



Elizabeth Montgomery was born to play Samantha, the supernatural being who reveals her powers to her mortal husband only after the wedding. But the launch of ABC's *Bewitched* — which would run from 1964 to 1972 — and the casting of the beguiling blonde were fraught with Hollywood hurdles. As fans mark what would have been Montgomery's eightieth birthday, biographer Herbie J Pilato reveals how *Bewitched* — with its beloved star — almost didn't make it to the screen.

# The Natural

**The pilot for *Bewitched* began rehearsals on November 23, 1963** — the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

The night before, Elizabeth and Bill Asher were at home, wrestling with what in perspective was a minor frustration, but one that later became a major magic snag: they had yet to conceive of a unique and identifiable gesture with which Samantha could manifest her magic.

Fortunately, a creative spark provided a proverbial light when Bill, from the living room, shouted to Lizzie, "That's it!" Hearing her husband scream, she rushed to his side to offer comfort during what sounded like a pressing tragedy. But that was yet to come. For now, Bill simply asked, "What's that thing you do with your nose?"

Clueless, she queried in return, "What thing?"

"When you become nervous, you move your nose in a certain way," Bill prodded.

"He thought I just didn't want to do it or something," she would remember in 1989. "The next time I do this [thing]," she told him, "let me know."

But at that moment in 1963, Lizzie became so flustered that she instinctively performed what has transmuted into one of the world's

most recognizable facial tics. Bill then went on to explain what he had seen and what she had done and, in those joyful moments, Samantha's nose twitch was born, igniting the eventual birth of *Bewitched* — on the night before a catastrophic incident that would change the world.

Elizabeth remembered that fateful day, which began like any other, if at first unique only because she was preparing to leave for her first *Bewitched* rehearsal. As the early hours passed, the events of this new atypical day expanded. As she recalled in 1989, she was brushing her hair in the bedroom and heard Bill scream from the living room. But this time, it wasn't a good thing.

"No! It can't be true!" he said.

"For some reason," she said in 1989, "I felt it

had nothing to do with family. But it's as if I inherently knew what had happened. The whole thing was very strange, but to keep on working did seem to be the right thing to do."

So that's exactly what they did. Lizzie and Bill pushed forward and went to the set of *Bewitched*, which filmed at Sunset Gower Studios in Hollywood. She remembered:

We went ahead and had the first reading of the script. There wasn't one person that didn't show up. There weren't any phone calls made. It was like everyone on the set just needed to talk with each other. It was like a little memorial service that hadn't turned into that yet. Everyone was there supporting each other [during] this horrendous thing.

Essentially, Lizzie, Bill and the rest of the *Bewitched* cast and crew did what should always be done in the midst of tragedy: realize that, for the living, life must go on.



**T**he seeds of *Bewitched* had been planted long before by Columbia/Screen Gems studio executives William Dozier and Harry Ackerman, the latter having envisioned a supernatural sitcom that he titled *The Witch of Westport*.

In early 1963, Dozier and Ackerman (both of whom died in 1991) hired writer Sol Saks to write the pilot script, "I, Darrin, Take This Witch, Samantha," and *Bewitched* was born.

Dozier, then vice-president of Screen Gems West Coast operations, detailed Samantha's genesis for *TV Guide* in a January 1968 article, "The Man Who Helped Deliver a \$9,000,000 Baby Tells How It All Happened."

In periodic meetings in 1963, Dozier and Ackerman discussed potential new TV projects, one of which was about a mortal wedded to a supernatural being, who did not reveal her persuasion until their honeymoon. Shortly after these meet-

ings, Dozier lunched with George Axelrod, author of the 1952 play *The Seven-Year Itch*. It was then Dozier suggested the concept for a sorceress sitcom, which delighted Axelrod, who very much wanted to write the pilot.

An agreement was bartered with Axelrod's agent, Irving Lazar, and work was to commence immediately. But there was an issue. Lazar had also managed to cut a significant deal for his client to write, produce and potentially direct several feature films for United Artists, which also wanted Axelrod to start work at once.

