

by Kay Armatage

From Foxy Lady to Meatballs to You

Meatballs is another Canadian movie success for Ivan Reitman and Danny Goldberg. The follow-up to Reitman's enormously successful *Animal House*, a comedy about college fraternities starring John Belushi (of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*), *Meatballs* is a comedy about summer camp starring Bill Murray (also of *Saturday Night Live*). It premiered in Toronto June 28 and is already a guaranteed success.

The movie was made for just over \$1 million, and already the following pay-offs have rolled in: \$3.8 million from Paramount for US distribution rights with a separate \$300,000 deal for Canadian distribution, plus slightly more than \$1 million from a New York pay-TV firm, and another \$1 million for non-US distribution rights.

That's only part of the Reitman/Goldberg success story, because *Meatballs* is not just a financial success, but a hit with the Canadian critics. That's no small triumph for Reitman and Goldberg who have been consistently lambasted, even reviled, by every Canadian culture maven from Robert Fulford to the lowliest newspaper reviewer.

You may ask what these two young men have done to deserve such epithets as "crass," "exploitational," and "shameful?" They have produced money-making, low-budget, Hollywood-type movies which have indeed been crass, exploitative, shamelessly commercial, and consistently successful. Nowadays most Canadian movies are crass, shamelessly commercial, and consistently intended — at least — for success. But when Reitman's and Goldberg's careers began, it was a different story.

In the late sixties, when they were freshmen at McMaster University, Reitman and Goldberg founded the McMaster Film Board, which showed second-run commercial movies at cut rates to the student body; already a departure from the traditional university film society which

concentrated on foreign "art" films. They made enough profit to finance a half-hour 16mm. colour movie called *Orientation*, a comedy about university life which was written by Reitman and Goldberg, directed by Reitman, and starred Goldberg, with music by Lenny Blum. Their first picture was their first success. *Orientation* was distributed theatrically as the opener for a Dustin Hoffman film called *John and Mary*.

From such harmless beginnings they moved on to finish *My Secret Life*, which had been started by another McMaster student, John Hofsess, as an experimental movie with arty sex. Reitman and Goldberg scrapped most of the art, added a lot more sex (which in retrospect seem pretty tame stuff: soft-focus lap-dissolves of graceful nude bodies in fanciful positions), and went on to earn the dubious distinction of being the first Canadian filmmakers to be tried for obscenity in an Ontario court. *My Secret Life* was banned in Canada, but it ran on 42nd St. long enough to make them money and credits for another film.

Reitman's first feature as a director was *Foxy Lady*, his only out and out bomb. *Foxy Lady* was a risqué comedy shot in friends' apartments and on the streets of Toronto in a couple of months. Reitman and Goldberg were smart enough to get out of that one with about \$11,000, which they put immediately into *Cannibal Girls*. Written over the weekend by Goldberg and Lenny Blum, it was shot at a friend's farm in ten days and finished in time for Cannes (1972).

That was in the old days when Canadian producers didn't go to Cannes to hustle the world market. Bill Marshall, Hank Van Der Kolk, Robert Lantos, Jon Slan and David Perlmutter weren't there then in their yachts and villas. There were no Canadian champagne parties, no Canadian Film Development Corporation giving out T-shirts or taking the American press out to three-star dinners. The only Canadian films that were sent to Cannes were Quebec films which were shown in the festival competition — not, heaven forbid, in the international marketplace.

Reitman and Goldberg were there with *Cannibal Girls*, tacking up schlocky posters everywhere, literally beating a drum through the streets, and contacting every international distributor registered

in even the smallest hotel. They broke every Canadian rule and virtually every film world rule. Not only did they hustle and actually make sales, but they did it by obviously not caring a fig about their work of "art." They quickly felt out the world market and declared themselves perfectly willing to adapt the film for any taste. If Japan or Turkey wanted more horror and violence, they had more sequences of the sort that could be cut in at a moment's notice. If the US or France wanted more sex and/or comedy, they could deliver. They could cut or expand the film to any running time, and they would do it to make any sale. The sanctity of Canadian art wasn't an issue. Money was.

At that time, Canadian feature film production had a mission. The discovery of the Canadian identity was the theme, and the promotion of Canadian culture the goal. Nowadays, such lofty ideals are relegated to documentary films and Quebec features, while the English Canadian industry has a more realistic goal: money. In retrospect, *Cannibal Girls* seems remarkably indigenous, with its Canadian actors playing Canadian personality types in a setting of rural and smalltown Ontario. But in those days, it seemed to be just another tacky exploitation movie, and it was definitely a blemish on the softly featured, slightly anguished face of Canadian cinema. The critics reviled it as gross, puerile, and crassly commercial. At a time when Canadian film art was closely identified with box office failure, *Cannibal Girls* was definitely a success, and hence a disgrace.

After that, Reitman and Goldberg formed an association with David Cronenberg, a young Canadian director who had made two quirky low-budget art films tinged with slightly perverted sex and science fiction. *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* had already earned Cronenberg something of a cult following in Europe and at the Edinburgh Film Festival. The Cronenberg/Reitman/Goldberg match was obvious.

