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Ernie Hudson

Hey, Man, He's a Ghostbuster!

After surviving "The Forbidden Zone" with his buddy Spacehunter, this legitimate actor took on an apparition mission with Bill Murray, Harold Ramis and Dan Aykroyd, the "Ghostbusters."

By DENNIS FISCHER



ALL GHOSTBUSTERS PHOTOS: COPYRIGHT 1984 COLUMBIA PICTURES

His name is not a household word. But then neither were the monikers of his fellow Ghostbusters Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd until a few years ago.

He is Ernie Hudson, co-star of both *Spacehunter* and *Ghostbusters*, and originally a Michigan native who wanted to be a playwright.

"I started at Wayne State University writing and directing," he says. "I began acting because I found actors very unreliable, always going off by themselves. Then, I would have to find somebody to replace them. I never really thought seriously of making a living at acting until the late '60s. As a black man, it was difficult because there weren't

many blacks who were 'making a living' at acting. There were guys like Sammy Davis Jr. with all the jewelry, but it's hard to identify with them.

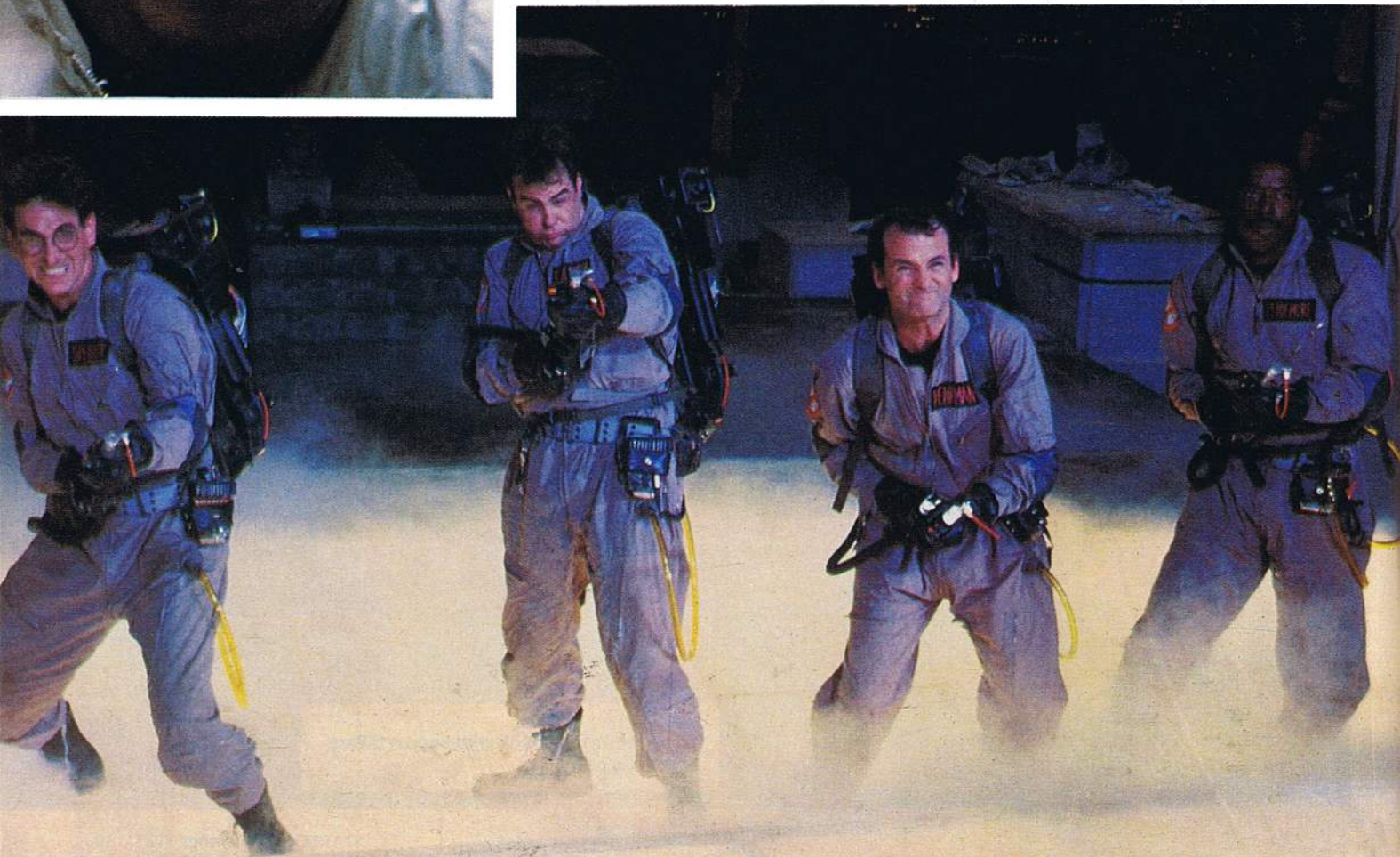
"It wasn't really a choice to act; it was more from frustration, knowing I couldn't do the factory number, or work the straight office job.

