

Stephen King's 'FIRESTARTER'

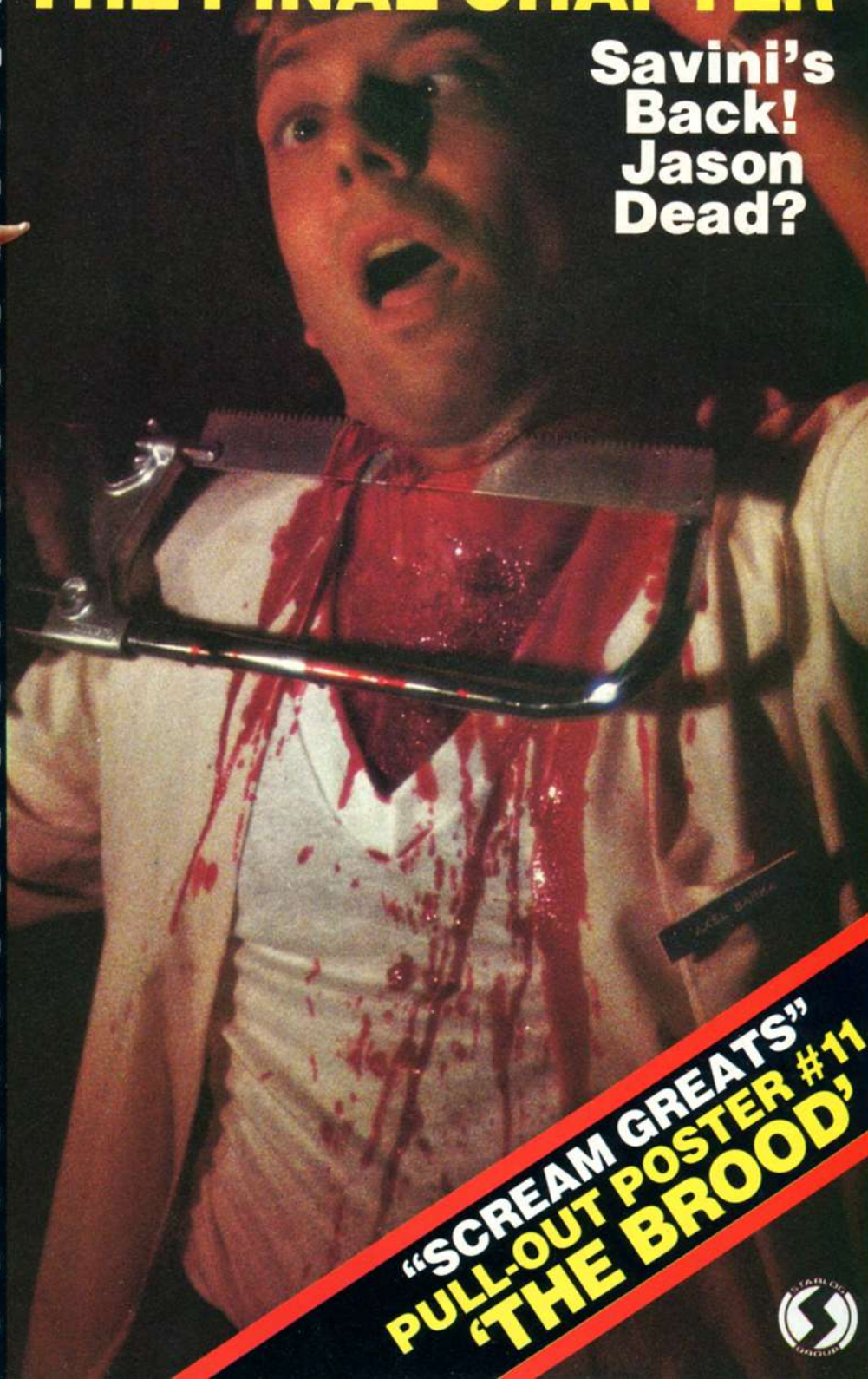
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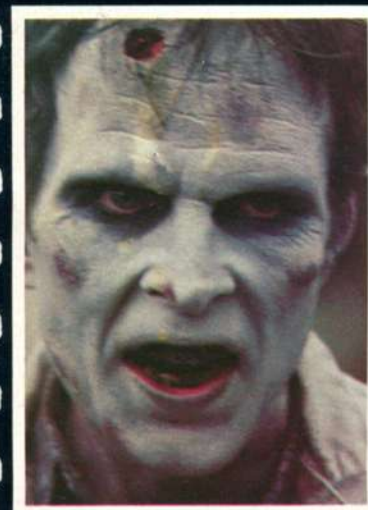
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FROM THE AUTHOR OF  
**FIRESTARTER**  
**STEPHEN KING**  
**CWJO**



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# The Ghosts In *Ghostbusters*

Associate producer Michael Gross on supervising the design and special effects of the new supernatural comedy.

