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OCTOBER 1986
NUMBER 111
THE SCIENCE FICTION UNIVERSE

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Back Off, Man, They're

Venkman, Spengler, Stantz & Zeddmore are back to tackle animated apparitions in sophisticated Saturday morning shadowplay.

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS



The animated team of Zeddmore, Stantz, Venkman and Spengler look slightly unfamiliar since the show is unable to caricature the exact likenesses of the original movie actors. Secretary Janine and Slimer also reappear.

If you see something strange in the usually bland neighborhood of Saturday morning cartoons this fall, you may just have called the Ghostbusters.

The Real Ghostbusters, that is, not to be confused, its producers hope, with *The Original Ghostbusters*, an animated series based on the short-lived children's TV show starring Larry Storch, Forrest Tucker and Bob Burns. When a movie makes \$200 million and there's no sequel in sight, anyone with a spare ounce of ectoplasm will look for a way to profit from the phantom-smashing sensation.

What *The Real Ghostbusters* hopes will set them apart, however, is the adult format, picking up in the same scary-comic vein where the 1984 hit film left off.

Once again, we follow the exploits of Peter Venkman, Ray Stantz, Egon Spengler and Winston Zeddmore, four blue-collar guys who don't say, "This Bud's for you," until the vapor, spirit or poltergeist in question has been safely slapped into a containment unit.

Patterned after the characters played by Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis

By BRIAN LOWRY

and Ernie Hudson—but unable to use their voices or exact likenesses—the show also features Janine, their efficient secretary, and a most unusual mascot: Slimer, the green, floating torso with the voracious appetite who "slimed" Murray the first time around.

But if the real Ghostbusters struggled against Ghozer to save the world, story editor J. Michael Straczynski—a self-proclaimed "fifth Ghostbuster"—sees an equally daunting challenge awaiting: the effort to bring adult storytelling to kidvid.

"Studios are watching this series very carefully," Straczynski says, sitting in his offices at DIC Enterprises, the Encino, CA-based company that also produces *Heathcliff* and *Inspector Gadget*. "If this works, they'll have ammunition to turn to the networks and say, 'Look, it *does* work to have sophistication and intelligent writing in your shows. Let's do the same thing.'

"If the show fails, everyone will say, 'See,

they tried to do intelligent shows and no one's watching.' A lot is riding on this series."

ABC and Columbia Pictures have both provided a vote of confidence, approving a Saturday a.m. network TV debut this month and a 65-episode syndicated run for 1987.

But can *The Real Ghostbusters* escape from the stigma of Saturday morning, where most of the shows have less to do with telling stories than selling toys? Straczynski claims the gold's in the writing.

A number of *Twilight Zone* alumni, including Michael Reaves and STARLOG's David Gerrold, have contributed teleplays. Experienced SF and comic-book pros—among them Marv Wolfman, J.M. De Matteis, Steven Barnes, Arthur Byron Cover and Steve Perry—have also been solicited to write for the show.

Straczynski, late of *He-Man* and *She-Ra*, was committed to luring the best to script the Ghostbusters' exploits. "I felt if our show

BRIAN LOWRY, veteran STARLOG correspondent, previewed *The Boy Who Could Fly* in issue #110.



The Real Ghostbusters brings the film's off-center sense of humor to Saturday morning TV. "It's *The Twilight Zone* meets David Letterman," says story editor J. Michael Straczynski.

worked, it would work because of imaginative thinking," he explains. "Having writers who know the canon of science fiction helps tremendously." There are, in fact, only two prerequisites to write for the show: A) a liking for the original movie, and B) a knowledge of science fiction.

Ghost Stories

The result, Straczynski claims, is a lineup of stories unlike anything ever seen on Saturday morning, and some of the plots (and titles) seem to bear him out. Some samplings:

"The Collect Call of Cthulhu"—A Michael Reaves tribute to H.P. Lovecraft, where two kids find an ancient copy of *The Necronomicon* and accidentally bring the Old Ones to life.

"Adventures in Slime and Space"—A tongue-in-cheek David Gerrold tale, where the group must prevent the world from being engulfed by slime.

"Station Identifications"—Ghosts start coming out of television sets as whatever's on the screen, including, in one instance, Captain Jim, Mr. Spook and The Doctor.