To alleviate the conflict, a generous Dozier released Axelrod from his Screen Gems commitment and then met with writer Charles Lederer who, like Axelrod, immediately recognized the potential of a witch series. But Lederer was also involved with another job, in this case, writing the screenplay for MGM's 1962 feature *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

In stepped Sol Saks, with whom Dozier and Ackerman had both worked at CBS, where he had

penned *My Favorite Husband* for Ackerman and Peck's *Bad Girl* for Dozier. Saks was commissioned to write the pilot script he tentatively titled *Bewitched*.

Around the time Saks was hired, New York actress Tammy Grimes was under contract to Screen Gems. Then the star of the Broadway hit *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, Grimes had signed not only to do a series for Screen Gems, but one or more films for its feature film unit, Columbia Pictures. Upon reading his witch script, Grimes requested changes from Saks, who sent along revisions after she returned to New York.

While that transpired, Dozier was approached by an enthusiastic agent, Tom Tannenbaum, who wanted very much to team his clients with a show for Screen Gems. Those clients were Elizabeth Montgomery and Bill Asher.

As fate would have it, Dozier was a friend to Elizabeth, with whom he had long wanted to do a series, and Ackerman — Dozier's Columbia colleague — was a CBS executive during the reign of *I Love Lucy*, countless episodes of which Bill had guided. Now with Screen Gems, Ackerman was executive producer for a host of the studio's very popular TV programs, not the least of which was *Father Knows Best* (costarring Elinor Donahue, who would become his wife in real life).

Whom would Darrin wed on *Bewitched*? That die was yet to be cast. For the moment, Dozier and Ackerman were working on finding Samantha.

By this time, the Columbia-contracted Grimes was considering the lead in Noel Coward's new Broadway musical, *High Spirits*, which he had also signed to direct. Based on his previous hit play, *Blithe Spirit*, *High Spirits* centered on a female ghost and, like *Bewitched*, embraced a fantasy-comedy.

Grimes's choices were similar but different: would she portray a sorceress or a specter? She ultimately chose the latter and, like writer George Axelrod, was released from her contract with Columbia.

In 2007 she told writer Peter Filichia and *Theatre Mania's* online magazine: "I vetoed the script they gave me." In 1963 she told the studio: "This Samantha has all these powers? Well, then why isn't she stopping wars? Why isn't she fixing traffic in Los Angeles, saying to all of those drivers, 'Just a second — I'll soon get you all home.'"

However, she said, Columbia didn't agree with her, so they "went to Elizabeth Montgomery."

When asked if she regretted the decision, Grimes replied: "No, but I used to wonder what would have happened if I'd done it. I probably would have done far more television and less theater. So it's all right."

Yet as Harry Ackerman recalled in *The Bewitched Book*, Grimes did indeed regret not starting on *Bewitched*. "I run into her every two or three years, and she's still kicking herself for not having done [the show]."

Although years later Elizabeth decided to end *Bewitched* — and made every creative attempt to distance herself from the series after it ended — she threw herself into the role of Samantha and felt "eternally grateful" to Grimes for rejecting it. "I didn't get the part because I beat out hundreds of women in some huge casting call that was painstakingly narrowed down to me," she explained. "Tammy said no, I said yes, and I was simply at the right place at the right time."

That "right time" occurred shortly after she and Bill Asher completed production on the feature film *Johnny Cool*, in which she starred and he directed, and during which they fell in love. Enamored with him, she became disinterested in acting, mostly because of the grueling schedules and distant film locations that meant extended periods away from the new love of her life.

Bill, however, did not want her to disengage from her craft. "I felt that would have been a great loss," he said in 1988. "She had a lot to offer the industry, and she should be working, for herself as well as for her contributions to the business."

Consequently he suggested the possibility of working on a series with her, during which there would be no periods of separation. "And Liz was all for that," he added.

Although Lizzie and Bill met for the first time on *Johnny Cool*, she was well aware of his work. As she recalled in *Modern Screen* magazine in 1965, she had rejected a number of series and always said if she did decide to do a show, "it would be wonderful to get William Asher."

Got him, she did. But initially Bill wasn't all that excited about getting Lizzie — as a thespian, that is. He always said the last thing he'd ever do was fall in love with an actress. Yet, as he too told *Modern Screen*, he soon realized that Lizzie was "special, very definitely special. She has none of the personality that usually goes with a personality. She doesn't possess the slightest affectation. She isn't affected by adulation. She's first of all what she is. Second, she's an actress."