By David Everitt



PHOTOS: © 1984 COLUMBIA PICTURES

A member of the effects crew of *Ghostbusters* sculpts one of the Terror Dogs that menaces Aykroyd, Murray and Ramis.

**W**hile Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Harold Ramis supply the comic antics as the title parapsychologists in *Ghostbusters*, associate producer Michael Gross has had to take charge of the fantastic illusions and the unearthly creatures of this comic confrontation with the supernatural. His job involved supervising the design and execution of matte paintings, miniature effects, creature costumes, stop-motion animation, makeup effects, cable-operated monsters, and optically-created ghosts—"every kind of effect you could put into a film with the exception of spaceships," says Gross.

Gross' participation in Columbia's *Ghostbusters* is the result of many years in the fields of art direction and humor that brought him into contact with *Ghostbusters* producer/director Ivan Reitman and other Na-

tional Lampoon alumni who have contributed to this summer's ghost-comedy. In addition to several other publications, Gross was an art director and editor for *National Lampoon* and its sister magazine *Heavy Metal*. While at *National Lampoon*, Gross met Reitman and subsequently designed the poster for Reitman's *National Lampoon Show* on Off Broadway. While at *Heavy Metal*, he hooked up with Reitman again as production designer and associate producer on the *Heavy Metal* animated feature. Along with assisting with the 3D production of Reitman's *Spacehunter*, Gross also did some designing for Harold Ramis' *National Lampoon's Vacation* and the comedy series *SCTV*.

At this writing, Gross was still in the thick of producing the extensive *Ghostbusters* effects and was kind enough to take the time to

speak to FANGORIA.

**FANGORIA:** I suppose that *Ghostbusters* will be perceived by many people as a spoof of *Poltergeist*, but the title of the picture reminds me of the haunted-house comedies of the 40's, such as Bob Hope's *Ghost Breakers*.

**Michael Gross:** Dan Aykroyd brought the script to us and I never really knew how much he was influenced by those movies. But I think he must have been. There is a scene in the film, which has since been cut out because the film was too long, in which Danny is sitting on the Joe Franklin Show. Franklin says, "Your company name, *Ghostbusters*, it reminds me of an old Bob Hope movie." And Dan says, "Actually, Joe, that was *Ghost Breakers*." And he goes on to say that Olson and Johnson did *Ghost Catchers*, and he says, "Of course, the Bowery



Boys, they must have *really* been into psychokinetics because they did *Ghosts on the Loose* and *Spooks Run Wild*. And then Abbott and Costello did *Hold that Ghost*. . . "He runs through the whole long list of titles—there must have been 11 of them. So, obviously, the reference is there, we do understand that. I think it's much closer to that than a parody of *Poltergeist*. It's not a spoof of *Poltergeist* at all. It can be thought of as a kind of contemporary version of those old ghost comedies. Funny guys that have to confront scary stuff—that's what works in this film.

**Fang:** What exactly were your responsibilities as associate producer of *Ghostbusters*?

**Gross:** My responsibilities were almost exclusively anything that related to the visual. In the early stages of the film, for example, I was involved in the hiring of the director of photography and, more so, with the hiring of the art director. At that point I got involved with a lot of the design work: the ghosts, the goblins, the creatures, the hardware, a lot of the storyboarding—all the things that are specialized design work, what I would call contemporary science fiction and horror design. Once that was off and rolling, it was my job to deliver the special effects.

**Fang:** Were you involved in the actual design or were you more of a supervisor?

**Gross:** I get involved as any art director would. I get up to my elbows in it. I don't pick up a pencil very often, but what I've done in some cases is that I'd hire three or four il-

lustrators and I'd tell them, "Okay, here's our concepts. I want you to do this, this and that." They would bring back sketches, I'd modify them, I'd get them the way I like them, and then I'd show them to Ivan. He'd hate them or love them or whatever, and then we'd go back and respond to his reaction and needs. So, I'd manage this group of artists, and I'm proud enough to say that there are a number of designs in the film that I feel responsible for although I never put pencil to paper.

**Fang:** What personnel did you round up for your effects shop?

**Gross:** At first we were thinking of going to Apogee, but at the time they were committed to *Dune*; they're not now, of course, but they were tied up then. And ILM couldn't take us on either; their schedule was booked for the next year-and-a-half. We wondered, "Where are we going to take a film of this size and complexity?" As it turns out, Richard Edlund [Oscar winner for the special effects of *Star Wars*, *Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*] was leaving ILM at the time, and we got together with him. He said, "What I'd really like to do is set up my own shop. I think I'm going to be setting up shop with MGM to do *2010* and that'll be on a slightly different schedule because it doesn't deliver till next Christmas, and I could probably take care of your film around the same time." So we made an arrangement in which Columbia and MGM joined in with him and, under Richard's direction, hired a lot of people to do these two films. What we did was take over Doug Trumbull's physical facilities at

EEG; Doug's out of that facility now. We went in and outfitted the place. That was a great problem. You can imagine, going against these kinds of deadlines and starting a new company from scratch. We built a high-speed 65 mm camera, and we had to build a lot of equipment that didn't exist, and modify a lot of equipment, and bring in the specialized talent to do this film. Richard did an extraordinary job. He hired everybody; it was all under Richard's direction.