"It's fun working a show. The show always ends and then you can move on to something else. With a regular job, it's never-ending. I just couldn't do that, so acting provided a certain amount of freedom and variety. And then there was always the possibility of making it—it's almost like shooting craps, you stand to lose big, but then you gain more if you win. I didn't have much to lose."

When *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone* came along, Hudson was ac-

Theatrical actor Ernie Hudson

Spengler, Stantz, Venkman and Zeddemore take on Gozer, who snatched the form of the destructor from the mind of Hudson's character in the original *Ghostbusters* script.



tually looking in another direction. "I was up for a pilot called *Ryan's Four*," Hudson recalls. "It was a wonderful role, and I really wanted it. That was all I really thought about. My agent called and told me about a thing called *Adventures in the Creep Zone* [*Spacehunter's* original title] that was just totally bizarre. I didn't even want to go for it, but he said, 'Well, it looks pretty good on the pilot, but go up for this movie anyway.' I read for it early in September, never heard anything else, and I forgot about it. That audition was the first time I met [producer] Ivan Reitman [STARLOG #85] and Jean LaFleur, who was directing. But I was more interested in that pilot.

"However, there was a problem getting me to read for Henry Winkler, the executive producer of this TV show. Somehow, we never worked it out, so I didn't get the part. I was totally devastated. Then, my agent called. 'Well, I'm really sorry about the TV show—Oh, by the way, you got *Adventures in the Creep Zone*.' But that was no real consolation."

Fantastic 3-D

Hudson spent 15 weeks in Moab, Utah for the confused and disorganized *Spacehunter* lensing. Originally, he was informed that Jeff (Starman) Bridges would portray Wolff, the hero eventually played by Peter Strauss (STARLOG #72). Hudson had also been told to grow his hair long for the part of Washington, but when he arrived, it was insisted that he shave his head totally bald. Then, three weeks into the film, director LaFleur was dismissed and replaced by Lamont Johnson.

"When I got the job, I read the script and I basically liked it. But there were problems with it," Hudson recounts. "It was confusing at first and seemed a little scattered. I had just finished doing a John Candy piece, *Going Berserk*, and now here I was shooting in Utah. Reading the script, I thought it was a special FX movie. I thought the movie would work or not work depending on how they pull all the FX together. Suddenly, after finding my direction, I learn that we're going 3-D! I've never really been a fan of 3-D movies. I don't know much about them, but I was told they had this 'revolutionary new process' which would totally bring 3-D into the modern era. So, I thought, 'OK, that might be interesting.'

"So, we shot it and it was difficult because things were always changing. We changed the script entirely. When Lamont came in, we got a new script, a new everything. I ended up really liking Lamont. But it was very confusing, especially in the beginning."

