



"Back off man, I'm a scientist!"

A QUICK 'PKE' BACK AT THE CAREER OF THE GHOSTBUSTERS

by Ian White





It's the Summer of 1984. New York City is under siege. A bad-ass Sumerian God called Gozer has taken up residence on the roof of a Manhattan skyscraper and a giant and very angry Marshmallow Man is reducing the metropolis to rubble. When the Big Apple is quite literally going to Hell and the end of the world is imminent... WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Luckily, actor, writer, Blues Brother, and *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Dan Aykroyd had the answer.

Aykroyd had always been fascinated by the paranormal. He had grown up in his family's haunted farmhouse and was still affected by an experience he and a friend shared while watching television. "We heard knocking coming from upstairs," he recounted, in the 1985 book *Making Ghostbusters*, "We went to the stairs and... saw these ectoplasmic tubes of light – shimmering patterns of iridescent green light that passed in front of us. We were so scared we ran out of the house."

Ghostly phenomena wasn't unusual in the Aykroyd homestead. Aykroyd's mother had been frightened by two spirits that materialised at the end of her bed, and his father had participated in a séance during which a talking trumpet reportedly 'flew around the room'. More worryingly, his grandmother had been thrown out of bed 'and bitten on the legs, ankles and arms by some kind of turbulent force'.

Aykroyd's relationship with the uncanny continues to this day. His former L.A. home, which was previously owned by singer Mama Cass, was haunted by a ghost that "...once even crawled into bed with me," Aykroyd told *iVillage* in 2003. When he eventually put the house on the market, he had to disclose that some 'unusual activity' had taken place on the premises "that could not be explained rationally or physically."

Aykroyd's inspiration for *Ghostbusters* was the parapsychologist Hans Holzer - arguably the first 'celebrity' paranormal investigator – who is probably best known for his controversial diagnosis of the notorious *Amityville Horror* house. When Holzer and his spiritualist medium Ethel Meyers threw out Ed and Lorraine Warren's claim that that the house was demonically infested and, instead, declared that the spirit of an Indian chief was responsible, taking revenge because the home had been built on an ancient Native American burial ground, Holzer paved the way for dozens of books and movies about cursed land and restless spirits. Aykroyd considered him 'the greatest ghost hunter ever'.

Ghost Smashers (Aykroyd's original title) was conceived as a vehicle for Aykroyd and his best friend and *Blues Brothers* co-star John Belushi. Aykroyd wanted to follow in the footsteps of vintage comedians like Abbott and Costello, Bob Hope, and Martin and Lewis, all of whom had made comedies about the supernatural. "I thought it would be great to write one for this decade," he explained when the film was released, "Parapsychologists have long been plagued by the fact that only one person in ten ever reports a paranormal experience. I thought, 'What if you advertised on TV or in the Yellow Pages and said, 'Hey, we believe you, we understand you'. That was the birth of the commercial enterprise of ghostbusting."

Aykroyd was writing the first draft when he heard that Belushi had died. "It was a terrible blow," he conceded, "but eventually, I came to realise that the picture really served any three guys." The third guy he'd had in mind was his friend and (later) *The Great Outdoors* and *Nothing But Trouble* co-star, John Candy.

Aykroyd gave the completed script to fellow SNL cast member Bill Murray, who recommended it to Ivan Reitman. Reitman had



previously directed two of Murray's films, *Meatballs* and *Stripes*, as well as the horror comedy *Cannibal Girls*. Reitman's reaction was guarded. In this early version of the script, which was a lot darker than the eventual movie and packed with confusing 'technical words and phrases', the 'Ghost Smashers' were a time-travelling SWAT team who fought terrifying inter-dimensional entities with antenna-like 'nutrona wands'. "It took place on a number of different planets or dimensional planes," Reitman recalled, "There was very little character work in it. By the tenth page, I was exhausted. By the fortieth or fiftieth, I was counting the budget in the hundreds of millions of dollars. And there really weren't many laughs."

Aykroyd immediately began a top-down rewrite. When Reitman read the new script, he was struck by Aykroyd's 'brilliant initial concept – the idea of a group of men who work out of an old fire hall and respond to emergencies much the way firemen do'.

He suggested that Aykroyd needed a co-writer and Harold Ramis, who had co-starred in *Stripes* and co-written three of Reitman's earlier films, was encouraged on board. Columbia Pictures agreed to finance the project but stipulated a summer 1984 release date, which gave Aykroyd, Ramis and Reitman only a year to rewrite the script, shoot the film and rush it through post-production.

Aykroyd and Ramis decided to make the Ghostbusters "blue collar guys [who were] the captains of their own destiny." Peter Venkman (who might have been played by Michael Keaton or Chevy Chase if Bill Murray hadn't signed on) was the "huckster, the salesman of the team" whereas the "honest, straight-ahead 'mechanic'" was Ray Stantz (Aykroyd). Egon Spengler, Ramis's character (although Christopher Walken and Jeff Goldblum were also considered), was 'a human computer... a 'New Wave' Mr. Spock' who collects spores and fungus and once straightened out a Slinky. Winston Zeddemore (Ernie Hudson), despite having a larger backstory that was eventually jettisoned during rewrites, joined the team midway through the action and was (in Hudson's words) "just an average guy. These [other] guys have all their nerdy stuff and their scientific nonsense [but] Winston is just like, 'Dude, just pay me. Give me my money, tell me where you want me to go'." Meanwhile, it was Reitman who suggested that the Ghostbusters should be university professors.

