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Dan Aykroyd gets into

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE!

As Ghostbuster, SF fan and now director, he's always looking for "Nothing But Trouble."

Dan Aykroyd,

Photo: Steve Schapiro

Fantasynmaker

A writer will do just about anything to get his script made. In the case of Dan Aykroyd's fantasy flight, *Nothing But Trouble*, Warner Bros. execs weren't asking too high a price.

"All I had to do was direct," chuckles Aykroyd. "Direct and play the two parts nobody else wanted."

Aykroyd's good humor as he describes the film, his directorial debut, seems to indicate that the actor/writer (who has starred in such genre films as *Ghostbusters I and II*, *My Stepmother Is An Alien* and *Twilight Zone: The Movie*) has come through this trial-by-fire relatively unscathed. The humor, a subtle counter to the actor's clear, concise conversational patter, may have something to do with the return of his wife, actress Donna Dixon, from Europe the night before. It could have even more to do with the fact that Aykroyd, earlier in the week, put the final

polish to the answer print of *Nothing But Trouble* (a.k.a. *GIT*, *Road to Ruin*, *Trick House* and *Valkenvania*) and that he's happy with the results.

"We went a week over schedule and I didn't make any major mistakes," says Aykroyd. "I would say that's pretty good for a first-time director."

But just how good, according to Aykroyd, remains to be seen.

"Whether or not I'll ever be asked to direct again will be known on a cold Friday night in the middle of February," declares the actor. "I'll begin getting calls six hours after *Nothing But Trouble* opens, calls that will let me know if the film is a hit or a miss. I feel that I've got what it takes to always be able to act and write. But those calls will indicate whether I'll ever be given a chance to direct again."

Nothing But Trouble (discussed in detail under its previous title, *Valkenvania*, in

"Playing a villain is something I *always* wanted to do," Aykroyd notes of his role as the wicked Judge Valkenheiser.

STARLOG #161) is a dark bit of fantasy-comedy. But Aykroyd reveals that his inspiration for the script comes from life.

"It's basically a blend of my own experiences driving across the country and being stopped in small towns. But the experience that really triggered *Nothing But Trouble* happened in 1977. We were two years into *Saturday Night Live* and I had begun commuting back and forth to my farm in Canada. One morning, around 2 a.m., I was driving through this small upstate New York town, doing about 50 in a 30 mile zone, when a cop stopped me.

"I knew what I had done and I told him I would be happy to pay the ticket, but he said, 'That's not the way it works here,' and that I would have to appear before the local Justice of the Peace. So, I ended up following him through eight miles of thick eastern forest to this massive, rundown old house. The J.P., an old lady, was awakened, came downstairs, held this kangaroo court that fined me \$50, and then asked me to stay for tea. I ended up staying with her for four hours. That experience stayed with me for years and posed the premise of what would happen if the Justice of the Peace was real crazy, had something against me personally and wouldn't let me leave."

Mr. Director

The premise became a script which made the rounds and found a willing taker in Warner Bros. (for whom Aykroyd had made *Spies Like Us*, *Caddyshack II*, *Driving Miss Daisy* and other films). In the interim, Aykroyd approached John (Breakfast Club) Hughes and good buddy John (The Blues Brothers) Landis to direct what Aykroyd describes as "a Gothic depiction of real life" and found no takers. Hence, the meetings with Warner Bros. executives that Aykroyd recalls with comic clarity.

"I came in. I gave Warners the script. They said, 'Fine, we want to make this movie with you and John Candy.' I said, 'Fine. I want to play the judge and the banker.' They said, 'How about Chevy Chase as the banker?' I said, 'Great!' He said, 'Great!' Everybody said, 'Great!' Then, we kind of looked at each other and said, 'OK, who's going to direct?'

"And I thought to myself, 'If I say I *don't* have a director at this point, it's going to take months to find somebody,' so I just blurted out, 'I'll do it.' The executives looked at each other and had this private little conference with me sitting right in front of them. They said, 'Well, he's *not* stupid, he *has* done films before, so sure, why not?' I had no burning desire to direct but I saw that's what it was going to take to get my story made."

But Aykroyd is the first to admit that his shaky confidence about directing gave way to utter panic once the deal was done.

