body. What happened?

"I told them I wanted to make *The French Connection*, but with aliens," says director Barry Sonnenfeld. Instead of an undercover DEA, he's got an undercover agency that monitors aliens: the Men In Black (based on the Lowell Cunningham comic book of the same name). Not Mexican-type aliens — Martian-type aliens. And we're talking deep undercover. So deep the world's governments don't even know anything about it. The Man From UNCLE meets Buckaroo Banzai.

"The thing I really liked about the script was that it is reality-based," says Sonnenfeld. "It takes place in New York, and it's all about these guys on the street who are basically saving the entire planet while never allowing what they're doing to become public knowledge. That's also where the comedy comes in."

Earth needs an agency like *Men In Black* because, in a galaxy full of wonders and marvels, the only aliens who would ever bother coming to a backwater Podunk like Terra are the scum of the universe. We're talking con artists with ray guns and terrorists who don't mind ripping your face off and using it as a temporary disguise. Messy stuff.

Agent Kay (Tommy Lee Jones) and his cohorts have spent the past 30 years as part of this very high-tech cleanup crew, making sure life goes on as normal for the

unknowing citizens of our fair planet. Sometimes they have to get a little heavy-handed, destroying evidence, wiping memories ... but hey, it's a small price to pay for normalcy.

Enter Smith, who is enticed to leave his old life behind to join the elite MIB by Jones, the wise-beyond-his-years agent who has seen it all. Twice.

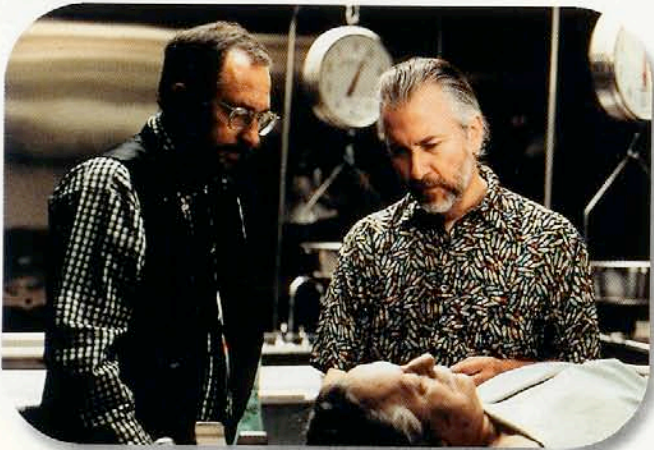
From there it could have become just your average buddy-cop flick, with the grizzled, cynical, sarcastic, about-to-retire veteran having his faith restored by the fresh-faced, innocent, optimistic, energetic, enterprising young rookie. But not with the likes of Sonnenfeld at the helm, any more than *Get Shorty* was just a mafia film, or *Addams Family* was just a campy suburban comedy.

**T**O MAKE *MIB* SUCCEED TOOK THREE THINGS.

Style: The futuristic, '60s-look sets by Academy Award-winner Bo Welch are fun without descending to kitsch.

Drama: Saving the world is a little old hat by now, but it's always serious business (which is why *Star Trek: Generations* lacked a punch — nobody important had their world threatened). The destruction of your home planet cannot be laughed off (one reason why *Mars Attacks!* bombed).

And performance: Smith and Jones don't milk the comedy; when you set up the contrast between the mundane and the totally-out-there, and you don't need laugh tracks or rim-shots from the drummer to tell you somebody just said something funny. Jones is particularly effective at this,



with his been-there cool and his done-that face (no T-shirt, though: white button-down, to go with the basic-black suit).

But how do you show a world where nothing is what it seems yet everything is normal? "What I love is taking a scene you've seen a thousand times in a thousand cop movies, and giving it the alien twist. That makes the comedy."

**J**ONES TAKES SMITH TO A PAWN SHOP TO TRY AND squeeze information out of the weasly little guy behind the counter. So far a typical cop-movie device, right? When he doesn't get what he wants, an exasperated Jones pulls out his blaster and splatters the guy's oozy green brains all over the wall, much to Smith's surprise. Smith is even more surprised when, as they watch, a replacement head grows out of the ruin of the old one like an inflating balloon. "You bastard," the guy says when he's got a working face again. "Do you have any idea how much that smarts?"

It's that tongue-in-cheek smartness that makes this film work. Reality with a quirky dose of weirdness — but not the eye-rolling, mugging for the camera goofiness that messed up other attempts at the genre, like *Mars Attacks!* That has generally been the case when Hollywood has drawn from the comics for inspiration: when the caped crusaders of the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises are treated as a plausible part of the real world, the humor flows naturally. When you force the jokes, make the world one big whoopie cushion, no one buys in and you end up with *Judge Dredd*. Or *Barb Wire*.