As Venkman's reluctant love interest Dana Barrett, the no-nonsense musician who hires the Ghostbusters when her apartment is haunted and who is memorably possessed by the demi-god Zuul, *Alien* actress Sigourney Weaver was definitely out-of-the-box casting. "I auditioned with the possession scene and I really did get possessed," she said, "I jumped around the couch and started to eat pillows and turn into a dog."

It was fortunate for Venkman that Dana didn't turn into one of the movie's fearsome Terror Dogs, the massive hounds of hell who pursue Dana's terrified neighbour Louis Tully (Rick Moranis) across Central Park.

Effects Supervisor Richard Edlund, who had recently completed SFX on *Poltergeist*, used many of the ideas he couldn't fit into the film on *Ghostbusters*, but one of the film's most outrageous ghouls, 'Onionhead', was developed by Effects Artist Steve Johnson, who admitted in an interview that he was embarrassed by his original character designs. "To me, he was just a big smile with arms," Johnson remembered. Little did he know that 'Onionhead' would be rechristened 'Slimer' for *The Real Ghostbusters* animated spin-off and, thanks to that series, would quickly become as popular a character as the ghostbusters themselves.



Although the \$25 million budget rose to an estimated \$32 million by the end of the shoot, the movie would eventually take more than \$291 million worldwide. It was an unprecedented success and remains No. 28 on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 Funniest American Movies of All Time.

But what happened to Aykroyd's original title, *Ghost Smashers*? Well, nobody was happy with it. The problem was, animation studio Filmation had already produced a short-lived 1975 TV show called *The Ghost Busters* so they owned the rights to that name. Columbia still hadn't secured those rights by the time the first teaser poster was released, which is why the poster doesn't have a title and only features the iconic logo and the promise 'Coming this summer to save the world'. Eventually, in order to secure the *Ghostbusters* title, Columbia Pictures made a deal with Filmation that allowed them to make a later cartoon series if they wanted to. But more on that on page 24...

The film was nominated for two Oscars at the 57th Academy Awards - Best Visual Effects and Best Original Song but Ray Parker Jr.'s title track was quickly sued by musician Huey Lewis, when the latter claimed Parker's theme ripped off his own track, *I Want A New Drug*. The waters were further muddied when it was discovered *I Want A New Drug* had been used as part of a temp track when *Ghostbusters* was being edited. The dispute was eventually settled out of court. It's also interesting to note that Parker's lyric "I ain't afraid of no ghosts" heavily recalls the dialogue "I ain't scared of no ghost" from Disney's 1937 short *Lonesome Ghosts* but, hey, inspiration can come from anywhere, right?

The success of *The Real Ghostbusters* animated TV series (see page 24) was the core reason that Aykroyd and Ramis, at Columbia's urging, eventually agreed to write *Ghostbusters II*.

Although far from a terrible movie, *Ghostbusters II* was hobbled from the start. It went into production with a half-baked script that, despite the return of the four main actors and the key supporting cast of Sigourney Weaver, Rick Moranis, and Annie Potts (whose character Janine Melnitz would truly come into her own during the animated and comic book incarnations), had little of the wit and imagination that made the original movie so special. Bill Murray wasn't surprised. He had been the last holdout until the studio had 'waved too much money' in his face. Murray suggested the new movie should be entitled *The Last of The Ghostbusters* to ensure there could never be a *Ghostbusters III*.

When we re-join the Ghostbusters, times have changed. Venkman and Dana are no longer together, and Dana now has a baby from another relationship. Egon is back at the University and Ray and Winston are reduced to performing at children's parties.

Instead of Gozer, the film's villain is the Vlad the Impaler-esque Vigo the Carpathian (Wilhelm Von Homburg, whose lines were dubbed by genre favourite Max von Sydow). Vigo, who is trapped inside a painting, orders his servant Janosz (a scene-stealingly bizarre performance from Peter MacNicol) to kidnap Dana's baby so that Vigo can possess the infant's body during a New Year's Eve ritual and be released out of the canvas back into the world.

The film has one or two nice ingredients, most especially a fluorescent river of slime that courses beneath the streets of New York City and the compelling idea that the negative emotions of NYC's inhabitants are largely responsible for the dramatic rise in paranormal evil that threatens to kick-start the apocalypse. It's a fantastic story component that is also testament to Aykroyd's





interest in the supernatural, because the theory that unconscious negative emotions can have a violent physical impact outside of our bodies (manifesting themselves as poltergeist activity, for example) does have genuine roots in paranormal science. "We wanted to show that you cannot be bad to people without having it go somewhere. Negative energy has to find a place to settle," explained Aykroyd, while Ramis, who had a deep interest in Zen Buddhism, said "We started with the moral notion that negative human emotions have consequences. What we were working toward... was that everybody in New York would have to be nice or else the city would be destroyed."

It's a worthy and intriguing philosophy, but the film never quite works. Matters aren't helped by a cheesy ending - the citizens of NYC launch into a rousingly cheerful chorus of *Auld Lang Syne* which stops the almost-reincarnated Vigo in his tracks - nor by the return of Slimer, whose popularity in *The Real Ghostbusters* cartoon series secured him a smidgeon more screen time. Thankfully, most of the annoying ugly spud's scenes were edited out following a less-than-successful preview screening.

Unsurprisingly, *Ghostbusters II* was declared a critical failure. But it still took over \$215 million worldwide against an estimated \$37 million budget.

So, that's a brief overview of some, but by no means all, of the *Ghostbusters* story so far. The question is - what's ahead for Kristen Wiig, Melissa McCarthy and their all-female *Ghostbusters* crew, and will the new movie finally trap *Ghostbusters II* in the Ecto-containment unit where it belongs and restore the franchise to greatness? Only time will tell... unless, of course, you have the kind of ESP skills that would make Egon Spengler quivery, in which case you probably know already...

