

'Meatballs' feeds a taste of laughs

MEATBALLS

Laval, La Cite, Kent Dorval, Greenfield Park and Westmount Square

Paramount Pictures; produced by Dan Goldberg; directed by Ivan Reitman; written by Len Blum, Dan Goldberg, Janis Allen and Harold Ramis; starring Bill Murray, with Kate Lynch, Jack Blum, Cindy Girling, Kristine DeBell, and Chris Makepeace.

By DAVE CHENOWETH of The Gazette

Everyone loves a picnic, so it's no wonder that *Meatballs* is racking up box-office records across North America in the last couple of weeks. It's a summer's snack of a film — good, convivial fun, combining some real laughs with moments of sentimental tenderness.

At the same time, *Meatballs* is sure to disappoint the fans who made last summer's *Animal House* into the surprise box-office hit of the year. Ivan

Reitman, the Canadian co-producer of *Animal House*, has returned to directing, and in the process has abandoned the raunchy, manic mayhem that turns disgust into delight.

If *Animal House* hit you like a vat of Purple Jesus — that ungodly fraternity punch — then *Meatballs* carries the impact of lemonade. There's nary a scene that would upset your maiden aunt, but the result is underbaked, hot-dog humor that never fulfills its promise.

The action takes place at a wacky summer camp, with a stereotyped series of off-beat counsellors and campers. There's the fat boy, and the inept klutz known as Spaz and the pneumatic blonde girl's counsellor and the make-out artist and of course, the vulnerable young boy who's been exiled to camp by his too-busy parents.

Heading the cast of characters is Bill Murray, the *Saturday Night Live* star



Bill Murray serenades his summer romance, Kate Lynch, in Paramount Pictures' "Meatballs" about life in summer camp.

whose deadpan delivery turns absurdity into a comic delight. He is both the best thing about *Meatballs*, and its saddest waste of talent, as his insanity is buried under the need to portray the good-hearted head counsellor who helps the shy boy become a hero.

Most of the film is merely a series of

comic vignettes that never seem to go quite far enough. Just as one of the routines seems to be catching fire, zap, we're into something else.

There's a voyeuristic raid on the girl counsellors' cabin that ends with the fat counsellor losing his pants, a recurring gag about leaving the sleeping

camp-owner stranded — bunk and all — in the middle of the road, and a mini-Olympics confrontation between our heroes and the rich kids from a nearby high-class camp.

What gave *Animal House* its special quality was the fact that there was a human edge, a rawness born of truth,

to its send-up of frat boys, spaced-out professors and fascistic deans. But *Meatballs* is no more than an exercise in harmless fantasy, about as true to life as the *Beach Blanket* films of the '60s. And like those successful films, it is harmless entertainment, never threatening, but never truly alive.