

Paramount gives Meatballs push

HOLLYWOOD (AP) — Can box-office lightning strike twice for 31-year-old Ivan Reitman? Paramount Pictures hopes so and is giving his Meatballs a hefty push.

Czech-born Reitman was the co-producer of National Lampoon's Animal House, which stunned the movie trade last year by racking up domestic rentals of \$52.4 million, making it the 15th biggest money-maker of all time.

Now Reitman, a slender man with dark, amused eyes in a long face, is telling the world what he did on his summer vacation: He went to summer camp and directed a movie. It cost \$1.4 million and stars yet another alumnus of Saturday Night Live, Bill Murray.

Meatballs stems from the 12 years Reitman spent in summer camps in Ontario. The escapades are played for laughs, but not the kind in the R-rated Animal House.

"There we went for the jugular," the director explained. "Meatballs is much warmer, gentler." Hence a PG rating.

Reitman's life had high adventure amid its beginnings. He was born in Komarmo, Czechoslovakia, where his father owned the country's biggest vinegar factory. After the war, the Reitmans decided to escape. They travelled in the nailed-down hold of a barge headed for Vienna.

"I remember flashes of scenes," said Reitman, who was four. "Later they told me about how they gave me a couple of sleeping pills so I wouldn't make any noise. I was so knocked out that I slept with my eyes open. My parents were afraid I was dead."

The Reitmans joined a relative in Toronto, where Ivan displayed his show biz inclinations: Starting a puppet theatre, entertaining at summer camps, playing coffee houses with a folk music group. He studied music and drama at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., and began making movie shorts.

With friends and \$12,000, Reitman made a nine-day movie, Cannibal

Girls, which American International agreed to release. He then produced on a \$500 budget a weekly television revue, Greed, with Dan Ackroyd as emcee and Doug Henning as magician. That led to co-producing the Broadway hit. The Magic Show, starring Henning, a buddy from McMaster.

Reitman became associated with the Lampoon group in its off-Broadway revue that featured John Belushi, Gilda Radner and Murray. He helped develop Animal House and co-produced with Matty Simmons.

"After the picture was a success, I realized I didn't have to go to work right away," said Reitman. "In fact, with my percentage of the profits, I wouldn't have to work again."

He felt the urge to direct again, and in Canada. He and producer Dan Goldberg dreamed up the idea of a summer-camp comedy. Three writers, including Harold Ramis from Animal House, prepared a script in three weeks. With financing from the Canadian government and private investors, Reitman lined up a cast and summer camp — but no star. Filming was already underway when Murray signed on.

"We shot 32 days, which seems fast," said the director, "but then, Animal House was filmed in 34 days. Speed creates spontaneity, especially when you're dealing with wild comedy."

Meatballs was filmed in Camp White Pine, where hundreds of youngsters were having their vacations in the wilds. No way would they become actors for eight hours. So movie-making became an hour's activity, along with handicraft and hiking.

Reitman showed his film to Hollywood distributors last December to overwhelming apathy. He skulked back to Toronto, shot two more days, trimmed half an hour and showed it again. Lots of takers. Reitman chose Paramount because it agreed to release Meatballs this summer. And also because of the purchase price of \$45 million.