



# THE FILM YEARBOOK

## 1986



EDITED BY  
AL CLARK



# GHOSTBUSTERS

Without America, there could have been no *Ghostbusters*, just as without America there could be no Ronald Reagan. You win some and you lose some.

*Ghostbusters* is in that great Hollywood tradition of moronic inspiration which gave the world an eyesore that became a cynosure (the Hollywood sign), a 100-foot-high monument made of rubbish that became the city's most famous sculpture (the Watts Towers), and of course the Three Stooges.

Hollywood is where all the greatest morons find their fullest scope. Yes, this town has no shame. In *Ghostbusters*, the best silly movie in years, there isn't a shred of sense, not a single redeeming thread of thought. It's two hours of heaven for 12-year-olds.

The film crosses a gang comedy with a horror spoof, so that if the earthbound gags ever flag, the supernatural can have a whirl. It's the most spectacular and expensive comedy since Spielberg's *1941*, but unlike that turkey *Ghostbusters* never makes the mistake of letting the special effects experts become jokebusters.

It's true that the film's ending is a bit too long on flashy gee-whizzery and a bit short on laughs, but most of the time when the disembodied presences appear on screen, they're there for laughs. Most memorable among the manifestations are the fiend that materializes from the pushcart hamper with a bunch of hot dogs in its mouth, and the taxi driver who wears a standard cabbie's hat – but underneath the hat he turns out to have a decomposing skull instead of a face.

Generally, though, the actors provide the movie's best moments. Bill Murray,



Harold Ramis and Dan Aykroyd are Venkman, Spengler and Stantz, respectable professors of the paranormal at New York University. But their research grant runs out and they are forced to take their diabolical expertise into the marketplace. Demonstrating that Reaganism's stress on free enterprise isn't misplaced, these cloistered academics thrive in the real world of business. More than most, they know how to make the invisible hand of capitalism shell out.

It turns out that just at that time New York is being plagued with enough ectoplasmic appearances to populate a summerful of poltergeist movies. But our intrepid 'paranormal investigators' remain unspooked. They battle these little devils to a standstill until they must face the ultimate incorporeality, a King Kong-sized spirit from the vasty deep, the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man.

Let's honour Bill Murray now as the world's funniest living white comedian, instead of waiting until he's decrepit as we did with Charlie Chaplin. It is Murray who makes the \$30 million cost of *Ghostbusters* pay off. The film's idea and even its title are lifted from earlier laff riots (the Bowery Boys' 1946 *Spook Busters* and 1957 *Spook Chasers*). But Murray's comedy is fully mid-eighties in its cool egocentrism.

An early sequence shows off Murray's flippant wit at its best. Tackling their first demon-destroying job, our three heroes see how formidable these phantoms really are. One of these ghoulish greedy-guts whistles down a hotel corridor, leaving piles of destruction and pools of exteriorised protoplasm in its slipstream. Murray staggers

out of the scummy wreckage and cries in outrage and astonishment, "He slimed me!" The phrase became 1984's contribution to the list of most-often-repeated movie lines, along with *Sudden Impact's* "Go ahead, punk, make my day."

Murray is a rumpiled semi-competent who always makes his adversaries say uncle because of his supreme self-confidence. Nothing that goes wrong is his fault because he invariably has a blame-shifting explanation. He gets his own way because getting his own way is all he ever thinks about. He's a grown-up 12-year-old who's so cute he's forgiven everything.

Later in the film Murray and his pals are called on the carpet. On hand is their nemesis, the city inspector William Atherton. Aykroyd says it was all the fault of this "dickless wonder". Atherton claims that isn't true. "Well, is it true?" Murray is asked. "Yes, it's true," Murray says. "This man has no dick."

That's a classic nonsense put-down, made fresh by Murray's impudent scatology. A similar air of precocious pubescence hangs over Murray's pursuit of statuesque ice-maiden Sigourney Weaver, in whose fridge reside the Beasties from Beyond. At one point, Murray is present in Weaver's *Rosemary's Baby*-ish flat when Weaver becomes possessed and begins coming on to him. Thinking quickly, he says, "I have a rule not to become involved with possessed people . . . actually, it's more of a guideline."

This gag is virtually spoken to the camera. Murray has created his own one-on-one relationship with the audience. He speaks almost directly to them, functioning as a stand-in for them on the screen. He's in the movie and commenting on it at the same time. That's why Murray became a star in *Meatballs* in spite of the fact that it was such a predictable vehicle: the star of the movie seemed like he was sitting in the same row as the hecklers throwing popcorn at the screen.

When Murray suppresses his subversive personality and becomes part of the movie he's in – when he becomes an actor, not a comedian – he

disappears. In *Tootsie*, he dutifully served his function as a necessary element in the dramatis personae and then left the screen and the audience's memory simultaneously. Nor does his range include straight leading man parts, as *The Razor's Edge* showed. Murray appeared in *Ghostbusters*, incidentally, only because Columbia agreed to finance

identified as the late John Belushi's sidekick, are also adept gag-timers in their own right. They ought to be able to play these jokes right – they wrote them.

Aykroyd produced the complex original screenplay, building a fantastic superstructure on the simple premise of the title. The Aykroyd-Ramis final draft left plenty of room for

other elements have dominated. One of his most valuable skills is remaining silent, just standing there looking quizzical while the audience work up their anticipation for the payoff they know he'll deliver.

The wise director paces Murray through the movie, avoiding too great an involvement in the plot. *Ghostbusters'* director, the



*The Razor's Edge.*

It's the on-the-sidelines aspect of Murray's humour that causes him to work best as a member of an anarchic ensemble. Previous group triumphs have included *Caddyshack*, which co-starred Chevy Chase and Rodney Dangerfield, and *Stripes*, which co-starred Ramis and John Candy. The corner the set-up, the more Murray will shine: just play the old gags and then focus on Murray's reaction.

In *Ghostbusters*, as in his other films, Murray doesn't hog the camera. Rick Moranis has some good bits as Weaver's neighbour and lovesick lapdog. Ramis, who remains better known as a director (*Caddyshack* and *National Lampoon's Vacation*), and Aykroyd, still

Murray's improvisations. If comedy ever received respect at Academy Award time, their mantelpieces would be full. They must, unfortunately, be content with being multi-millionaires beloved by millions. As for Aykroyd's and Ramis' function as actors in *Ghostbusters*, however, it's mainly to fill out the perimeter of the frame and give the screen something to do while the audience picks themselves up out of the aisles after Murray's jokes.

No stand-up comedian, Murray needs something strong to react against. Unlike Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy, Murray isn't comfortable basing routines on his own personality. His biggest laughs are one-liners coming at the ends of scenes

Czech-born Canadian Ivan Reitman, is experienced at organizing Murray-vehicle gang comedies. In fact, Reitman could be called the godfather of the aggressive style of non-Jewish undergraduate comedy that has dominated movies since the success of *Animal House* (1978), which he produced. Reitman was the man *National Lampoon* publisher Matty Simmons hired to translate the Lampoon's literary humour into other media. Comics whose careers Reitman fostered in his radio and stage shows later starred on TV's *Saturday Night Live* and now star in Reitman's movies. For discovering Murray, if for nothing else, Reitman deserves immortality.

BART MILLS

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