There's even Power Guy, a thinly veiled swipe at He-Man. ("At one point, someone points at Power Guy and says, 'Who is this?' " Straczynski reveals. "They say, 'He's a toy they made into a cartoon series.' And Peter says, 'What lunatic would make a toy into a cartoon series?' Our sponsors will just love us for that.")

"Knock, Knock"—One of 12 episodes written by Straczynski for network or syndication. ("I've seen the movie 12 times," he notes.) Here, subway workmen unwittingly open a door marked "Do Not Open Until Doomsday"—taking the Ghostbusters on a trip to a realm resembling Dante's *Inferno*.

"Night Game"—The forces of Good and Evil meet once every 500 years—this time in a baseball stadium—to fight an otherworldly battle. The prize? One person's soul.

"Haunted Animal House"—Peter and the gang return to his alma mater, where his old fraternity is being plagued "by a gang of unruly frat ghosts." The spirits of deceased frat members, it seems, are driving the current batch of college kids out of their minds. Written by John Shirley.

"X-Mas Marks the Spot"—The Ghostbusters go back in time and inadvertently capture the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future before they can rehabilitate Ebenezer Scrooge. Eventually, the four must return to

try and undo the damage they've done. ("Our guys *can* screw up," Straczynski says.)

Some other, equally bizarre offerings are planned for syndication, which allows a bit more leeway than the networks. One proposed script, reminiscent of an old *Howard the Duck* comic, involves were-chickens—normal-sized cluckers who go crazy when the Moon comes up. Straczynski calls it "a sick, twisted idea—the kind that gives the animators room to play."

Unlike other Saturday morning fare, *The Real Ghostbusters* revels in that sort of irreverence. The approach, its producers fervently hope, will appeal to adults as well as children on various levels, "the same way the old Warner Bros. cartoons used to," Straczynski says.

The writing hinges on the broad story parameters, which tell the writers, essentially, to let their minds run amok. "We don't have a formula," Straczynski says proudly.

"By not having a formula, you avoid repetition. In the average animated series, you have the bad guy—Skeletor, or whomever. You have to take the bad guy each week and keep finding new permutations for him. You can go nuts that way.

"We can play with a whole wide range of things, so no two of our shows are alike. We're doing an episode where there are no

ghosts, there's nothing to do and the Ghostbusters have to go out and get *real* jobs."

It isn't always just fun and games, either, when you make your living zapping free-floating ectoplasm. While Straczynski acknowledges that there's little actual violence shown, "There is some implied violence. These ghosts, given the chance, would and *could* kill you. Some shows are very scary, some are full-tilt gonzo."

When it comes to unbridled terror, the story editor says nothing will surpass "The Bogeyman Cometh." The episode, which will air on network TV, focuses on a real bogeyman, who lives in the In-between place.

Each wall, floor and ceiling in the Bogeyman's realm leads to a different child's bedroom closet. The character himself is a nasty, hooved, horned demon.

Straczynski submitted the show, certain that it would never pass the network's standards and practices committee. Sure enough, the ABC liaison called and requested two minor changes. "After that, there was a long silence," Straczynski recalls. "Then, she said, 'OK, that's it.'"

"The censors have been remarkable with us. They have let things go through I thought would *never* make it. 'The Bogeyman Cometh' is a frightening, frightening story, and they let us do it! It's going to have kids traumatized all over the country," Straczynski says gleefully.

"We're doing things that are totally deranged. We fry the Easter Bunny. I've always wanted to fry the Easter Bunny, and I finally get my chance.

"We also have surrealistic humor. In one show, people's dreams come to life. There's a postman sleeping, and you have a post office mailbox arguing with a huge letter. The mailbox is saying, 'You *must* go where you're addressed,' and the letter is arguing in favor of free will."

Ghost Stars

Straczynski apologizes, in fact, for the first few shows, which don't push as hard against the limitations of Saturday morning. "Don't be discouraged by the first three shows," he warns. "The first three shows are soft because we didn't realize how much we could get away with."

Nevertheless, for all its absurdity, ebullience and ambition, there's a certain irony about *The Real Ghostbusters*—namely, that it's being done without any input from the real Ghostbusters.

Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, Ernie Hudson and director Ivan Reitman have moved on to other projects. Reitman, Straczynski says, has seen some scripts and responded favorably, and Michael Gross and Joe Medjuck, the film's associate producers, are serving as the cartoon's executive producers.