Hudson also enjoyed working with co-stars Molly (*Breakfast Club*) Ringwald (STARLOG #74) and Peter Strauss. "I love Molly," he exclaims, "and I'm very happy that things are going well for her. She's a wonderful actress. Peter is a very giving actor, and *Spacehunter* was different than the serious roles he usually plays. It was more of a youth-oriented film, so I think it was a real stretch for Peter. He was very pleasant to work with, he's a very good person. But it was



They're not Musketeers, they're *Ghostbusters* (l to r: Hudson, Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis).

a real stretch for him and the confusion didn't help. I'm not sure he got all he could out of Wolff.

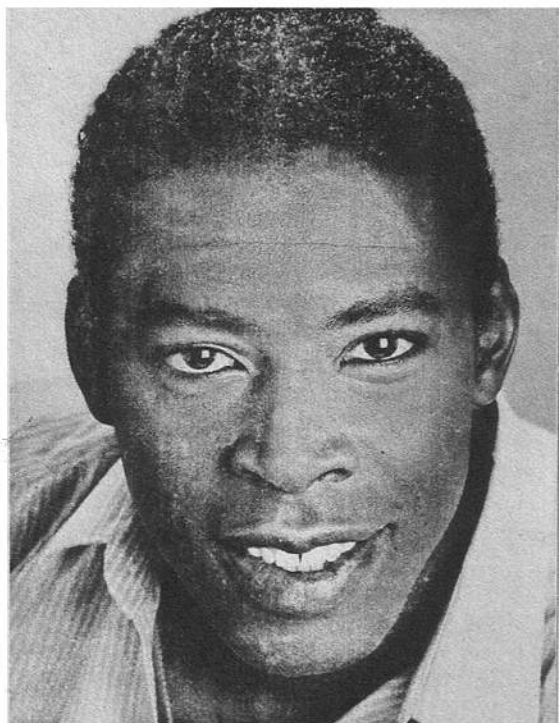
"Sometimes you get a role, and it's a certain type. Wolff was a wonderful, Harrison Ford type, but that's not Peter. An actor has to take it his own way and do something totally different. Unfortunately, you're working with people who want the Harrison Ford thing, and they want it from you.

"In terms of *Spacehunter*, Peter should have taken the role and done his thing with it, but I never thought he was comfortable. I didn't say that to him, because he was under a lot of pressure. Peter had to carry his first big feature through all that confusion, and it was very difficult."

Still, Hudson found *Spacehunter* to be a good learning experience, and unlike director Lamont Johnson (in THE BEST OF STARLOG #6), he has no regrets about the project. He feels that while the film was an honest effort, it fell short of its potential.

"First off," Hudson enumerates, "the special effects didn't work well in 3-D. I don't think the process was 'revolutionary.' It was difficult for people to see [since the 3-D process does reduce brightness]. In fact, I saw the film flat later on cable, and it was far more interesting.

"The film opened big—\$7 million in the first three days, but then, it was downhill. I think people went to *Spacehunter*—which came on the heels of *Star Wars*—and expected to see something different. If you don't have something really special and different, people just ask why they should spend money to see this thing? I don't think *Spacehunter* was daring enough; it wasn't really risky. We never lived up to our own publicity. It wasn't a bad story as movies go. And with Peter in it, I think people expected



Hudson hopes to be heavily involved in the inevitable *Ghostbusters II*.

Spacehunter to be a serious film, and it wasn't serious at all."