"What he means," Lizzie chimed in at the time, "is that the only drive I have is to get home." Still, she often wondered if it was possible to be both a good actress and a happy woman. When she met Julie Andrews, she knew it was possible. In her view, Andrews appeared "extremely happy."

And like Lizzie, Andrews would for years be associated with an iconic magical female role: *Mary Poppins* was released on the big screen in 1964, the same year *Bewitched* debuted on the small screen.

Bill's TV edition of *Couple* (based on a novel by John Haase) featured a character named Ellen, the world's wealthiest woman, who falls for an average Joe — actually, an auto mechanic named Bob. As Bill explained in 1988, *Couple* was "a real Getty's daughter-type thing," set at the beach where "nobody knows each other's last names." In this way, *Couple* was akin to his *Beach Party* movies of the era and the *Gidget* series he directed for ABC, Columbia and Ackerman. It also

sounded an awful lot like Lizzie and Bill's reality, minus the auto-mechanic aspect.

Somewhere between the first *Beach* movie and *Gidget*, Bill brought *Couple* to Dozier, who would later give the green light to his high-concept 20th Century Fox shows for ABC, like *Batman* and *The Green Hornet*. Dozier liked the *Couple* premise but suggested that Bill meet with Ackerman. "He's got something in mind that's very similar," Bill recalled Dozier saying, "and you might like it better."



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**T**he Fun Couple — that's what Lizzie and Bill were considered in Hollywood, and that was the title of the show they intended to work on together when they first approached Screen Gems.

Dozier, of course, was referring to *Bewitched*, which was an opposites-attract comedy that featured an attractive young woman who just happened to be a witch. Couple was an opposites-attract comedy that featured an attractive young woman who happened to be rich. Dozier's instincts proved to be "on the nose." Bill not only favored *Bewitched*, he said he and Lizzie "flipped over it."



In retrospect, it appears Columbia was merely storing the *Bewitched* pilot until Lizzie and Bill arrived on the scene. Due to Ackerman's Lucy affiliation with Bill, the studio was aware of his strength in directing TV female leads. The studio also respected Lizzie's artistic body of work. As she perceived it, those in power saw the writing on the wall. "Columbia felt that Bill and I would work well together," she intoned in 1989 with a wink and a smile. "An extraordinarily good producer-director teamed with someone who at least looks like she could do the job."

But creative conflicts continued to arise that almost thwarted the game. Beyond the basic script and casting decisions, the series was having issues with budget and with the Writers Guild, which claimed the show's premise was lifted from the 1942 feature film *I Married a Witch*.

A fantasy-comedy classic, *Married* is considered one of the best English-language motion pictures of its time. As directed by French film maestro René Clair, the ingenious story (based on a novel by Topper author Thorne Smith) cast the enchanting Veronica Lake as Jennifer, a sexy seventeenth-century sorceress, who appears in modern-day New England to haunt a gubernatorial candidate played by Fredric March, a descendent of the Puritan who condemned her. But she falls for him instead. March portrays various incarnations of his character through the years, adding to the film's style, wit and inventiveness.

After the *Bewitched* pilot was filmed, Bill Asher was asked if he had seen Clair's masterpiece. He had not. "And besides," Bill clarified in 1988, "there wasn't any valid comparison between the two concepts, certainly none which would have invited any legal ramifications. *Bewitched* began where the movie ended. Our story was about a married couple, and the movie was about a courtship."

One bullet was dodged — at least until former child star-turned-studio executive Jackie Cooper came into the fold. According to *Bewitched* director Richard Michaels, quoted in 1988, "Bill was the unnamed producer of the show from the beginning." When Cooper replaced Dozier as a top executive for Columbia, the studio sought to avoid bestowing series control to husband-and-wife business teams due to a not-so-positive experience with *The Donna Reed Show*, which was produced by its star and her spouse, Tony Owen.

"Jackie came in and saw me controlling things from a distance," Bill explained in 1988. "He tried to institute a policy which would prohibit Liz and me from working on *Bewitched*, and we damn near didn't do the show."

