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**AUGUST**



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**POSTER:  
BLADE RUNNER**



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**Number 85**  
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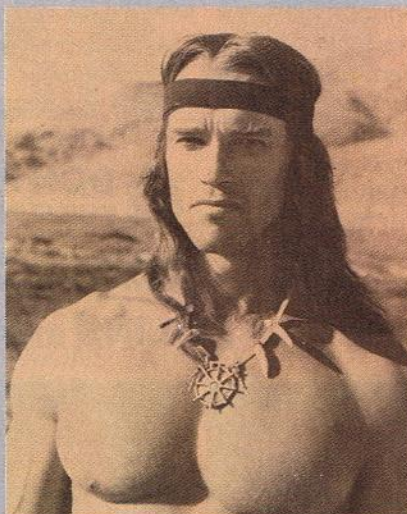
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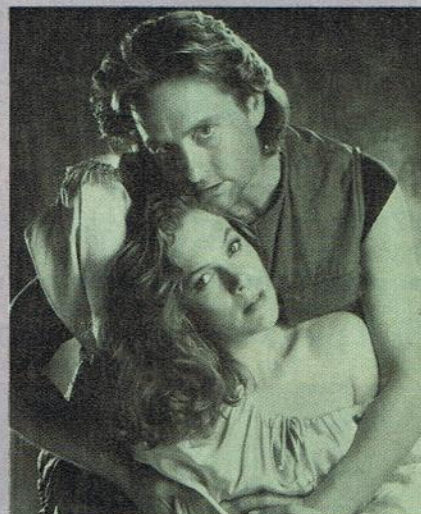
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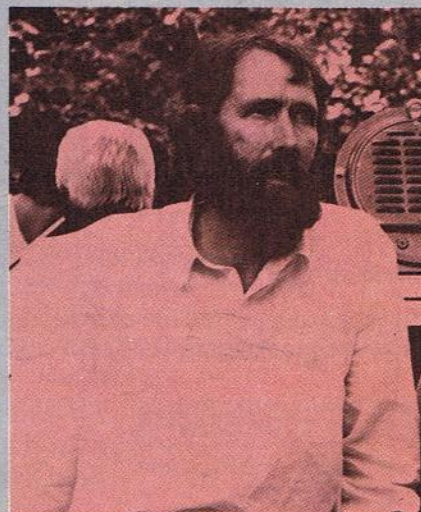
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# Ivan Reitman

## Magic, Meatballs and Making Movies

From "Cannibal Girls" to "Spacehunter," a veteran producer/director reflects on the costs of creating laughter, while spooking audiences with the spine-tingling antics of the "Ghostbusters."

By SAL MANNA

**T**he year is 1959. A little boy sits in the front row of a Toronto movie theater at a Saturday matinee. Suddenly, the movie stops dead and the screen goes white.

"Attention!" yells a terrifying, disembodied voice. "The Tinger is loose in this theater! Please scream for your life."

Twelve-year-old Ivan's face blanches as white as the screen. His heart beats fast with anticipation, his eyes darting around in mock fear. He has no choice. Either he screams—the only way to kill the slimy, crablike organism in his spinal column according to William Castle's classic of comic horror, *The Tingler*—or...or, well, he would rather not know.

So, Ivan screams his lungs out, destroying the Tinger. And then he laughs with delight.

The year is 1984. That little boy in the Toronto theater once again sits in front of a

movie screen. Only this time the screen is on a Burbank Studios scoring stage and two dozen musicians are playing music to bits-and-pieces of film as it unreels on the screen. That little boy is now 37 years old and the movie he wards over is his own, *Ghostbusters*.

For Ivan Reitman, making movies is more than a matter of making money or wielding power—it's an extension of those wonderful days of joy and amazement he experienced as a child.

"My favorite movies were *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Robin Hood*," says the dark-haired producer/director. "I saw all the William Castle films. I got the special glasses to see the ghosts in *13 Ghosts* and I rooted for *Mr. Sardonicus*."