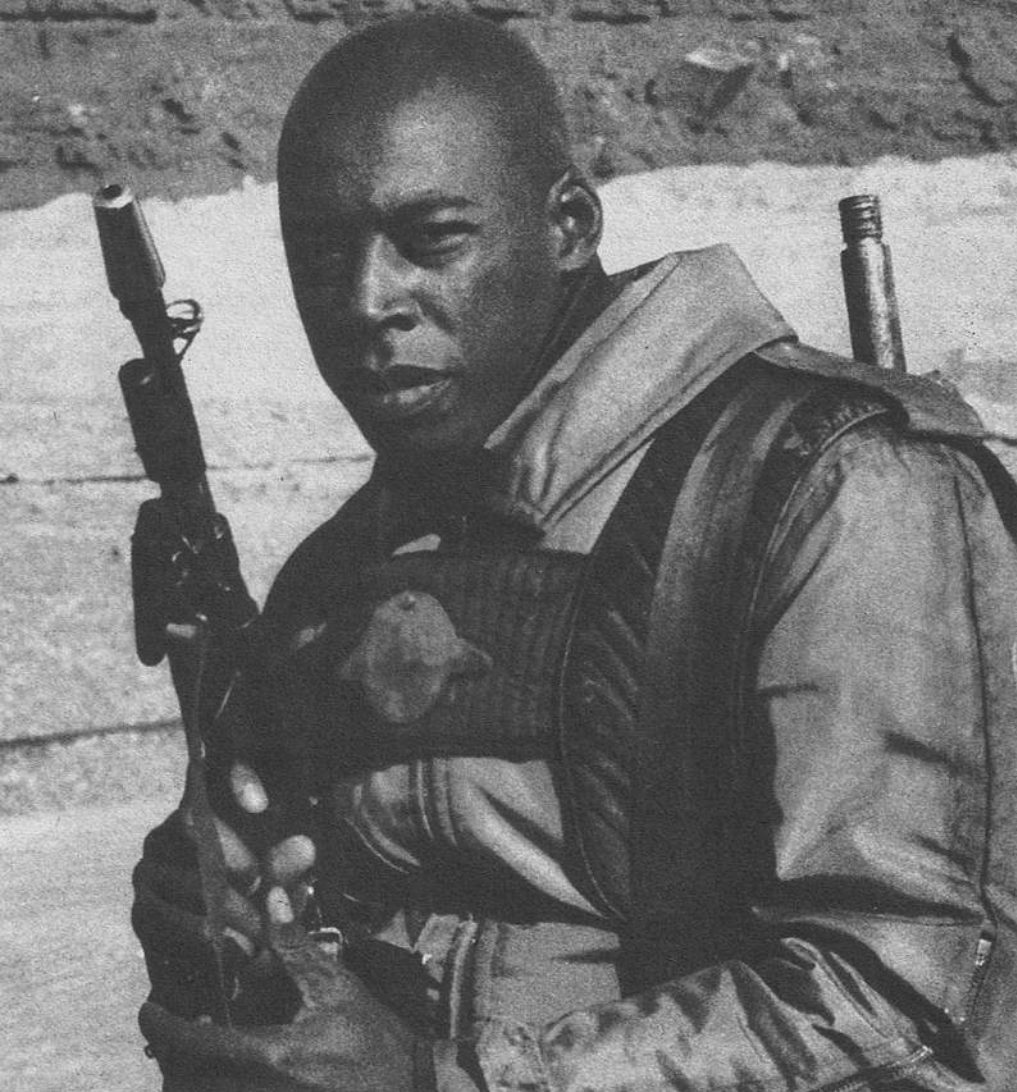
Ghost Story

Exiting *The Forbidden Zone*, Hudson went on to make *Two of a Kind*, a fantasy in which God threatens to destroy the world unless John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John fall in love. Hudson next appeared in the teen comedy *The Joy of Sex*, directed by Martha (Real Genius) Coolidge (see page 64). Both films were flops.

So, how did Hudson end up landing the choice role of Winston Zeddemore, one of the *Ghostbusters*? Once more, he almost didn't.

"The first time I ever heard of *Ghostbusters*," recalls Hudson, "was when

DENNIS FISCHER, LA-based writer, works for The Hollywood Reporter. He profiled Tobe Hooper in STARLOG #96.



SPACEHUNTER PHOTO: COPYRIGHT 1983 COLUMBIA PICTURES

As Washington in *The Forbidden Zone*, Hudson feels the project fell short of its potential, but he still had no regrets.

I ran into Ivan Reitman in an elevator at the Cedar Sinai Hospital. I've always liked Ivan because his work has always been so different and because he took time with me. Actors tend to get overlooked and producers tend to overlook them. Ivan never did. But we were on the elevator together and after saying hello, he said, 'Oh, by the way, I'm doing a new movie.'