In order to keep things fast and funny, the

writers are told to treat the characters exactly as if they were Ramis, Hudson, Aykroyd and Murray. "There is only *one* Bill Murray," Straczynski admits. "As a consequence, you'll never get as hip or sharp a delivery, no matter how good the actors are.

"You just have to write it as if you're writing for Bill Murray and the others, and hope the actors can pull it off."

Lorenzo Music, a familiar voice in commercials and best known as Carlton the Doorman from the sitcom *Rhoda*, has the unenviable task of following in Murray's vocal chords. A deft ensemble of unknowns provides the rest of the voices.

Faces have also been altered, since, notes Straczynski "We can't show Bill Murray's face, because he owns that." So, Peter has a more boyish look, Egon turns up with blondish hair, and Ray and Winston also look a tad different.

Slimer, at least, resembles his earlier incarnation. Apparently, free-floating, three-foot-tall green potato heads don't have Bill Murray's clout.

Straczynski, for his part, is unconcerned. "We figured after the first couple of episodes, you won't even notice," he says.

The series even makes light of its link to the movie. One episode features the Ghostbusters, due to their fame, being brought out to Hollywood where a movie is being shot about them.

The naked face of marshmallow fear reappears, forging a Stay-Puft link between animated adventurers and their big-screen predecessors.

In the cartoon, the characters come to Columbia Studios and meet Rick Rosen—an executive on the film written into the episode. The segment ends with the cartoon characters watching a rotoscope of the movie, cutting to Peter, who says, "That guy doesn't look a thing like me."

Ghost Guard

Producers of the animated series are also undaunted by "word on the street" that Aykroyd, between his other projects, is working on a script for *Ghostbusters II*. "If
(continued on page 69)



That piggish poltergeist—now known as Slimer—has reformed and become friend and mascot to *The Real Ghostbusters*.

Ghostbusters

(continued from page 11)

there is a sequel, we have no problem with it," Straczynski maintains.

"We'll work it into the continuity. We'll find a way to say—as *Star Trek* often did—here's when this happened in our universe.

"I'm really big on continuity," he adds. "One show, which is done in flashback, ties together the movie's end and our series' beginning. We figure, let 'em wonder, let the questions arise. Then, we'll say, 'We haven't forgotten: here's how *this* happened, here's how *that* happened, nyah nyah to you.' "

In addition to battling to save the world, *The Real Ghostbusters* will struggle to distinguish themselves from *The Original Ghostbusters*, a cartoon based on the earlier Filmation TV series.

Columbia settled a lawsuit with Filmation for an undisclosed sum in order to use the title in the film, but that didn't preclude Filmation's own animated attempt to capitalize on poltergeist popularity.

Original debuts in syndication, featuring two guys and a gorilla battling the occult. "Just by coincidence," Straczynski says slowly, "the very first episode of our show, 'Ghosts Are Us,' has to do with a rival trio of ghostbusters who are, of course, frauds.

"We aren't worried. We're going to take a little potshot at them in our first episode and then leave it at that."

Encouraged by ABC's strong support, the folks at DIC are using revolutionary jargon—talking about overthrowing the structure that has made Saturday morning cartoons the black hole of animation. "If it works, they'll have to make new shows," Straczynski contends. "The ones that are on now are too straightjacketed to break that format.

"There are so many shows which are toy commercials that trying to get writers to do original thinking, without a story guideline telling them what to do, is very hard.

"A writer came in who wanted to work on the show and who had worked for some other animated series," Straczynski recalls. "I told him we *do* have a toy company involved, but it doesn't have story approval and it doesn't tell us what characters to use, in what order or how often.

"He looked at me for a long moment, thinking about something, and then he said, 'Well, how do you know what to write?' " Now it's Straczynski's turn to take a long pause: "He will not be working on this show," he says firmly.

The flag is up (with a *Ghostbusters* decal, of course), all of ghostdom is being assembled and the accelerators are loaded. J. Michael Straczynski and company, eager to assault traditional sensibilities, ain't 'fraid of no failure: the rebellion has begun.

"We may miss, we may strike a direct hit," he observes. "Our hope is only that this will be just the first volley fired in that revolution."



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