Reitman's latest, *Ghostbusters*, would

make Castle himself proud. Produced and directed by Reitman and starring Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Sigourney Weaver, Harold Ramis and Rick Moranis, *Ghostbusters* has that same quality of tongue-in-cheek fright which made Saturday matinees a boon for the buttered popcorn industry.

Set in New York City, the film chronicles the adventures of three extraordinarily bright but somewhat wacky New York University parapsychologists who lose their research grant and are forced out of their ivory tower. They start their own business, *Ghostbusters*, just as the Big Apple is

SAL MANNA, LA-based freelancer, has contributed to People, Omni, and the Los Angeles Times. He interviewed Robin Curtis in STARLOG #83.



Marching into mortal combat with a poltergeistic menace are Harold Ramis, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Ernie Hudson. They're humorous heroes worth haunting—Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters*.

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plagued by an alarming increase in paranormal events. Quickly, they get on the trail of these mysterious occurrences, and by movie's end, help save the world.

"What's interesting about this picture," Reitman explains, "is that it has an enormous scope and is intimate at the same time. The problem was how to keep it light and funny and still tell the story in a realistic and serious way. So, we approached the picture in a very naturalistic way. We assume from the start that there *are* ghosts and everyone in the film accepts that fact. So, there's not a question of whether there are or aren't ghosts. We played the serious parts as if *Ghostbusters* were a straight film, like *Poltergeist*, and those scenes are really scary, as if it's *really* happening."

Essential to the effectiveness of the fright scenes, of course, is the quality of the special effects—discussed by Associate Producer Michael Gross in FANGORIA #36 and FX supervisor Richard Edlund in a future STARLOG. Reitman was a bit unnerved by the effects. "We have to go all the way with it in terms of quality," he explains. "The science fiction audience is very sophisticated. They've seen an incredible number of FX shots, from the great to the lousy, so you had better be different *and* good."

"We weren't given much time to finish this film. Columbia wanted *Ghostbusters* at the summer's beginning. But we have as many special effects as *Star Wars* and must get them all done in half the time. We've been going 24 hours a day for about six

months."

But it is Reitman's comic bent, more than any special effects, which have always marked his films. As Aykroyd puts it, "He's a guy who loves entertainment and counts the laughs. He's a Canadian!"

### "Cannibal Girls" Comedy

Actually, Ivan Reitman was born in Komarmo, Czechoslovakia, where his father owned a vinegar factory. When he was four years old, and it was becoming clear that only Communist Party members would be allowed to own property, his father and mother decided to move elsewhere. They escaped to Vienna, Austria by hiding in the bottom of a tugboat and eventually made their way to Canada, where Reitman's mother later gave birth to twin daughters. Settling in Toronto, his parents ran a dry cleaning store and owned a car wash.

But for Reitman, there was no business quite like show business. At age 15, he formed his own folk music group, The Twin Tone Four. When he entered McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, he majored in music. It wasn't long, however, before the tingling lure of the motion picture screen beckoned Reitman elsewhere.

In college, he assembled a comedy short, *Orientation*, about a freshman student's first day on campus. It was so well-received, it was aired on Canadian television.

Then, just out of college and using \$250,000 in Canadian grant money, Reitman produced *Foxy Lady*, one of his few

monetary failures. But that didn't stop him. He had built up credit with several production companies and with a \$12,000 investment (deferring the other \$100,000), Reitman gave the world *Cannibal Girls* (starring Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin, later of *SCTV*). Shot in seven days, it was billed as a horror comedy about cannibalism. Not surprisingly, it was hard to find a distributor for the delicious flick, and finally its investors put it under lock and key.

Then, in the grand tradition of artists fighting to prove themselves, Reitman *stole* the film, flew to the Cannes Film Festival and sold it to Sam Arkoff for a profit.