Which is why *Addams Family* and *Addam's Family Values* worked for Sonnenfeld; and he has applied the sensibility to this, his first SF film and fifth outing as director (his first with veteran Steven Spielberg in the executive producer's chair). And while it may seem a departure, thematically all of his films have the same connection: an alien (of one kind or another) trying to fit, somehow, into a society it knows nothing about.

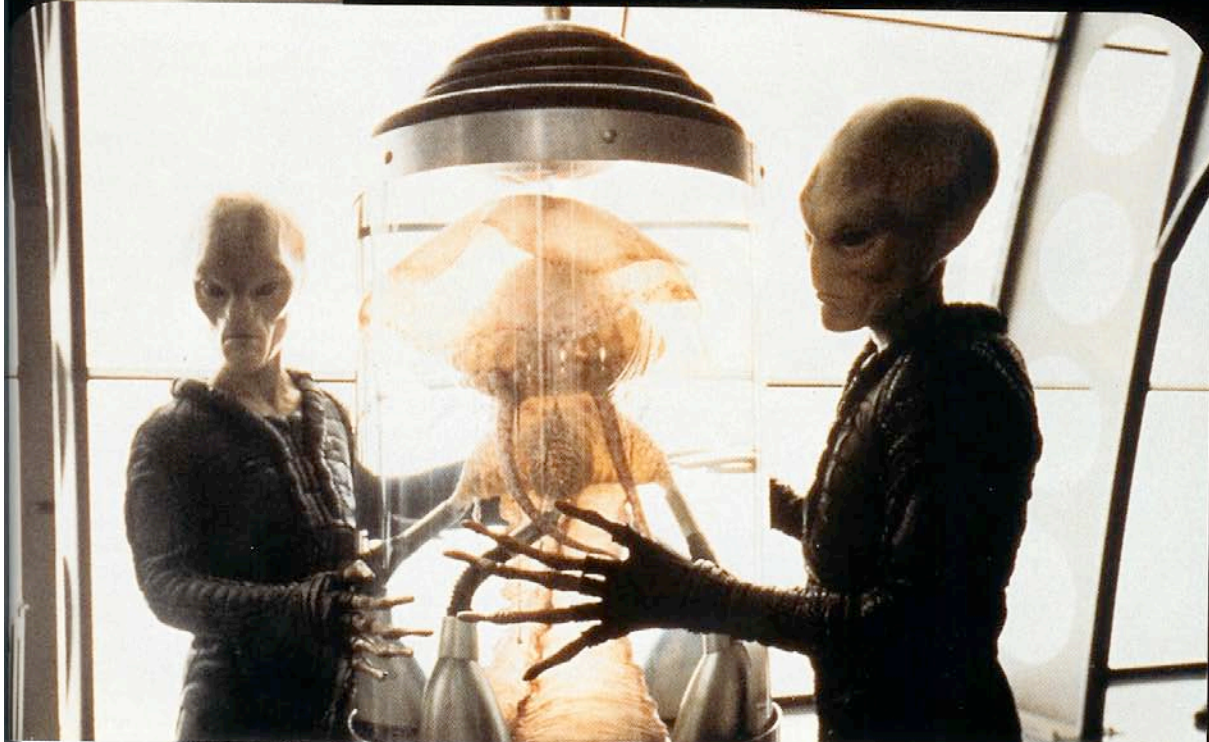
**S**ONNENFELD FELT THAT WAY, HIMSELF, WORKING WITH THE TECHNO-droid wizards at Industrial Light & Magic. *The Addams Family* films had used no computer-generated special effects (Thing, for instance, was played live on camera by an actor). For the aliens of *MIB*, the director knew he was going to be venturing into territory he had never covered before and that computers would only be able to handle part of the job. To complete the enormous task of making the creatures as believable as possible, Sonnenfeld brought in Rick Baker, make-up effects man extraordinaire.

ILM's computer sequences are fine for fast-moving dinosaurs or spaceships. But for character sequences — with faces that give expression, nuance, depth — you need the mask magic of a Baker (whose work has ranged from the cantina scene in *Star Wars* to Academy-Award-winning work on *American Werewolf in London* to the Eddie Murphy seven-character tour de farce in *The Nutty Professor*).