"And I said, 'Oh, what's that?' He said it was with Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd. I said, 'Really, that's great!' Then, he said, 'Well, there's *nothing* in it for you.' I said, 'Well, OK, I'm not expecting that every time you make a movie, there has to be a part for me, but thanks, it's been great seeing you anyway.'

"Then, my agent called a month later and said, 'Ivan's doing a film, and there's a wonderful part that they are possibly going black with.' He was trying to get me to read for it, but I couldn't get an interview. They thought I was all wrong, they were looking for a comedian. They had an image and I didn't fit. Plus, they only knew me with the shaved head. I think Ivan saw me that way.

"Washington in *Spacehunter* was big, and he saw himself as big, powerful and mighty—very authoritative. Zeddmore in *Ghostbusters* was totally the opposite. He's just a guy trying to make a living.

"Finally, after a couple of months, I got an interview. When I went in to read, they were seeing everybody, black or white, because evidently the first idea fell through. They really seemed to like my reading. I mean, they laughed, and they were so taken that they asked me back and I read again. Then, they called me back one more time. It was a never-ending experience, but finally I got the job."

On *Ghostbusters*, there were a number of script changes, which trimmed Hudson's role in the final film. "The first script I read was very different," he says. "Zeddmore had a much bigger role, but the studio decided this was a star vehicle for Bill Murray, that he should be more involved than anybody else in the cast, so they reworked it. So, instead of my character coming in early on, he came in halfway through the movie. As an actor, when I read this new script, I said, 'Wait a minute.' I talked to Ivan who felt that was the *only* way to do it. I was about to walk out because when you really want to be part of something, you give a lot. I was set to work on this movie for 16 weeks.

"Everyone was very open to suggestions, as least as much as they could be. It got a little frustrating; the character *had* changed."

Nevertheless, Hudson is happy that he stayed on *Ghostbusters* and enjoyed working with his co-stars. "The nicest thing about the

movie," he says, "was working with the other actors and meeting Bill Murray. Some people you have a certain idea what they're like, and after you work with them, you're disappointed and you change your opinion. With others, after you've worked with them, you come away with greater admiration. That's how I feel about Bill Murray. I like Bill. He's wonderful, and I don't think he has been given his proper due.

"These people all had a different attitude and chemistry. Much of the time, I was feeling a little odd. Bill, Dan, the others had been together for years, from *Second City*, *National Lampoon*, *Saturday Night Live*, and they already had a working relationship. I had to fit in somehow. When you're working that closely, you have to trust each other. But you have to establish that trust; you can't just give it to somebody. As an actor, I spent the first month trying very hard to build that trust. Once it's established, it ain't going to get lost, right?"

During filming, the *Ghostbusters* often departed from the script to engage in improvisations. "I didn't realize that the guys were very, very much connected with improvisation," admits Hudson. "My background is theater, where the script is the bible. A writer spends time working out what he wants, and it's very annoying when somebody comes in and says, 'Well, I've decided not to say this.' I respect the script, but with these guys, there was a certain freedom, a certain spontaneity. I didn't know what was going to happen next. It certainly gave Bill Murray's genius a chance to come through because he wasn't locked in.

"I've done TV, sitcoms, those kind of jokes, and if it's not working, you make it work somehow. If you don't get laughs, you put in a laughtrack, and then you'll definitely get a laugh. But it wasn't that way on *Ghostbusters*. The script was always evolving and changing. We would do takes five or six times, and they would be *different* every time. That was a new experience for me."

Weird Tales

With the changes in *Ghostbusters*, also came the vanishing act of Winston Zeddmore. Not only was Hudson's character brought in later in the film, but most of his background fell victim to the editor's shears, while some of his best "bits" were given to other characters. "Originally," Hudson reveals, "the guy who got 'slimed' was Winston. The guy who thought of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man was Winston. So, I went from all that to what we ended up with. I didn't know how to take the character because I wasn't sure what the boundaries were. I felt that Winston felt a little odd connecting up with these people who've been successful. He came into the situation after they had already established the *Ghostbusters*. He had seen them on TV, so he comes in, skeptical and wanting a job. He figures they're a little crazy, but that's OK, because the most important thing to him is the job. I took what I was feeling on the set and transferred it into the Zeddmore character, so that by the time

we got to filming's end, I really felt a part of it all.