"I was as complete a wreck as a person



"I think we made a big mistake in the writing of *Ghostbusters II* by committing ourselves so heavily to the Statue of Liberty thing," admits Aykroyd.

could be," he chuckles. "I was disturbed and worried right up until the first day of shooting. But it was on that day I realized, how lucky can a first-time director get? I'm working with Chevy Chase, John Candy and Demi Moore and one of the greatest groups of technical people any director could hope to get. It was then that I realized that I had such a great team around me that there was no way I could make a major mistake."

In fact, the only major concern facing Aykroyd once he yelled action was whether he would keel over from too much involvement in *Nothing But Trouble*.

"The biggest challenge was conserving my energy so that I could both act and direct," he admits. "Here I was playing two parts in heavy makeup [a mutant Infant Body and the murderous Judge] and trying to direct. The big question was whether I could get all these elements to work at once. The crew took me by the hand and walked me through the first couple of weeks until I had the confidence to do the things I wanted to do. By that time, the crew was so totally in sync with what I wanted that it made the actual filming a wonderful experience."

Aykroyd claims that the entire filmmaking experience blends together as "a creative, finite process," but points to one specific scene as indicative of what he was trying to achieve with the film.

"The dinner scene was the one I was most worried about," he explains. "It's filled with exactly the mixture of comic beats and suspense that I was trying to achieve with the entire movie. It was tough because I knew we would be doing it all day, setting up angles for everybody and getting the elements of the train, the hot dog and my fake nose in just the right amount. But once the scene was blocked out and the cameras set, the scene just fell together."

Including the rare opportunity to see Aykroyd, known to a large extent by his bemused good guy and straightlaced heroic roles, as an out-and-out baddie.

"Playing a villain is something I always wanted to do, and so, when I wrote the script, I wrote the Judge as the consummate bad guy. There's also something quite charming about the old guy. I mean, you can't help but like a guy who kills drug dealers and lets musicians go. I didn't have to do any heavy thinking to get into the part. The attitude came strictly from the makeup. I would look in the mirror, get the voice down and be able to go out and do him all day."

Aykroyd, on the set, was a walking advertisement for David Miller's makeup

Aykroyd isn't against donning proton packs with Harold Ramis and Bill Murray for a potential third *Ghostbusters*.



Ghostbusters II Photo: Bruce McBroom/Copyright 1989 Columbia Pictures



The actor enjoyed working alongside Kim Basinger, but didn't like the fact that *My Stepmother Is an Alien* had to go up against Schwarzenegger.



Ghostbusters Photo: Copyright 1984 Columbia Pictures



Yuppie Chevy Chase is sentenced to a fate worse than death (John Candy) by the dishonorable Judge (Aykroyd).



As a first-time director (and actor under makeup), Aykroyd found unique ways to motivate cast member Demi Moore.

skills. And while Aykroyd in prosthetics didn't prove to be a distraction, the actor/director concedes that he did feel more than the slightest bit embarrassed bellowing out orders in makeup.

"Embarrassed isn't the word for it, *silly* is," he laughs. "Here I was walking around, trying to get people to take me seriously while wearing an Infant Body head. My being in makeup and directing became second nature to the crew after a while, but every so often, I would get a look that said, 'Sure, we believe you, Mr. Director. Now, let us do our job.'"

Mr. Ghostbuster

Looking back, Aykroyd assesses his biggest genre experiences in *Ghostbusters* and the less successful *Ghostbusters II*.

"I liked everything about the first

MARC SHAPIRO, STARLOG's West Coast Correspondent, profiled Kevin Peter Hall in issue #163.

Ghostbusters," says Aykroyd. "For me, it was just the perfect working experience. I did my job. Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, [director] Ivan Reitman and the others all did their jobs. In a way, we had all been working our entire careers to get to that film. All our training, skills and knowledge were just poured into that film and I think it shows."

He switches to critical tones in remembering *Ghostbusters II*.

"I think we made a big mistake in the writing of *Ghostbusters II* by committing ourselves so heavily to the Statue of Liberty thing. There could have been a better way out of that. I believe everybody connected with the film regrets the way we did it. There was a lot of stuff I liked in the second one. The human stuff and, in particular, all the stuff with the baby was great. I also loved the concept of the painting in the museum.