"When you work with an actor in a costume or suit or whatever Rick wants to call it," Sonnenfeld explains, "you're first of all working with an actor. When you're working with ILM, although you will ultimately get what you want, you are now actually trying to direct performance with guys who are basically really good with computers.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Wil Smith's green rookie and Tommy Lee Jones' veteran form an unlikely union.

**BELOW LEFT:** Barry Sonnenfeld and Rick Baker oversee production in an autopsy room. **BELOW:** Rick Baker's FX crew was pushed to the limit, designing an entire galaxy of varying alien types.





"They would show me work in progress and it would be, 'It's not funny. This still looks like a puppet, it doesn't look real,' and they would say 'What do you mean?' And I'd say, 'It doesn't look ... real.' When you work with actors, a director and an actor have a common language. You can say things like 'Faster, flatter, don't show me the comedy,' and the actor will know what you mean."

With ILM, he literally had to spend months (the film was a year in post-production) looking at shots and trying to define to them what makes a film funny. "And I couldn't tell them how to fix it, because I don't know. I didn't know what to draw on a computer graphics tablet. And they'd


say, 'What do you mean? You want more secondary muscle movement?' And I'd say, 'I don't know, you tell me!'

"And now, after a year of this, they understand, and I'd like to start over with them *now*. Because they get it. There are shots that took six months to get, in terms of character performance."

**T**HE COMPUTER GUYS HAVE BEEN BREAKING new ground the past couple of years because they can. The powerful software — and the powerful computers to drive it — just weren't there before (imagine writing the programming for the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* in Fortran using punch cards!). But not every filmmaker has the drive and the vision to push the ILMs and the patience to let it happen. Because of the amount of time and care involved here, *MIB* will likely be counted along with *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as one of the films that pushed the envelope on effects.

But Baker isn't worried about losing his job. "Rubber monsters may have a limited time left. But at one point, when *T2* came out, we had a really dry time. Everyone was thinking our stuff was done. But I've been really busy the past few years."

For one thing, he's been able to use computers in his own designs, in the development stages, and that's brought his own costs down. But he adds that he's not setting up to compete with ILM either. "Really, it's two completely different things. There's no way I could compete with the guys at ILM, they have the computers and the expertise. But those guys understand physics, and



they stare at their monitors but they don't really understand performance. Which is also the really fun part of what we do."

Sonnenfeld agrees. "I hear Jim Cameron wants to make a movie where some of the characters are computer-generated," he says, "but I think they'd better be androids. It works for aliens, but even that is totally performance-driven. And it's hard to do."

There are three scenes in *MIB* involving three-foot-tall Baker-designed aliens called, for reasons that are obvious when you see them, the "worm guys." The first scene was done physically, with puppets. Each of them was manipulated by a team of puppeteers, and what nuances they came up with gave each of the "worm guys" an individual character (none of which was scripted).

"If we hadn't had the puppeteers, none of these subtleties would have come out," says Sonnenfeld. "The ILM guys aren't actors. So the other two scenes are entirely computer-generated, but because Rick's puppeteers had created these characters and these performances, they had that depth."

On the other hand, ILM's creatures can do things that Rick's can't, in terms of physically flying through space and running. There's one shot in this movie, a continuous sequence that begins in a closeup with a car and ends on another planet. Without a cut.

"You can't pull a dolly for that," laughs Sonnenfeld. "That's the great thing about computer animation."

**A**ND WHILE IT IS EXTREMELY COOL TO BE able to do that, the best thing about it is you *don't* notice unless you really think about it. Sonnenfeld says he was pushing for that kind of seamlessness. He wanted the aliens to be "normal," not show-stoppers.

"You know the cantina scene in *Star Wars*?" he asks. "It was great, but the movie sort of stops and you get to watch this scene with aliens. If you're stopping all the time and saying 'How did they do that?' then you're not buying them as real people."

"The funny thing is," he adds, "the way I want to break new ground is in having these guys so real, so integrated into the scene, and so commonplace in terms of Smith and Jones' reactions, that people will be walking out after the film saying 'I thought there were supposed to be computer graphics.' The best work is invisible. Baker's and ILM's creature design stuff is the best out there, and the proof is that at the end of the day it doesn't look like we spent a fortune on this."

"Which we did." □

**ABOVE LEFT:** A production sketch for one of *Men In Black's* many action sequences. **BELOW LEFT:** In a genre awash with computer-generated effects, Rick Baker's boundless imagination proves that there is still a place for groundbreaking make-up. **BELOW:** Linda Fiorentino, winner of the New York Film Critics Circle Best Actress Award for *The Last Seduction*, brings her talents to bear as Dr. Laurel Weaver.

