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NUMBER 86  
SEPTEMBER



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# Rick Moranis Nebbish, Nerd & Famous Hoser

The Canadian funnyman skeedaddles over "Streets of Fire" while scaring up silliness with the "Ghostbusters" and discovering the ultimate secret of filmmaking—eating well.

By DAVID McDONNELL & JOHN SAYERS



**E**ating is the best part of making movies," he states. Rick Moranis, the man responsible for dozens of characterizations on television and film, knows what he *really* likes about moviemaking. "I learned that the heart of *every* film is craft services," he observes. "Craft services originated as the apprentice set cleaners. In the old elephant movies, the guy who swept up after the elephant was a craft services man—and probably still is.

"The original coffee-and-danish that these people arranged eventually grew into croissants with preserves, then fresh vegetables and fruits. Now, there's a 24-hour buffet going on, in addition to the catering truck which supplies breakfast and lunch. And all that food is *absolutely* vital."

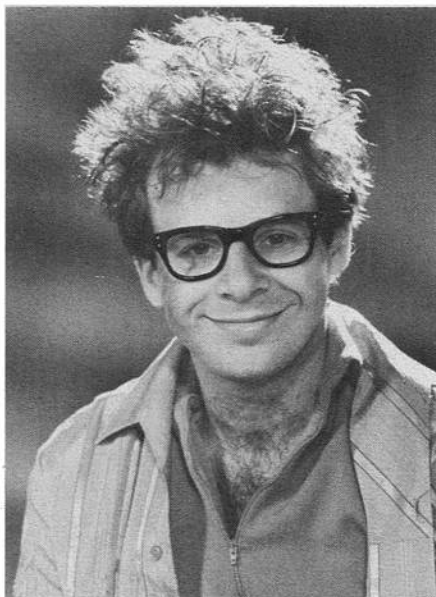
The co-creator of Doug and Bob McKenzie of *The Great White North* says that film assignments like the nebbish accountant Louis Tully in *Ghostbusters* and Billy Fish, the sleazy manager in Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* offer entirely distinct flavors from his delicious roles on *Second City Television*.

"Doing weekly TV is often about starving," he says, "but films are about eating. The moviemaking process is so slow, that you can't have *any* opinion on the film you're making. The script has gone through 50 revisions, with the 51st after lunch. No one but the director knows what's happening. So, all everyone talks about, complains about, or praises is the food. Really, the hardest part of acting is keeping away from that catering truck.

"*Strange Brew* was my best eating film. Dave Thomas [Doug of Doug and Bob] put on 15 pounds during that movie. The craft services men used to hand him sandwiches like a relay racer hands off a baton. Ballooning up like that helped his character. So, you see, craft services are much more vital to the film than *anything*, even the script. If you're well fed and happy, you can come up with some good ideas and change that *lousy* script."

## Brother of Hosers

Rick Moranis spent his entire career in pursuit of well-fed happiness. While still in high school in his native Toronto, he began working part-time at a radio station. This



Moranis as nebbish in *Ghostbusters*.

gig led to a job with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), in which he wrote, engineered and produced radio programs, later moving to CBC-TV.

The big break for the talented writer-performer came in 1980, when he joined the cast of *SCTV* (replacing Harold Ramis). Moranis earned acclaim for his uncanny impersonations of Woody Allen, Dick Cavett, and Merv Griffin—and a gallery of other characterizations, all quite unlike the *real* Moranis, soft-spoken, witty and candid. Following *SCTV*'s move to NBC, he won two Emmys as Biff. In Bones' voice, he said to me, "Jim, Make sure you *don't* look at me during this take!" I got to laughing so hard that the Carlin beard came off because my tears were dissolving the glue! Eventually, the director came out and said, "Guys! Behave!" But that's what made *SCTV* fun.

"Our style of performing on *SCTV* was nothing like film acting," Moranis comments. "For instance, Dave Thomas and I did a parody of *Death of a Salesman*. He played DeForest Kelley as Happy, and I was George Carlin as Biff. In Bones' voice, he said to me, 'Jim, Make sure you *don't* look at me during this take!' I got to laughing so hard that the Carlin beard came off because my tears were dissolving the glue! Eventually, the director came out and said, 'Guys! Behave!' But that's what made *SCTV* fun.

"The seven of us used to get in there with knives and guns drawn. Seven very creative

people, with 10 characters each behind them, were ready to fight for screen time. You mix it up with Dave, Andrea Martin, Catherine O'Hara or John Candy and that's like professional boxing! You better not let your guard down, or these people will hit you in the face. It's the greatest way to work—it really forces you to be good. The greater talent you work with, the more talented you have to be."