"But I've always believed we were a year too late with that sequel," he contin-

ues. "In a way, we were trapped. We all could have hopped up and down and equalled the entertainment of the first one and it *still* wouldn't have had the impact because the original *Ghostbusters* was so complete and well-rounded. I think we all knew going in that the second *Ghostbusters* was going to suffer from sequelitis."

However, Aykroyd, who defends *Ghostbusters II* as "having some great FX and some pretty suspenseful moments," doesn't deny the possibility of a *Ghostbusters III*.

"It would depend on many things," says Aykroyd. "But if Billy [Murray] said he would do a third *Ghostbusters*, I would go away *right now* and write the script. But I don't think we're going to hear that."

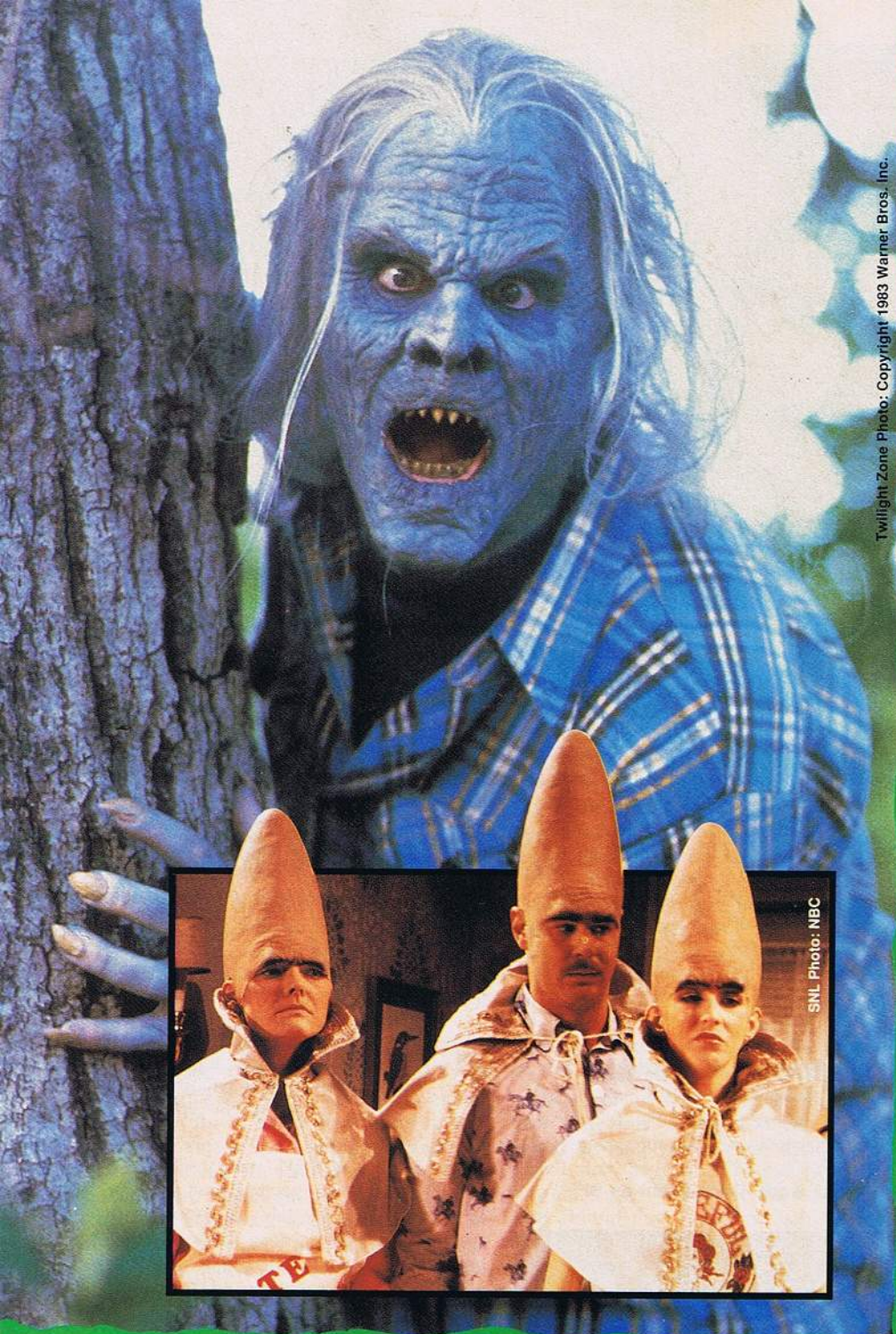
Aykroyd turns his attention to another fantasy outing, *My Stepmother Is an Alien*.

