

Meatballs among the plastic flowers

BY JAY SCOTT

BILL MURRAY — of Saturday Night Live and now the star of Meatballs, a Canadian movie about hijinks at a disreputable summer camp — comes grumping out of his bedroom at the Four Seasons in bright blue shorts unfastened at the waist; his yellow T-shirt allows his pale stomach to protrude roundly, rather like the headlamp on a locomotive. He does not look like a star of any magnitude, let alone the star of what many industry insiders are predicting will be the runaway comedy hit of the summer. Saturday Night Live fans who relish the show for its unpretentiousness can rest easy — he is not about to become a Beautiful Person.

The opportunity exists. He soon begins shooting a movie based on 'new journalist' Hunter S. Thompson's relationship with his attorney, who vanished four years ago ("He was involved in all sorts of gun-running," Murray says. "He was an up-tempo kind of guy; he's believed to be shark bait somewhere"). The movie is a Universal picture. Universal has given him a house in Hollywood. "The house is so ridiculous. There's Astroturf around the pool and a pink bridge at one end of it. Not 20 feet from a beautiful 400-year-old oak tree are plastic flowers: it's like low-rent Hefner. I look down at the Universal lot and think, 'What the hell, lob a few mortars off the edge.' I don't want to 'go Hollywood.' It's really a mental bear trap out there. It's serious out there. It's still pretty funny to me, thank God. As long as it's still funny, I'm OK."

Not all the Saturday Night Live comics have kept Murray's distance. "I like the work on Saturday Night Live. The people are better than the people in Hollywood — every time I do anything else, I wonder why I'm not back there, where they do everything right. It's like playing for the Yankees. The show could go on forever; it looks as if they can keep changing the cast. I got another season in me. John Belushi probably won't be back. Dan Ackroyd may not be — I hope he does come back. John can't stand it any more. He's had too much of that Hollywood life.



Kate Lynch kisses Murray in the film, Meatballs: he thought it would be a challenge.

When you come back, it's the same as it was when you left: you're still the same old fat guy, or whatever you were. There's no star treatment. If you start acting like a star, everyone wonders what the hell's the matter with you."

Murray agreed to Meatballs basically because, although he claims to be lazy, he thought it would be a challenge. He disliked the original script, so he and several other writers took it "and made it borderline. I decided, oh, what the hell, I may as well do something. From the first day, I got to work hard: you have an idea, and an hour later 40 guys are running around trying to light up your idea. What it became was a Disney movie. At least." The major subplot involves Murray's relationship with a young camper played by 15-year-old Toronto actor Chris Makepeace. "He's really solid. Tony Bill (a producer) called. He wanted to know how to get

in touch with the kid. Burst my bubble."

How does he feel about Meatballs? "I feel tired. I'm tired of Meatballs; no, really, I think it's entertaining, as entertaining as anything I've seen lately. I saw a movie, The Great Train Robbery, on the plane. It had about 30 seconds of entertainment in two hours. I think Meatballs is going to be real big money." Is any of it his? "I may get donations from around the country. The campers' association should be happy. It makes camp look a lot better than it is. We filmed it at Camp White Pine (near Haliburton, Ont.) in real pretty country. The food at camp is everything it's cracked up to be. They said they had the best food you could get at camp. That's like saying it's the best food you can get on a train."

He is somewhat apprehensive regarding the Thompson project, partly because Thompson is a friend — "We

could destroy both of us in one swift cut" — partly because the script is unfinished. "That's another one that's going to be a lot of work. I don't know if we have a story yet." And partly because he is apprehensive in general. He puffs through a cigaret holder — "something I've affected for the part" — and squints at Toronto's fog; he could be trying to look through the fog shrouding his future.

"I'd like to get in and get out. I keep saying that. But when you get to be successful, it's hard to quit. Also, I love working. But I'd like to quit and lead the good life. Read books. There are more important things to read than Variety and the Hollywood Reporter." Then he begins a discussion of a cable TV project that would pattern programs after the FM radio format, with "video disc jockeys." Dos toevsky is going to have wait.