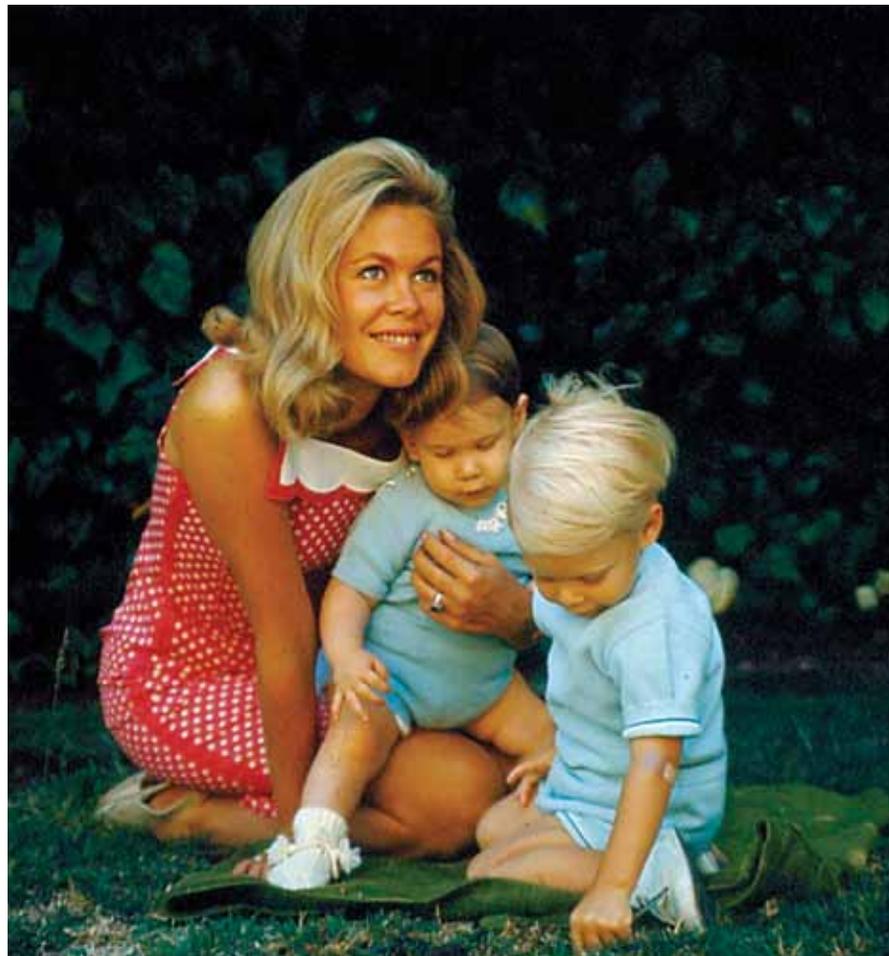
In his autobiography, *Please Don't Shoot My Dog*, Cooper said he learned rather quickly the "art of dealing with people and, specifically, how

to be an executive." He never doubted the potential of *Bewitched*, he explained, and was eager to work with Lizzie, whom he had met when she was a teenager. She was "already beautiful and already very strong and positive," he said. She would remain so when they met on two future occasions: first, when she was married to Gig Young and, later, when she was with Bill Asher, whom Cooper — like Harry Ackerman and other industry insiders — had known as the director of *I Love Lucy*.

In January 1964, two months after filming was completed on the *Bewitched* pilot, Cooper and Lizzie reconnected, at her invitation. She wanted to discuss a business matter. He suggested they have lunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel. After the meal, her tone apparently became formal and she requested that Cooper honor the promises allegedly made by Dozier, his Columbia predecessor.

She wanted Bill to be secured as core producer and showrunner of *Bewitched*, with Ackerman serving as executive producer. She had her own ideas of which direction *Bewitched* should go, and she wanted those concepts incorporated into future scripts. She was to retain casting and director approval and wanted Bill to direct the first eight or nine episodes.

Cooper thought such "promises" sounded



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quite unlike Dozier. In response, Lizzie apparently just glared at him with what he described as her "big blue eyes," which were actually green and could become "very steely when she wanted them to."