His next movies demonstrated the same business cunning and success. *They Came From Within* (made for \$163,000, it earned Reitman, as producer, \$400,000) was the first of two projects with director David Cronenberg (FANGORIA #3, 25). Also known as *Shivers* (and originally titled *The Parasite Murders*), it echoed *The Tinger*, as filthy worm-like creatures grew *inside* people, turning them into sex maniacs. The second Cronenberg project, *Rabid* starring Marilyn Chambers, did equally gross business. *Black Out* and *Death Weekend* (a.k.a. *The House by the Lake*) met similarly lucrative bottom line fates.

Interspersed among his film projects, Reitman produced a live TV variety show, *Greed*, hosted by Aykroyd, and *Spellbound* for the Toronto stage. The latter evolved into *The Magic Show*, a five-year hit on  
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The *Ghostbusters* venture into the heart of haunted darkness—a wormhole in the Big Apple as producer/director Ivan Reitman (inset) watches their ghoulish antics.



# Reitman

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Broadway (and its 13th longest running show) starring magician Doug Henning.

Then along came *The National Lampoon Show*. Featuring such new comedy talents as John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Ramis and Murray, Reitman produced the off-Broadway hit and its subsequent one-year tour. He also became acquainted with *NatLamp* publisher Matty Simmons. At one point, the two decided to produce a low-budget, college comedy. With \$3.2 million from Universal, John Landis as director and 32 shooting days, *Animal House* grossed over \$200 million worldwide and became the most popular movie comedy in history.

"I didn't know it was going to be quite so big," Reitman admits, "but I did believe it was very good. We all knew there had never been a movie like *Animal House* before and that we were onto something big. That it happened was a thrill."

Reitman was now a Baby Mogul. He had money, power and youth—and was only 30 years old.

"Besides allowing me to basically do what I want in films," he says, "it gave me confidence to try new things. I learned to trust my judgment more. And, of course, *Animal House* made it easier to direct because people were more likely to believe in you."

*Meatballs*, with Murray as the star and Reitman directing his first major feature, was next. On a \$1.4 million budget, it made over \$55 million and became Canada's most successful film venture ever. In 1981, Reitman unleashed his third straight summer blockbuster, *Stripes*, again toplineing Murray. With what was, for the producer/director, an astronomical budget of \$10 million, it brought in more than \$85 million. Reitman was at the top.

## "Heavy Metal" Drama

But *Heavy Metal* (STARLOG #48) began a string of less-than-successful films. While Ivan Reitman claims it was not a failure, having earned back its \$8 million cost, *Heavy Metal* was his first film in years which was not box office gold.

"The film was another example of my wanting to experiment," he says. "I've always been an animation fan and wanted to bring an adult comic book to the screen. I've also always been a big comic book fan. My mother has thrown out a fortune in collector's item comics in the last 15 years."

Unfortunately, *Heavy Metal* just didn't work. "Everything is an artistic risk. Looking back, I now think that animation is a very limiting form," Reitman says. "Also, the movie would have been better had it been one strong story instead of a bunch of different stories. I would have liked to see the Harry Canyon episode done that way and gotten rid of the sword-and-sorcery bits. But I'm happy with the *Heavy Metal* dollars. And it was successful."

His next project was neither happy nor successful. In early 1983, Reitman returned to Broadway with another musical magic show starring Henning, *Merlin* (with music by Elmer Bernstein, lyrics by Don Black, book by Richard Levinson and William Link). Producer Reitman soon replaced Frank Dunlop as director and tried to salvage the \$1.5 million problem-plagued show.

"*Merlin* didn't work," he confesses. "It wasn't staged well. We had book and music problems. Then, we were performing live every night and working all day trying to fix it. By the end, I loved it and the audiences loved it. We were playing to packed houses and I even got a Tony nomination, but it was too late. The show cost too much to keep going. It's a touchy business we're in and *Merlin* didn't quite work out."

Does he foresee any further projects with fellow Canadian Henning?