Along with Thomas, Moranis created the now-famous Doug and Bob McKenzie. The Canadian hosers became instant celebrities, scoring with an LP, a syndicated comic strip, and Moranis' first film, *Strange Brew*.

"Our album [an \$8,000 improvised effort] sold one million copies," he says. "In the United States, we were just cult figures and late-night comedians. But in Canada, we're in the history books. The McKenzie brothers were the biggest thing *ever* in Canada. We weren't just in the entertainment section—what we did was *news*."

"Doing the album was the most fun I ever had in my life. I had been a disc jockey, playing other peoples' albums. Now here were radio stations playing mine!

"I took a strong hand in the album, because I came up through radio and understood marketing, airplay, and how to make a successful album. That's why we had the 'hit single' and why it was at a certain tempo, in a major key. I wanted the album to be funny for the audience, but I designed it for radio. And while there was much luck involved, it worked due to careful planning.

"But when it came to filmmaking, I was out of my element. I bowed to other people during *Strange Brew*. I wanted the film to exist in the *real* world, but it became a science-fiction plot, which I was against from the beginning. There was a good deal of second-guessing the audience. I played out the entire film, but I was never really totally behind it.

"Yet many people loved the movie. Dave

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How ya doin', eh? This is Bob McKenzie (Moranis) and his brother, Doug (Dave Thomas), fresh from SCTV, up Great White North Way. Take off, you hosers.

was finishing up the editing and holding screenings when I was doing *Streets of Fire*. Now, when you work with Walter Hill, you're in locations like the fifth story down in a garage in downtown Los Angeles, and the phone has AIDS on it. You're out of touch. When I would call in, Dave would tell me that the screenings were working. The recruited college audiences were tearing the house down.

"With that kind of reaction, the studio decided to put *Strange Brew* out in 850 theaters. That means if you're in a town like St. Petersburg, Florida, for example, you are on 13 screens. Now, in St. Petersburg, SCTV was not shown. We got no album airplay there. Therefore, nobody in St. Petersburg was going to see this odd little movie. They really should have keyed the release with the album's largest sales areas. In Canada, though, *Strange Brew* went through the roof. We won the Golden Reel Award for the highest-grossing Canadian film of 1983.

"When I finally saw *Strange Brew* in the theaters, I said, 'Yeah, it's cute. But it's *not* me.' Part of me was up there, but I wasn't really happy with it. Dave and I are still very close friends, and we're going to work together on another McKenzie Brothers album, and possibly another film. A sequel would be the movie that *Strange Brew* should have been, not the one that Hollywood was telling us it should be."

## Streets of Food

His second film, *Streets of Fire* proved a much less taxing experience.

"*Streets of Fire*, which was kind of 'Hells Angels meets *Flashdance*,'" Moranis says, "was very easy for me—actually, I was bored. This is how I discovered craft services. I played a real sleaze who eventually redeems himself. But when you act in a

movie, you come in, you block the scene, and then you're off for three hours while they're lighting. They have a stand-in for you, who stands there and gets lit, then they bring you back in. In the meantime, what do you do?

"You try and do a little bit of writing, but you're just all over the place on location and can't concentrate. After a while, you adjust to the pace, and become part of the styrofoam crowd. You say things like, 'What's your next project? Yeah, I've been thinking about doing that, too. Say, did you see that TV movie last night? What a piece of crap!' Then, you start trashing other projects.

"If I ever write a book about Hollywood," Moranis laughs, "it'll be called *The Failure of Others*, because that's the most important thing in Hollywood. That's why I live in Toronto. It's nice to do what you like to do, period. On *Ghostbusters*, we didn't care about *The Failure of Others*—we just went ahead and made a great movie. But for Hollywood types, it's very important. 'He's doing that?? It'll fail.' 'He's putting that person in that movie? Oh, what a disaster!' Because you start to believe your own positive hype, you need negative hype to help reinforce the positive hype. It's amazing!"

Yet, Moranis has nothing but praise for his *Streets of Fire* director. "Fortunately, Walter Hill is nothing like that. Walter doesn't make movies to be commercial. He makes movies that he wants to see.

"Walter makes his films through editing. His kind of effort turns a normal 10-week shooting schedule into 13 weeks. He does many more set-ups. He really needs tons of film to achieve his style. And *Streets of Fire* is excellent in terms of cinematography and editing.

