

SIGOURNEY WEAVER

In a decade where the big screen was dominated by male excess and machismo, one actress emerged who was able to go eyeball to eyeball...

Skirts billowing up in the wind... To readers of a certain age, the '80s will have provided two vivid images of women with their dresses flying up towards their permed hairdos. One was Kelly LeBrock in *The Woman In Red*. The other was Sigourney Weaver, who, at the climax of *Ghostbusters*, had to decide whether she'd rather be possessed by the demon Zuul or Bill Murray, all while the winds of Hell were blowing her dress up around her shoulders.

But while the ex-Mrs Steven Seagal is now but a footnote to the decade of big hair and shoulder pads (apart from that TV outing in the US version of *Celebrity Fit Club*, where she led a team called 'Kelly's Bellies'), Weaver marches on, regularly turning in smart, varied performances to this day (*The Ice Storm*, *Heartbreakers*, *Avatar*). Somehow she's avoided the career cul-de-sac that forces most actresses over 40 into a plastic-surgery purgatory.

Despite her continued relevance, though, Sigourney's box-office peak happened in the '80s. At the close of the decade, she was Oscar-nominated for both Best Actress (for *Gorillas In The Mist*) and Best Supporting Actress (for *Working Girl*), putting her in the select band of actors to be nominated twice in the same year. Still, it was ghosts and aliens rather than gorillas and acquisitions which cemented her appeal. *Ghostbusters* was the phenomenon, ruling the box-office in 1984, ahead of *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. Five years later the sequel also did respectable business, playing up the cool chemistry between Weaver's Dana Barrett and Murray's Peter Venkman. (Dana: "After dinner, I don't want you putting any of the old cheap moves on me. It's different now." Venkman: "Don't worry. I have all new cheap moves.")

Murray loved to tease Weaver on set, introducing her as the "two-time Oscar nominee" before her scenes and generally going out of his

way to ensure that she – nor anyone else, for that matter – didn't take herself too seriously. "He'd try and hang me upside down or tickle me," recalled Weaver, who hadn't even been considered for the part initially. Dana Barrett was the last of the major characters to be cast and, despite rejecting numerous actresses before her, Weaver wasn't even in the running in director Ivan Reitman's mind – he felt she was just too serious to play a character who becomes demonically possessed and turns into a sex siren.

"Ivan, multiple schizophrenics are my speciality," joked Weaver at her audition, before playing out the possession scene for the director. Several frenzied leaps on to the couch and a few bites of the cushions later and the part was hers.

Bill Murray loved to tease Weaver on set, introducing her as the 'two-time Oscar nominee' before takes

Despite Paul Feig and Kristen Wiig's upcoming all-female *Ghostbusters*, there's still talk of a *Ghostbusters III*. But Weaver is focussing on two other big franchises instead, with *Alien 5* in the offing (*District 9* director Neill Blomkamp's at the helm) and *Avatar 2-4* now in pre-production. "I've always regretted having such a serious career, because I'm really more of an idiot," she insists. But such is the power of *Alien's* legacy and the resonance of her own portrayal of Ellen Ripley that in Hollywood, a 'Sigourney Weaver-type' is shorthand for a strong, ferociously independent woman.


Alien hit the big screen on the eve of the '80s, in 1979, but it would be almost five years before the sequel got underway. In between, Weaver cultivated her Hollywood stardom, starring in a thriller with William Hurt (1981's *Eyewitness*), a political drama with Mel Gibson (1982's *The*

Year Of Living Dangerously) and a comedy with chuckle kingpin Chevy Chase (1983's *Deal Of The Century*), as well as *Ghostbusters*.

Things were ticking along quite nicely, even if she wasn't exactly the Julia Roberts of her time. Nonetheless, when James Cameron rang up Weaver to discuss his script for *Aliens*, she was initially skeptical about returning to the role of Ellen Ripley. But it quickly became clear that Cameron wasn't willing to make the sequel without her. "I was egotistical enough to be moved by that," admitted the actress. Not that she and Cameron always saw eye to eye about the movie. "What we always differed on was how much she hated the alien," recalled the director. "Sigourney had the response, 'The alien is a creature and I can't blame it for the death of my crew,' and my feeling was, 'You hate that motherfucker.' I was the throttle and she was the brakes. She would always pull back from a moment that was pushing it too far – that's why you get this incredibly modulated performance."

Let's face it, science-fiction films don't usually get nominations for Best Actress."

As to tackling *Alien 5*, Weaver is philosophical about reuniting with the xenomorph almost a decade after *Alien Resurrection*. "I can't think of a better director," she says of teaming up with Blomkamp. "He's a real fan. I think he'll be true to the world and take it in unexpected directions. It's got a lot of sinew in it. It will certainly stand up to the others and probably break a lot of new ground as well."

Meanwhile, Blomkamp admits Weaver's had a hand in breaking the film's story. "I spoke to her about it," he says. "She told me how she felt about the character and the history of Ripley. It was interesting. I was like, 'There's a way to tie what she's saying into my idea in a way that's pretty awesome.'" After five decades in the biz, Weaver's star clearly hasn't dimmed any... 

Quote me

Weaver's career in her words...

On Being Tall...

"I think if you're 5'10" when you're 11 years old, you're just gonna be weird for the rest of your life."

On Gorillas In The Mist

"This little gorilla came over and sat down next to me and put her hand on my arm, and her hand was so hot, I felt it all the way through my windbreaker.

From that moment on, every time I was sitting with the gorillas, I felt such intense joy, like nothing I've ever felt, except maybe being with my daughter."

On Working Girl

"I actually felt a little sympathy for Max. I think in her heart, she knew what she was doing was wrong, but still felt that the end was justified. Luckily, she's redeemable."

