



Kate Lynch and Bill Murray celebrate a victory for Camp Northstar in *Meatballs*

Animal Bunk

MEATBALLS

Directed by Ivan Reitman

Written by Len Blum, Dan Goldberg,
Janis Allen and Harold Ramis

One of the happier developments on NBC's *Saturday Night Live* this past season was the unleashing of Bill Murray. A latecomer to the Not Ready for Prime Time Players, Murray had broken into the show by serving as unofficial second banana to the stars, John Belushi, Dan Ackroyd and Gilda Radner. When he finally seized centerstage, he stopped being a straight man and became a live—or maybe frazzled—wire. Murray is a master of comic insincerity. He speaks in italics and tries to raise the put-on into an art form. His routine resembles Steve Martin's, with a crucial difference. Where Martin is slick and cold, Murray is disheveled and vulnerable. One feels that Murray's manic behavior is a cover for some rather touching neuroses.

The worst aspect of *Meatballs* is that it plays against his strengths. His combination of brashness and tenderness would work perfectly in a romantic comedy, something along the lines of *Foul Play*. Instead, Murray has tried to emulate Belushi: *Meatballs* is an *Animal House* rip-off, transplanted from the campus to a summer camp. The film demands that its star be wild and gross—characteristics for which Murray has no great affinity.

It is doubtful whether Belushi himself could have saved *Meatballs*. Directed by *Animal House* Co-Producer Ivan Reitman, the movie is a series of shopworn jokes, executed with no discernible flair. The writers have done little more than round up the usual array of stereo-

typed characters: a horny fat boy, a bespectacled nerd, a conceited stud, busty girls and so on. Once these kids and the head counselors (Murray for the boys and Kate Lynch for the girls) are introduced, the film meanders aimlessly. Half the time, *Meatballs* forgets to exploit the gags that it so laboriously sets up. No sooner do we learn, for instance, that Camp Northstar is in the throes of a power blackout or a parents' day than the film veers off on an unrelated tangent.

Meatballs does at least demonstrate that the success of *Animal House* was no happy accident. That film's manic vitality and boundless raunchiness are painfully absent here. At its best, *Meatballs* rises only to the level of TV's now defunct *Animal House* sitcoms. Through it all, Murray smiles and forges ahead, but his big riffs have been edited down to frantic bursts of mugging. Even worse is the single attempt to capitalize on his personal warmth: an interminable subplot about the friendship between Murray and a shy camper (Chris Makepeace) is so mawkishly presented that it takes on an unintended air of homosexual romance. As Murray himself might put it on *Saturday Night Live*, *Meatballs* is the work of knuckleheads.

—Frank Rich