"All that said, it wasn't exactly my kind of picture. But I'm sure that it's somebody's

kind of picture. Talking about *Streets of Fire* is difficult for me because I'm a bad liar. I can't say that I *loved* the film. How can I lie?"

Moranis sighs. "Unlike *Ghostbusters*, I can't be objective about *Streets of Fire*," he admits. "When I saw *Ghostbusters*, I saw a couple of things I would like to do again. But mostly, I was so caught up in it, that this guy Louis Tully was just another part of the movie. *Streets of Fire* was different.

"I'm *not* into motorcycles, cars, hard driving, rock'n'roll and leather jackets. That's *not* me! I would never write a movie like *Streets of Fire*. And often, I didn't even know what I was doing in that movie. Fortunately, my character also really hates being in that situation. He is pissed off right from the film's beginning. Then, his girl friend is kidnapped, and he gets schlepped along to rescue her from this gang. I played the whole movie with 'What am I doing here?' in my mind—which is what I felt personally. Maybe that helped my performance.

"Just the same, I know I'm not the type to only be a movie actor. For instance, there's a fight scene at the film's end that took nine days to shoot. In its beginning, I get hit in the face, and spend the rest of the fight on the sideline. I spend nine days with blood on my face, looking at a fight. Lots of fun, right?"

"Now, as I was standing there, bored out of my mind, the thought kept occurring to me how much money I got to do this picture. In fact, it occurred often. And I'm thinking to myself, 'Boy, craft services sounds real good right now.' No, film acting is *not* my destined career."

## Prince of Nerds

In *Ghostbusters*, Rick Moranis did considerably more than act. As a result, he's much more satisfied with this hauntingly humorous hit.

"After I spoke with director Ivan Reitman," he explains, "I came out to Los Angeles to write for about three days. I wrote one or two scenes with Harold Ramis, and one or two scenes myself—just to get out a first final draft. I'm not credited as a writer, nor did I want to be. I was just involved with my character."

Louis Tully, the Moranis character in *Ghostbusters* is a practicing accountant in New York City. He spends most of his social life longing after the film's female lead (Sigourney Weaver of *ALIEN*). It's a relationship finally consummated after both are possessed by demonic spirits.

"Chasing Sigourney was perhaps the best experience I've had so far acting in films—apart from craft services," Moranis announces. "I adore Sigourney. She's such a great actress, and a fun person. She's from a different school entirely, a studied, theatrical actress. Sometimes, she didn't understand what planet the rest of us were from.

"Our motto is: How much can we get away with before they say: 'Action'? The further I am away from my character leading up to that point, the more fun it is to see how close I can get. We're rotten, spoiled



brats, and we make trouble. That helps the comedy.

"It was really fun to put Sigourney's style of rehearsal, getting into character, and all that together with our misbehaving. It was a great mix, and she's a very funny person. We used to walk together around Columbia," Moranis recalls, his arm encircling an imaginary, taller companion, "me with my hand around her leg, I would give her a kiss right on the navel. Almost as good as craft services.

"Everyone in *Ghostbusters* is a very confident performer. Give them an empty set and roll film, and they'll come up with great stuff. The script was just a blueprint, and was frequently thrown out. There was no competition as far as whose new idea would be used. Everyone just agreed on what would make for the best scene. Harold calls it the unwritten rule of Second City: if you make the other guy look as good as he can, you're going to look better. It's about support and helping people, and it really works.

"Ivan might have thrown out good material, but what he got from us was better. That's his style. Ivan created a very open environment for his actors. He's a great director for a comedian, because you can try all of your ideas. He'll use whatever works best for the scene, for the project and for you. It's a shame that more productions aren't done like this one. It would, no doubt, inspire better quality films. Ivan used us all to our best advantage.

"Take Harold Ramis, for instance. Harold has one of those subtle comic deliveries which spans a very dynamic range. He's really one of the funniest people around. Yet, Harold is not, first and foremost, an actor. But he's such a fine writer and director that, of course, he *knows* how to act. Acting is probably the easiest thing for him to do, and that's true with all of us."

And Moranis' assessment of the final product?

"I just loved *Ghostbusters*," he admits. "It reminds me of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and how much fun that was, how different it seemed. You don't even have time to breathe in *Ghostbusters*, for fear that you'll miss a joke.

