E.T.: THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

1982

It was 1982. Former movie star Ronald Reagan's presidency was in its second year. Federal authorities were hunting a lunatic lacing Tylenol bottles with cyanide. Aussie band Men At Work dominated the airwaves. And the world was enraptured by a visit from an extra-terrestrial.

Unlike the terrifying alien invasion depicted in the 1938 radio drama *War of the Worlds,* which left panicked listeners drawing their shades and running for cover, this creature from outer space, an endearing figment of director Steven Spielberg's imagination, left moviegoers looking longingly into the sky and yearning for a real-life encounter with the being they had come to know as E.T.

The idea for *E.T.* materialized one day while Spielberg was directing the adventure film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on location in the middle of the Tunisian desert. He was pondering the seashells he had come across in the sand. Thousands of miles away from his home in Los Angeles, he recalled feeling alone and "a bit separated" from himself. In that moment, he found inspiration. Over the next few days, a story evolved in Spielberg's mind about a lonely boy who finds the most unlikely friend right in his own backyard.

Serendipitously, screenwriter Melissa Mathison was also on the *Raiders* set, visiting her soon-to-be-husband Harrison Ford. Mathison had penned the script for the 1979 movie *The Black Stallion,* based on the poignant novel about a young boy stranded on a deserted island

with a wild horse. Spielberg asked Mathison to write the screenplay for a new film. At the time, neither of them could know that it was the beginning of the cinematic legend *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial.*

Spielberg had long been fascinated with the idea of space travel and aliens from other worlds. His father was a sci-fi buff, constantly reading books about terrifying creatures from outer space that sought dominion over Earth. Spielberg's dad also instilled in him the perception that technologically advanced space travelers would probably be more benevolent, and that was the idea behind Spielberg and Mathison's friendly three-foot-tall E.T.

It took Mathison only eight weeks to finish the first draft, which Spielberg read in about an hour. The story about a boy who befriends and shelters an abandoned alien was rich in meaning and subtext, with relevance for any child suffering from loneliness. Profoundly moved by the script, Spielberg admitted that his empathy for E.T.'s predicament was partly born out of his own forlorn feelings about his parents' divorce.

Excitedly, he took the project to Sidney Sheinberg, then head of Universal Pictures, who green-lighted *E.T.* almost immediately.

Dee Wallace was cast as Mary, the mother of three kids who was struggling emotionally over her recent separation from her husband. Fourteen-year-old Robert McNaughton landed the part of eldest son Michael. Spielberg was impressed by his experience as a young

stage actor and his remarkable professionalism. Drew Barrymore, the six-year-old daughter of actor John Drew Barrymore and great-niece of Lionel Barrymore, was picked for the role of Gertie, the adorable, precocious little sister.

Spielberg had first met Barrymore while casting *Poltergeist*. Although Barrymore didn't get a part in that movie, Spielberg was so impressed by her rambunctious spirit and her proclivity to make up stories that he encouraged her to come back for future projects. He had already auditioned many kids for the part of Gertie, but when Barrymore came in, she brashly announced that she could improve his movie, and he cast her on the spot.

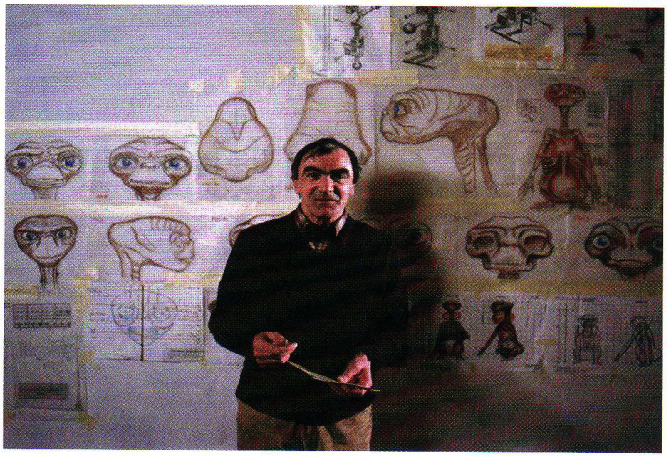
Finding the right actor to play E.T.'s human soul mate, Elliot, was an ordeal. Spielberg had already auditioned more than one hundred kids when a colleague steered him toward a bright nine-year-old actor from San Antonio, Texas, named Henry Thomas. The audition was a heart-wrenching experience for everyone in the room. Borrowing a scenario from the film, Spielberg told Thomas to imagine that he had an alien in his house, that the creature was his friend, and that a man from NASA was going to try to take it away. The audition was videotaped with casting director Mike Fenton assuming the role of the NASA official.