"Winston is a little awkward and peculiar. Of all the characters I've done, he was probably the one closest to me.

"Oddly enough, it was one of the least comedic things I've done. I've done comedy. I have a good sense of timing, and I think I'm very funny, but in *Ghostbusters*, I didn't feel very funny. I felt, in many ways, very much the straight man, but I guess we all were. You look at Danny and Harold Ramis' characters—basically, we were all pretty much straight men to Bill Murray. It's nice when there's somebody who takes the ball and runs with it, and Bill was able to do that. You say, 'OK, I understand because he delivers,' but I like to be flexible, to be able to change key. I believed that an actor should be able to do both heavyweight and lightweight, straight man and comedy, take an audience from laughter to tears—that's the fun of it. But this *wasn't* the kind of role where I could change gears, and it took me a while to accept that. I was like a musician playing in a band. It was my particular job to play this particular instrument, and that's what I played. It was not a chance to do a solo. Bill was the one who did the solo, and that's the way it was."

"The character's history had been taken out because of the time limitations, so he looked like a flake coming off the street saying, 'Hey, I just want a job.' That originally was a joke we had: he walks in, they hire him, and when they walk downstairs, they find

that the guy was an ex-military major with special skills. But that was cut out."

With a film as successful as *Ghostbusters* (now in re-release), discussions for a sequel inevitably ensued, but Columbia Pictures is holding back on a firm commitment until there is a satisfactory script. Says Hudson, "We've talked to Columbia, and it all depends on Dan Aykroyd's script. He's writing one, and as far as I know—I believe I would be in the sequel, but there is no contract now. If there's one thing I've learned, you *never* know what anybody's going to do. I would like to get out of the character's straight jacket. I would like to play more notes besides the ones that I did in the first film. Also, I would like Zeddemore to be more involved in the storyline. It was difficult being one of the *Ghostbusters*, but not being in on the script's set-up. I would like to be legitimately involved as opposed to just being in the movie. I would like very much to be part of *Ghostbusters II*, but I haven't signed any contracts. I would be very disappointed if I was not."

Besides the problems and challenges of his *Ghostbusters* gig, Hudson remembers some of the more humorous experiences of making the film. "One of the funniest things was shooting on the streets of New York. We had blocked traffic and had to drive the Ecto-mobile around the block and then come around the corner so when Ivan yelled action, we could pull into the shot. We went to drive the car around and Bill Murray suddenly had

to go to the bathroom, but we were stuck in the middle of traffic. So, he took a run to the bathroom and it's the middle of rush hour. When we finally got into position and Ivan yelled action, there was Bill trying to rush back to the car.

"Then, there was the scene where Danny and I pull up in the car as the ghosts explode out of the firehouse. We went to take the car around the block to get it into position for the scene and it ran out of gas. It also ran out of gas on the bridge we were driving across, and there were Danny and I trying to push the damned car and get it off the bridge."

Of course, Hudson faced the routine problems of actors in FX films: reacting to things that aren't yet there. "Ivan let us see some of the FX stuff," he explains, "so we had an idea of the strange things we were supposed to be seeing. It was wonderful seeing it all put together. But you don't know how to take this stuff which seems silly. You worry that there are going to be people watching this, and if they don't believe that I *believe* it, then I'm going to end up looking ridiculous.

"For instance, I was standing there on the set, and I was told that there was this *marshmallow* coming at me. Ivan shouts, 'OK, he's coming at you' and I had to react, and there was a part of my brain saying 'You know, you look really *stupid*.' I had to get past that," Ernie Hudson says. "It took a lot of imagination to make myself believe. I had no idea what a 60-foot marshmallow looked like, but it all worked out very well." ★

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