"Bill Murray is great. He walks onto the set, and you have a *terrific* time. This guy is absolutely the greatest movie star of all time. I'm ready to see him in *Nicholas Nickleby*. I could take 10 hours of Bill.

"I want Dan Aykroyd to get an Academy Award for the screenplay [co-written by Aykroyd and Ramis], because it's a totally original idea. Dan is a completely original mind. For instance, after my character becomes possessed, I rattle off a couple of paragraphs that sound like complete nonsense. Yet, I'm convinced they make total sense to Dan Aykroyd. It's like the cosmology that George Lucas has in *Star Wars*. Dan, somewhere in his mind, knows *everything* there is to know about this other dimension where this demon lives.

"But most importantly, *Ghostbusters* is the first movie that I want the toys from. I

want the jumpsuit and the backpack. I *really* want them. I didn't want the toys from any other movie! That's how much I loved this film."

## Crafter of Services

While *Ghostbusters* has a vaguely science-fiction based premise, and *SCTV* often parodied the genre, Moranis was never a particularly big fan. "I spent more TV time with *Dick Van Dyke* and *I Love Lucy* than *Star Trek*," he says. "But we did have fun with it on *SCTV*. I saw Steven Spielberg a few weeks ago, and he had seen the show in which we had him and George Plimpton playing video games to determine the fate of

the universe. He said, 'I can beat George Plimpton in a video game any day!'

"I did watch *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*. But there was a cheapness to the manner in which a slight plot twist was heralded as a good idea. You know, you go along and suddenly—'Surprise! This is really the planet Earth!' That never appealed to me. I have read some science fiction, but I'm not particularly devoted to it."

What does Moranis read for pleasure now? "Certainly not screenplays. I gave that up altogether. I don't want to know what other people are doing. My agent will say, 'There's a great project coming up that

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For Moranis, getting paid the big bucks on *Streets of Fire*—or offering them to heroic co-star Michael Pare—wasn't as much fun as the catering.



The fun in *Ghostbusters*, for Moranis, was sharing the screen with William Atherton (center), Annie Potts and "brilliant" Harold Ramis—as well as Aykroyd & Murray.



## Moranis

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so-and-so is doing.' And I say, 'Yes! That sounds great. I want to pay five dollars and see it.' But I don't want to read it.

"There are exceptions, of course. I read an absolutely incredible script, *Ladyhawke*, a fantasy. It's a Richard Donner project, and he is *one* director with whom I would like to work. I read for the role of a small, cunning thief. Boy, did I want that part! But it went to Matthew Broderick. In an interview with Matt that I read later, he said he spent 90% of the shooting time dripping wet. Maybe I didn't really want to do that movie after all! I'm not sure if craft services could have dealt with pneumonia."

Is tearing up the tube in *SCTV* and wow-ing America in two summer films enough for Rick Moranis? Is he diving directly into bigger, better projects?

"Well, after *Ghostbusters*, I went home and renovated a house I had bought," he confides. "That was like producing a movie. I'm going to do a cameo in *Brewster's Millions* [a Walter Hill comedy starring Richard Pryor] with John Candy, who I haven't seen for a long time. But I'm not leaping head first into acting.

"There seems to be this odd demand for me as an actor, which really surprises me. I never intended to be an actor. I don't really hold the profession in the highest of regards.

"I'm going to spend some time finishing writing several scripts. I was offered a couple of films to direct, and turned them down because they were youth comedies. You know: two guys, a nerd and 16 women. No, thank you.

"Mostly, I want to direct the movies that I write—unless I get to the point where I just don't want to do the job. I would keep creative control, but the director would have a custodial function. 'I'll be over at craft services, you set up the shot.'

"There are many interesting projects around, but this industry is in a constant state of change. For instance, Dan Aykroyd has written *Never Say Mountie*, for Universal. The original script was great. I was going to play the bad guy. But it has gone through several rewrites. Now, the studio wants it more American.

"The business is like the stock market. Flux, flux, flux. Somebody's stock goes up, it goes down. Somebody needs money and makes a deal, he has to make trade-offs. You have a script with this element—in three weeks, it's different. Two more weeks, it's different again."

Far away from Hollywood, the full-time resident of the The Great White North is a man who enjoys the simple things in life. "All I ask for is a little light entertainment this summer: the Republican and Democratic conventions, and a couple of good movies. *Ghostbusters* is one. I'm not sure what it will be like to be in a movie that everybody loves," Rick Moranis, expert in craft services, wonders. "But maybe it will get me asked out to eat more often." \*

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