"No! You can't take him away; he's mine," asserted Thomas, his eyes welling up with tears.

"But it's not my choice—the president asked me to come here and get him," Fenton replied.

Thomas cried defiantly, "I don't care what the president says—he's my best friend, and you can't take him away!"

"Okay, kid," interrupted Spielberg, "you got the job."



Thomas's emotional intuition and irreverent response could not have been more accurate. Defying authority was one of the core themes in the story.

The movie opens with E.T. foraging through the woods under cover of night, lifting a sapling from the soft floor of the redwood forest. It's revealed that he is right on the outskirts of the city. Suddenly, trucks come roaring up, and several men carrying flashlights leap out and start chasing the little creature through the forest. The men's faces are cast in shadow to imply the impersonal face of adult authority. The concept of childhood innocence at odds with an indifferent adult world permeates the film.

Panicked, E.T. scurries desperately through the woods, trying to escape his pursuers. Actually, it was only a mounted red light moving along a track behind a thicket of ferns, but the illusion was effective. E.T. cries as he tries to make it to his spaceship, but he's too late and is abandoned. The infantlike cry that evoked sympathy for the little stranded alien was actually the recorded squeal of a sea otter.

Indeed, in stark contrast to the menacing space creatures from the sci-fi films of the 1950s, there was nothing remotely frightening about E.T. With big sad eyes, he looked a bit like a tortoise without its shell. E.T.'s creator, Carlo Rambaldi, actually modeled E.T.'s eyes on the knowing, saddened look that Spielberg saw in the eyes of Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, and Carl Sandburg.

Given the limitations of special effects technology in the early '80s, it was indeed a tall order to create the realistic little creature. But Rambaldi, who had worked on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* and his crew of special effects artists were up to the task. In all, three different models were devised: a mechanical E.T. attached to control boxes that were manipulated by twelve different operators, a radio-controlled electronic version for facial close-ups, and an E.T. suit, worn by special E.T. movement performers. The latter was used for the scenes in which E.T. actually moved around the set. Rambaldi and team also constructed four interchangeable heads for E.T., each of which was equipped with a neck that could be raised and lowered like a miniature periscope.

The movie takes an emotional turn when Mary finally discovers E.T. in her home. It is clear that he is dying, yet her immediate maternal instinct is to protect her children from him. But when government scientists and doctors invade their home, her maternal instincts extend to her children's new best friend. The men from the government are all clad in helmeted white protective coverall suits, obscuring their identities in yet another statement about the cold, insensitive nature of

authority. But there's one exception: the sympathetic character of Keys, played by Peter Coyote, who tells Elliot that the presence of E.T. on Earth is "a miracle."

When the scene called for reviving the dying extra-terrestrial, Spielberg decided to use real doctors from the University of Southern California Medical Center instead of actors. He didn't think actors could assimilate all the medical jargon and play the scene convincingly.

Once E.T. is revived, Michael and Elliot kidnap the creature from the scientists to help him escape back to his home planet. As they ride their bikes at full speed toward a police roadblock, a suspense-filled confrontation is averted as E.T. summons his powers and the bikes take flight up into the sky. Audiences cheered, but Steven Spielberg winced. It had always bothered him that the police held rifles and pistols in the movie and that the children were menaced by that kind of threat from the authorities.

For the twentieth anniversary of *E.T.*, Spielberg rereleased the film and employed state-of-the-art computer-generated visual effects to alter the scene. In the revised version, as the kids soar above the roadblock, the cops are no longer wielding guns and rifles but instead hold walkie-talkies in their hands.

If the tone during the film shoot was sometimes heartrending and somber, behind the scenes the making of *E.T.* was quite another matter. Spielberg created a family atmosphere on the set, getting to know all the players on a personal level to understand how they worked best. He played video games with Henry Thomas and treated Drew Barrymore like she was his own daughter. He even showed up to direct the Halloween scene in costume, dressed as a matronly schoolteacher. In retrospect, Spielberg muses that the cast of *E.T.* was like his first family. Drew Barrymore once said of the experience of making *E.T.*, "I think in a lot of ways we were taught love."

In *E.T.*, Spielberg created such an endearing character that the cast, crew, and millions of moviegoers were able to ignore the special effects and suspend disbelief. *E.T.* opened on June 11, 1982, to record box office and went on to gross over three quarters of a billion dollars worldwide. Spielberg asserts that while *Schindler's List* is his most significant film, *E.T.* remains his most personal. The movie's time-honored tale of innocence versus authority is universal, and that is the reason it remains one of the most memorable films in the history of modern cinema.