



Meatballs

Bill Murray (left) and Chris Makepeace plot their marathon race strategy while enjoying an afternoon at the lake in Paramount Pictures' *Meatballs*, a comedy of life in summer camp. (CP)

Cornball movie making money for U.S., Canadian investors

TORONTO (CP) — It's cornball, low-budget and Canadian. But the movie *Meatballs* is doing exactly what its producers expected — making lots of money.

The movie, about life in an undisciplined summer camp, cost a mere \$1.6 million to make, but its Canadian investors made a handsome profit even before it opened to the public.

It was sold to Paramount for \$3.8 million for distribution in the United States — one of the biggest advances ever made for an independent film, says director Ivan Reitman.

After other rights have been sold, Reitman says, the film will make \$6 million for him, executive producers Andre Link and John Dunning of Montreal, producer Dan Goldberg, the Canadian Film Development Corp., and others.

The movie grossed \$1.4 million during its first week in New York City, says a Paramount spokesman.

It's a lot of money — but it's not Reitman's first encounter with success. His earlier effort, *Animal House*, which he co-produced, has grossed \$120 million, making it one of the top money-makers in film history.

Disputes similarities

And despite Reitman's and Goldberg's claims to the contrary, *Meatballs*' similarity with *Animal House* doesn't end with financial success.

Both films star comics from TV's *Saturday Night Live* — Bill Murray in the latest; both have a sloppy group of misfits who compete with upper-class snobs; both have a fat kid and a straight-laced "whimp," and they similarly delight in outrageous pranks and food-gorging scenes.

"We knew we would get compared with *Animal House*," Reitman said in a recent interview.

"Our major concern was to make it as different as possible. But there are only

so many conflicts that you can have in a movie. . . ."

Murray, who deadpans that his *Meatballs* performance "is nothing short of adequate . . . and paid for," says the movie is more "humane and sweeter" than its predecessor.

Murray originally turned down the role because the movie "was too much of the same old thing." But he relented after the script had been rewritten, the characters developed "and Ivan agreed it would only be shown to the Armed Forces if it was no good."

"It's more like *Animal House* than a lot of other movies, but it's not as gross or as hard-edged," says Murray, who makes his movie debut as the screwball chief camp counsellor who befriends an unhappy young boy.

"In *Animal House* there is no development of the characters but this is the story of a kid who goes through changes."

In his television series, Murray often spoofs a movie critic.

Asked by The Canadian Press to give a capsule review of his own movie, he said:

"It's perfect to send someone to that you want to get out of your house, whether they're houseguests or whatever. . . . It's more entertaining than Jim Nabors cooking on the *Dinah Shore Show*."

Filmed on location

The movie was filmed on location at Camp White Pines, near Haliburton, Ont., and the actual 650 young campers there appeared as extras.

It was because *Meatballs* was made at a real camp — eliminating the need to construct sets — that the movie could be made on a small budget, says Reitman.

"This picture could never have been made in Hollywood," notes Murray, who now is working there on a movie about journalist Hunter S. Thompson.

"We were with a crew out in the mid-

dle of the woods and there were no slimy executives running around saying 'Well, I hate that.'

"We had nothing to lose, and we were trying to make something out of nothing," says Murray, adding that the script constantly underwent changes.

"In Hollywood, if you change a set it is a big deal — you have to go through 15 guys who are afraid to say yes or no.

"It was a low-budget movie and it was a lot like doing live television. If we did three takes we thought we were on the set of *Apocalypse Now* (the multi-million-dollar film extravaganza on Vietnam)."

Hollywood there

Although produced in Canada by Canadians and starring home-grown talent in supporting roles, Hollywood has made its presence felt through Paramount's promotion and advertising — some of it flawed.

In the official press kits, the camp's location is given as "near Ontario, Canada" and says Reitman and producer Goldberg have been working together since their college days at "McMaster University in Toronto." The university is in Hamilton.

Reitman and Goldberg also say they took a lot of flak over another news release claiming that Chris Makepeace, who plays Murray's young friend, had to beat out more than 1,200 youngsters at a "cattle call" audition in Toronto. Although there were such massive auditions, Makepeace actually attended a smaller, private try-out.

Murray and the producers agree the movie will appeal to the young — particularly because of its general rating.

"There are no funny movies for kids," he says. "This one has all the niceness of a Disney movie but with a 1970s sense of humor.

"The kids will go crazy for it. It's going to make a lot of money."