Lizzie's animated pupils merely added to her arsenal of unique facial expressions, which, according to Cooper, in this instance emphasized a straightforward decision not to do *Bewitched*. "It's too bad," she told him on leaving their lunch meeting. "It would have been a nice little show."

Back at his office, Cooper contacted her agent, Tom Tannenbaum, and said he would have to inform Columbia's New York senior executive, Jerry Harmon, of the developments. Harmon would then be obligated to notify ABC, which undoubtedly would cancel *Bewitched* before it hit the air — unless a mutually satisfactory replacement actress could be found, which Cooper assumed would be highly unlikely.

"Please hold the fort," Tannenbaum told Cooper. "Don't do anything until I talk to her."

A short time later, Tannenbaum called back with what Cooper expected to be a mere confirmation: Lizzie was indeed quitting. But Cooper stood his ground. As he wrote in *Please Don't Shoot My Dog*:

There were good reasons not to go along with her demands. Ackerman was a tried-and-true TV producer. He should be in charge. No way was Billy [Asher] going to direct the first eight or nine shows — nobody in his right mind did that. Casting and director approval? Not in my studio. And if she had ideas as to the direction the show was going, fine, but let her funnel them through the producer.

Cooper then called Tom Moore, head of ABC, and explained what had transpired. Despite the odds, Moore thought there was a possibility of finding another actress to play Samantha, so Cooper instructed his casting office to start looking for someone who would fit Lizzie's age and type. He didn't tell the press of the recent development, and neither did Lizzie, which he was pleased to learn. Still, there was a leak.

In those days, Hollywood gossip columnists had "moles" on the payroll in every studio. Consequently, the story seeped into the trades, stating that "Elizabeth Montgomery was unhappy at Screen Gems," and no one denied it.

During the casting search, the studio found three actresses who proved they could play Samantha. Screen tests were arranged, a director was hired, and Dick York, already signed to costar as Darrin, was brought in to work with the potential replacements.

But the day before the screen tests were to commence, Cooper claimed a messenger



appeared at his office door, bearing Lizzie's handwritten note of apology. Apparently she'd realized that her demands were incongruent with her contract and that she should have respected and trusted Cooper's discretion. She promised not to insist that Bill produce or direct, and said she would work well with Harry Ackerman. She hoped Cooper would keep Bill in mind for the future.

In Cooper's eyes, Lizzie's note was a victory, but he wanted to officially secure her words. So he brought the note to the studio's legal department and integrated it as a contract addendum, which she agreed to and signed.

From that day forward, and for the first five seasons that *Bewitched* was on the air, Lizzie never spoke to Cooper again. "On the other hand," he explained in his book, "she was never late, she always knew her lines, she never caused anybody any trouble, she was a perfect lady, and she made the show a huge success."

Also, Cooper ultimately agreed to Lizzie's previous creative "suggestions": Bill ended up directing the first fourteen episodes of the first season and, by the fourth year, was promoted to producer, ultimately supplanting producer Danny Arnold, who switched over to ABC's other popular female-driven sitcom, *That Girl*, starring Marlo Thomas. Arnold later created and produced *Barney Miller* for ABC in 1975.

On the other hand, Harry Ackerman was executive producer from day one.

**During those early, tense contract negotiations with Jackie Cooper and Screen Gems/Columbia, Lizzie and Bill Asher required a strong Hollywood player in their corner. Consequently, in stepped none other than Lizzie's father, Robert Montgomery. "I asked him if he'd back me up," Bill acknowledged in 1988. "I told him that Columbia didn't want me to do the show and that Liz wouldn't do it without me."**

Robert consented to support his daughter and son-in-law in any way possible, which meant helping to schedule a meeting between Bill and Jerry Harmon. At that meeting, Bill promised Harmon that he would be financially responsible for all of the *Bewitched* production costs and that Columbia would own distribution rights and overhead. "I was accountable from a creative and financial standpoint," Bill said. "But from a logistical standpoint, the studio owned the copyright, which is something I really shouldn't have let happen" (though Bill later controlled even that).

That provision proved an attractive choice for Screen Gems, and it was not dismissed. With a final agreement signed and sealed, all parties were in accord, and as Bill acknowledged in 1988, "The studio backed off. I proved them wrong and, on a very precarious note, Elizabeth and I began to shoot the show." ©