**Fang:** Did he hire other former ILM people?

**Gross:** Some people left ILM and came down to join him such as John Bruno, who also was one of the directors of *Heavy Metal*. And we also had some people left over from Doug Trumbull's operations, like Matt Yuricich, the great matte painter. And a lot of people just came from all over this area.

**Fang:** What with Edlund and other ILM veterans of *Poltergeist* in your shop, did you find that they could expand upon techniques used in the *Poltergeist* effects?

**Gross:** To a degree. In *Poltergeist*, since it was the first contemporary ghost film that really took the effort to visualize ghosts in a sophisticated form, one of the things that had to happen was an awful lot of research and development. One of the advantages when coming in with us was that there was no need for research and development anymore. They knew how to do it. In fact, by the end of the *Poltergeist* production, they had discovered that there were simpler ways to do things but they hadn't been able to implement them at that time. In this film they *could*

**A Terror Dog is "rehearsed" on the set. In the background, Bill Murray looks on.**







**Optically-created ghosts also figure largely into this comedy production.**

implement them.

In some ways, we're not looking at the most original way of putting a ghost on the screen. Since this is a comedy, the effects are not the stars of the film; the comedians are the stars. Our ghost-moments are fairly brief. We're not technically very different, but we are more different conceptually. We have a ghost that is very original and very funny, a type that no one's ever seen before. But technically, the way he's actually applied to the film, he has a lot of standard ghost-like qualities. You have to do that. If you break too far away, the creature just doesn't have the familiarity as a ghost.

Actually, this ghost is the only funny creature in the movie. The rest of the creatures are either very scary or just somewhat unusual and a bit weird. The guys who are continually funny are Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis.

**A model of a skyscraper that will look like it is in New York City thanks to the technique of matte painting.**



**Another Ghostbusters goblin in the making.**

**Fang:** Did you find there were special problems involved in creating special effects to be used in comic situations rather than straight fantasy/horror situations?

**Gross:** The problem we had is very similar to the problem I used to have at *Lampoon*. When I was at *Lampoon*, people would often compare us to *Mad Magazine* because they were the only two humor magazines around. One of the things I did as art director was to make all the parody very, very straightforward. We've seen a lot of this on *Saturday Night Live* since. For example, if *Mad Magazine* were to do an article about wacky postage stamps, they would have Jack Davis cartoon drawings on the stamps. If we were going to do an article on the same thing the postage stamps at first glance would look exactly like all the postage stamps you've seen from around the world; you'd have to look twice to find the joke. The visual presentation would be very straightforward and that's what makes parody really work. I was at a party once with some *Mad Magazine* editors after Michael O'Donoghue had written "Tar-

zan of the Cows". We drew it very straightforward, just as a Tarzan comic would be. I remember one of the *Mad* editors at the party said to me, "You know, that 'Tarzan of the Cows' was hysterically funny. But why didn't you draw it funny?" I said, "That's the point. You don't draw it funny. You draw it like a Tarzan comic, and the power of the joke is doubled."

That problem tended to creep up in *Ghostbusters* as well. We would find that we would bring in an artist to visualize a ghost or creature, and they were very good at this kind of thing, very imaginative. But this was the first time they ever worked on a comedy. So when we asked them to design a ghost, they would bring in their first funny ghost, a silly ghost. They'd say, "Well, it's a funny scene, isn't it?" "I know it's funny, but the creatures are not funny. The scene is funny. The creature has to be very straightforward."

**Fang:** It sounds like you had to strike a tricky balance in your work.

**Gross:** We were always walking a conceptual line that was difficult. How funny should we be? We would sometimes visualize something and Ivan would say, "That's too scary. Remember, this is a comedy." And then we'd have something silly, and he'd say, "No, the comedy isn't in the creature; it's over there." The line we decided to hold to was not, say, what was done in *The Thing* or *Friday the 13th*. We didn't have any gore, knife slashings, creatures turning inside out—horrendous events that are hard to look at. Most of our ghosts are fun even when they're being scary. We have scary moments because it's suspenseful, and the creatures are scary to look at, but they never cross over into that nightmare land.

As for the comedy, it's what I call contemporary humor, the kind of humor found in *Saturday Night Live* and *Lampoon*. When someone does something funny, it's not funny because the off-camera orchestra goes "Mwah-Mwaaaah." It's a very different interpretation of humor. In this kind of film, yes, it's the first time in a long time someone's put together the scary and the funny, but it's being put together in a different way.





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PRODUCTION DESIGNER JOHN DE GUIR

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY LASZLO KOVACS, A.S.C.

VISUAL EFFECTS BY RICHARD EDLUND, A.S.C.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BERNIE BRILLSTEIN

WRITTEN BY DAN AYKROYD AND HAROLD RAMIS

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY IVAN REITMAN



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