"I thought it was a nice little meaningful, emotional movie. Working with Kim [Basinger], Richard [Benjamin, director] and Albert [Brooks] was a lot of fun and, from a special FX point-of-view, I don't think the movie can be faulted."

Where Aykroyd does find fault with *Stepmother* is in those studio executives who insisted on a release date for the film that almost certainly doomed it to failure.

"The problem came when the people who decide such things decided we could go up against *Twins* and be successful," says Aykroyd, pulling no punches. "We as filmmakers knew it would be absolute folly to think we could do any business

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Twilight Zone Photo: Copyright 1983 Warner Bros. Inc.

SNL Photo: NBC

Aykroyd

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against *Twins* and so we tried to get them to change our opening date. But there was a lot of macho posturing going on, and the result was that they wouldn't change the date and the film flopped miserably."

Aykroyd's love of the filmmaking process and, in particular, certain filmmakers has also led him to do small/cameo parts in the fantasy-adventure outings *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (in which Aykroyd plays the fellow who puts Indy on the plane) and as the real scary guy in the prologue to *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (Aykroyd's wife Donna Dixon played a stewardess dealing with John Lithgow in

Before the Newcomers arrived, Aykroyd brought his brood from France in the popular Conehead skits on *SNL*.

the "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" element of that film).

"In the *Twilight Zone* movie, John [Landis, who directed the prologue], asked me to do it. I liked the idea of being the guy who set the tone for the entire film, and getting into that makeup was great. With *Temple of Doom*, I was such a fan of the films that I just walked in one day and asked if there was anything in this movie I could do. As far as I'm concerned, a part doesn't have to carry a film for me to be interested. If it's a small part that I can have fun with, I'll give it a shot."

His long association with the fantastic

"I liked the idea of being the guy who set the tone for the entire film," says Aykroyd who gave *Twilight Zone: The Movie* its "really scary" prologue.

also had Aykroyd, circa 1981-82, in the running for the role of Dick Tracy.

"John Landis was set to direct the movie at that point," relates Aykroyd, "and I was one of the people up for the role. How seriously I was being considered was anybody's guess. There has always been a list of 15 or so people who seem to get mentioned for just about every big movie. I think I was somewhere in the middle of that list for Dick Tracy," he chuckles.

Mr. Fantasy

Aykroyd's relish in describing his fantasy journeys isn't just dead air. He explains that his love for fantasy and science fiction is for real.

"I get off on fantasy," he enthuses. "I love fiction of all kinds. I've always been a big fan of science fiction and of the worlds of the spiritual and the mystic. I think those areas are a never-ending source for story ideas."

Dan Aykroyd's career has been a veritable rollercoaster ride since he sprang into the national consciousness in 1975 as part of the legendary first incarnation of *Saturday Night Live* (where he appeared in the Coneheads and many other genre-oriented sketches). But he says his attitude toward what he does for a living hasn't changed in the ensuing years.

"My attitude has always been 'Hey, wouldn't it be funny if—'. If this makes me laugh, maybe somebody else will laugh at it, too. That's really where I've always come from. My whole thing is to entertain, make people laugh and to forget about the real world for a while. It's not always easy doing that. I'm never completely happy with anything I've done. If I've been successful with 80 percent of everything I've done, then I'm doing all right by the audience and myself."

Aykroyd is reminded that, during a meeting with STARLOG on the *Nothing But Trouble* set, he had marveled as to why an SF magazine would be interested in covering this film. He concedes now that the emphasis on makeup and FX does make this a STARLOG kind of movie. But he is adamant in defending *Nothing But Trouble* as fiction based on fact.

"What transpires in this film really comes from American life," Dan Aykroyd says. "I may have taken all this to comic/nightmarish extremes but the origin of this film is very real. There are crazy old country judges sitting out there in the woods capable of any kind of behavior and there's a family I know where the two brothers are literally Infant Bodies who are so fat that they're not allowed in the house. So, people may look at *Nothing But Trouble* and think it's totally made up. But I know that there are people like this out among us."



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