

Meatballs merciless and indigestible

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By VINCENT CANBY

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MEATBALLS AIMS AT THE same audiences that last summer couldn't get their fill of National Lampoon's Animal House. It is without mercy.

The film (*screening at the Capitol 2*) was directed by Ivan Reitman, who was the co-producer of Animal House, and it stars Bill Murray who, like Animal House's John Belushi, has a wide following as a result of his appearances on NBC-TV's Saturday Night Live.

Like Animal House, too, the new movie pretends to ennoble a special kind of collegiate absurdism, though, on close inspection, it turns out not to be absurdism at all, but Our Gang formula comedy. With far fewer high spirits than Animal House, and only two characters of any interest, Meatballs reveals itself to be a loud, off-key cry for conformism of a most disappointing sort. It's a sheep in wolf's clothing.

The film's setting is Camp North Star, a huge Canadian summer camp for losers, where discipline is terrible, the athletic program a failure, the counselors relentless wags and the camp director a bad comedian. Tripper (Murray), the head counselor, is described in my program notes as being "off-the-wall" because, I suppose, he puts

on a space helmet when he announces reveille over the camp's public-address system. He is also what Hyman Kaplan might call "a great kidder." When he's discovered trying to make a play for a female counselor, Tripper starts screaming for help, as if the young woman had been attempting to rape him. You must wear very loose socks to laugh them off at this one.

The character of Tripper is not funny, but I suspect that Murray really is. Rather than being off-the-wall, he gives the impression of being so sensible he makes sanity a rare form of madness.

For one reason and another — probably the poor screenplay and the lack of any real direction — Murray has trouble relating to the other actors, though the other actors are clearly enchanted by him. He seems only to come to life in his solo turns.

The rest of the characters are old acquaintances one had not hoped to meet again so soon. There are a doltish fat boy, a girl who wears glasses — and is supposed to be ugly as a result — and a boy who walks around unaware that his fly is open.

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