Shivers (1975) (originally titled *Invasion of the Blood Parasites*) was written and directed by Cronenberg, produced by Reitman and Goldberg, and starred Barbara Steele in a lurid cameo bathtub scene. It contained all the marks of Cronenberg the auteur: modern architecture

not to appear futuristically menacing, an underlying analysis of modern life (by now a recognized feature of the genre — cf. current reviews of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*), and a sinister linking of sex and disease.

A horror-cult success, *Shivers* was another Canadian disgrace, followed by the horribly violent *Death Weekend* (1976), produced again by Reitman/Goldberg and directed by William Fruet, whose reputation (from *Wedding in White*) as a Canadian mid-cult art director was now shamefully scarred. The formula was quickly repeated with another Cronenberg opus, *Rabid!* (1977), which not only had an international success, but won awards in international film festivals. Reitman and Goldberg were by now well beyond the pale. The Canadian press gasped and recoiled, and castigated the CFDC for investing in such commercial trash.

Somewhere in all of this, Reitman found time to produce *The Magic Show*, a stage show written by Cronenberg as a vehicle for Doug Henning, the dapper young Canadian magician. *The Magic Show* ran on Broadway for a record time, and still tours in subsidiary companies trained by Henning. Then came *The National Lampoon Show* another touring music and satire stage show featuring Dan Ackroyd, John Belushi, and Bill Murray, and a book by the Canadians who had started the *National Lampoon* magazine.

And you all know the rest. That group went on to do NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, the top-rated comedy TV show produced by Torontonian Lorne Michaels and co-written by Rosie Shuster. And then Reitman co-produced *Animal House* and it has made millions. All the others were relatively minor successes: *Cannibal Girls*, *Shivers*, *Death Weekend*, *Rabid!* were all low-budget movies that did very well, making good profits on the B-movie circuit. But *Animal House* (1978) was a mainstream hit, and it made millions.

Reitman didn't rush to Cannes that year. *Animal House* didn't need that sort of promotion, and, besides, Reitman was busy getting *Meatballs* together.

Once again, the team of Goldberg and Lenny Blum (with Janis Allen and Harold Ramis) was writing the script, Goldberg was producing, and Reitman was to direct for the first time since *Foxy Lady*. Despite the overwhelming success of *Animal House*, there was little Canadian excitement over *Meatballs*. *Animal House*, after all, was really American, and Reitman was no longer simply a Canadian disgrace: he was an American success — as Lenny Blum put it, "just another honcho boffo primo con limo" (meaning producer with big car). Reitman was no longer ours to flog, and Canadian critics weren't yet ready to praise.

Although *Meatballs* was shooting for seven weeks at Camp White Pines with a cast of young Canadians who were about to become stars, an all-Canadian crew, and Canadian financial backing, there was little press during production. The location was visited by a reporter from the Haliburton weekly and a suitable local human interest story made the front page. But that was all. The Canadian press was busy covering the shooting of *Bear Island*, a multi-million dollar Canadian-British-American co-production featuring a host of British and American stars, and the press at Cannes were busy hyping *Running*, starring Michael Douglas and featuring Toronto disguised as New York, with a large budget for American flags.

The Canadian press suddenly discovered that the Canadian film industry was the big time. The Canadian Film Development Corporation, which in the days of *Shivers* and *Death Weekend* had been severely criticized for investing a little money in trashy commercial features, was now universally praised for putting a lot of money into slightly less trashy commercial features. The Canadian identity, the worthiness of Canadian culture were forgotten. For Canadian investors, producers, and press alike, success meant money.

Since that's been Reitman's idea all along, his time may at last have come in Canada. The radiant premiere audience filled the Toronto theatre lobby with buzzings of "it'll make a fortune; it's great." In the old days of Canadian Culture, a remark like "it'll make a fortune" would surely have been followed by the rejoinder, "it's crass, commercial, and a disgrace to Canada." No more. Reitman is suddenly our boy again, embraced as "Canada's first movie millionaire," while *Meatballs* is heralded as "a tender delight" (*Toronto Star*, June 29).

How is the movie? I didn't like it much. I'm no fan of Bill Murray nor of his brand of humour, and everyone agrees that he carries the film. But what do I know? I didn't like *Animal House* either. Besides, *Meatballs* will make stars of some great young Canadian actors: Kate Lynch as Bill Murray's romantic interest; Sarah Torgov, soon to become the world's sweetheart; Jack Blum, who is called upon to do some pretty stupid things and still maintain his warmth and reality; Harvey Atkin, as the camp director; and especially Chris Makepeace, the fifteen-year-old Toronto kid around whom the plot revolves, and who manages to make scenes with Bill Murray believable (a remarkable feat). It's also full of cute little kids, wonderful Haliburton lakes and skies, and sometimes the lines are witty. And yes, it is a sweet and tender movie. As I said it'll make a fortune. And in Canada, that's suddenly what movies are for. □