"No," he replies instantly. "I'm not interested in that anymore. Film magic is so much more spectacular than what you can do on stage. The magic in *Ghostbusters* is so much more exciting."

Reitman attributes the failures of 1983's *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone* (STARLOG #70), in part, to *Merlin*. "I was so busy on *Merlin*," he maintains, "I couldn't pay much attention to *Spacehunter* and so it didn't make any money."

Twelve million dollars later, *Spacehunter*

was decapitated by the critics (STARLOG #76) and ignored by the public. While controversy surfaced in an early change in directors, with Lamont (*Fear on Trial*) Johnson taking over the project from Jean LaFleur and Reitman relegating himself to executive producer, Reitman doesn't blame Johnson for the 3-D flick's problems. "He did well. I think what happened was that *Spacehunter* lacked a comedic sensibility," Reitman says. "It was meant to be there, but because of the way it was directed, a lot got lost. But that also had a great deal to do with the casting. To make the film work, a different attitude and a different kind of actor was required. [Lamont Johnson discusses the film in a future STARLOG]."

A man not given to extremes of temperament, Reitman considers his recent poor showings on stage and screen as a blessing. "I had about 10 years of unprecedented success," he announces, "then, I had a bad year. I feel great about it and relieved. I knew that it *would* happen sooner or later. Now that my bad year is over, I can get on with making movies. I'm glad it was last year instead of this year with *Ghostbusters*."

## "Batman" Adventure

Reitman is banking a great deal on the shocks and yocks of *Ghostbusters*. He even turned down an offer to direct the upcoming film version of *The Batman* to concentrate (continued on page 65)



Oooohhh!! It's a very, very scary canine—one of the Terror Dogs which must be tamed by Reitman's *Ghostbusters*.



## Reitman

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completely on *Ghostbusters*.

"I didn't want to do two \$30 million pictures back-to-back," he explains. "It's too much work. Tom Mankiewicz [STARLOG #69] wrote a great script though. Joe Dante is directing, so it'll be great. But I'm so exhausted with *Ghostbusters* that I couldn't go into pre-production with *The Batman* right after finishing post-production here, so I begged out."

Instead, Reitman's next effort will be *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Douglas Adams, who wrote the British radio serial and the three bestselling novels, has completed two drafts of the screenplay—with more to come.

"We're at an early stage," Reitman says, "The problem is trying to fit three books into a film form that won't cost us \$90 million to do right."

Yet, despite his business abilities and commercial success, Reitman shuns the deal-maker label.

"The budget is irrelevant except vis-a-vis profits," he insists. "What's most fun is the creative end. My worst day as a director is better than my best as a producer. I worry about whether the movie works. The business part is second nature. That's why I've decided *not* to produce for others. There's not enough control. The director is the creative force and I would rather live or die by whether the movie works than worry about how other people do their jobs."

The people he doesn't have to worry about is the coterie of talents he has gathered around him: Ramis and Aykroyd (the two screenwriters on *Ghostbusters*), Murray, and occasional producer/writer Dan Goldberg—all of whom have been together since their Canadian days.

"Considering how much success we've had, it's remarkable that we're still together," Reitman says. "Success, not failure, is what usually tears people apart. I guess we realize that we're all good for each other. I can bring out something in Bill Murray that no one else can. I can make them all work harder for me than they do for anyone else. It's a question of trust. For me, they're exceptionally gifted and smart and make enormous contributions. They're writers as well as actors and I like that. We have a family feeling in production."

"My comedy all comes out of relationships and friendships anyway. All of my movies are about friendship. Maybe I'll make *The Brothers Karamazov* someday, but I'm good at comedies and I want them to be better and better. I want to have a body of work in which I can take pride."

Not to mention a body of work that young boys and girls, teenagers and college kids, will love and laugh with and always remember—just as a 12-year-old Ivan Reitman remembers screaming his lungs out, trying to *destroy* The Tinger. ★

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