



==the **EMPIRE** interview==

# AYKROYD

THE GHOSTBUSTER, BLUES BROTHER AND CONEHEAD LOOKS BACK ON AN ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER THAT INCLUDES COCAINE-FUELLED NIGHT SHOTS, DATING PRINCESS LEIA AND BEFRIENDING JAMES BROWN...

WORDS JAMES JENNINGS PORTRAITS JAMES EVANS

# Dan Aykroyd is a man whose passions have taken him far. When *Empire* meets the 62-year-old Canadian actor, comedian, singer,

and screenwriter at Sydney's swanky Sokyo Bar & Lounge, signifiers for his great loves abound: first there's the classic black Ray-Bans he's sporting, sunglasses he made iconic as one-half of the Blues Brothers (the double act he created with the late John Belushi as an outlet to celebrate his reverence for blues music). His current major interest is duly represented by the vodka-filled crystal skull he's mugging with in front of a photographer (Aykroyd is co-founder, part owner and spokesperson for the award-winning Crystal Head Vodka), and the life-long passion that brought him the most critical and commercial success is touched upon when *Empire* mentions a real-life encounter with a ghost ("You saw an *actual* apparition? Wow!" he says with Ray Stantz-levels of zeal and excitement).

This year marks the 30th anniversary of paranormal smash *Ghostbusters*, the most successful comedy of the 1980s whose impact on pop culture has been so Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man-sized that it's easy to forget Aykroyd's many other notable achievements: he was an original member of *Saturday Night Live* alongside the likes of John Belushi, Chevy Chase (replaced by Bill Murray in Season 2) and fellow Conehead Jane Curtin, he starred alongside Eddie Murphy — arguably the '80s' biggest comedy star — in 1983's *Trading Places* and was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor Academy Award in 1990 for his role in *Driving Miss Daisy*. And then there's the Blues Brothers. His time on screen these days may largely be relegated to support roles (he played Melissa McCarthy's father in recent comedy *Tammy* and will soon be seen in James Brown biopic *Get On Up* as Brown's manager Ben Bart), the jovial, 6' 1", bear-like Aykroyd is more than happy to take time out from his busy vodka spruiking schedule to talk about his storied career and — naturally — talk about the long-gestating, possibly Bill Murray-less *Ghostbusters III*...

## Right, so who cottoned on to crystal skulls first: you or Spielberg, who used them as a MacGuffin in the last Indiana Jones movie?

Actually it was sort of parallel — we were well into production and starting to build our glass and our fluid, and I found out that he was doing this movie [2008's *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull*]. I didn't want him to think that I was ripping him off so I had a meeting with him, because he is the Pope in the motion picture industry. I said "Steven, I didn't know you were working on this," and he said "Had I known you had it I would have had it at the premiere of the movie!" So he gave it his blessing, and the movie went off and did what it did. I don't think we benefited from any kind of association there. After all, the heads in his movie are actually coneheads.

## So he was maybe ripping you off...

We traded concepts back and forth informally, I guess.

## On the topic of Indiana Jones, how did your small cameo at the beginning of *Temple Of Doom* come about?



### AYKROYD IN FULL

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I called Spielberg up and said I was a fan, asked have you got a little part in the movie for me, and he and Lucas said sure, come on up. So I went to Hamilton Air Force base in San Francisco and we shot the scene where I put them on the plane ①.

## You had previously worked with Spielberg on 1941...

That was a great movie, a very under-recognised movie. It was a really good portrait of what was going on in California at that time, beautifully shot and beautifully done and I would suggest people revisit that and look at it again. Working with him, he's a master, just brilliant.

## *Ghostbusters* is obviously your most well-known film. Where did the idea come from?

Simply this: my great-grandfather was an Edwardian spiritualist who investigated spiritual matters in the town he lived in, he was a dentist, and he was a subscriber to the journals of the British Society for Psychical Research. My family's always been interested in Spiritualism — we had our own family trans-

## NOTES

- ① In this blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo, Aykroyd plays plum-mouthed Brit Art Weber, the man who gives Indy, Short Round and Willie their escape out of Shanghai.
- ② Roll was a noted psychologist and parapsychologist whose books include *The Poltergeist* (1972).



**Clockwise from top left:** Harold Ramis, Ernie Hudson, Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd wear burnt marshmallow well in *Ghostbusters* (1984); Aykroyd and John Belushi hit the diner in *The Blues Brothers* (1980); Aykroyd and Chevy Chase keep warm in *Spies Like Us* (1985); as pointy-domed Beldar in *Coneheads* (1993); looking sharp with Eddie Murphy on the set of *Trading Places* (1983).

medium in the 1920s and '30s who channelled spirits in séances which were held every Sunday at the farm that my great-grandfather would put on. It was passed down to his son who was a Bell Telephone engineer, and his son — my father — who was a civil engineer. They were empirical guys who worked with numbers, so it was kind of odd for them to be into Spiritualism. If you go up to a summer cottage in Canada you usually see *National Geographic* or old *Life* magazines, well lying around my place were these psychic research journals. I read an article on quantum physics and parapsychology and I just went "Wow! Let's do an old-style ghost comedy, but let's use real research being done by Maimonides Dream Laboratory, Duke University and William Roll ②", and let's marry the comedy with the actual science — that's how it came about.

**Is it true that the original idea for the film was quite different?**

The original idea was much the same, guys doing the dirty work of trapping entities, but it was much, much darker than what we

ended up with. So Ivan [Reitman], Harold [Ramis] and Billy [Murray] and I, we were right to change it. Billy is the greatest comic leading man ever. When Harold and I started working on the script, he knew all about paranormal research and we just locked step together and were able to produce the first draft.

**Your characters in the film [Ray Stantz and Egon Spengler] take the ghost stuff seriously, whereas Murray's character Peter Venkman is more prone to take the piss. Did that reflect real life?**

We kind of engineered it that way. I guess I would say in real life that Billy wasn't as sensitive and I don't know in real life if he would take it seriously, unless something happened to him.

**Was *Ghostbusters* a fun set to be on?**

Oh, absolutely. It was one of the greatest times ever. We were all working on all eight cylinders, everything was tuned and running fine and it was a beautiful time. We took over New York City; it was the peak of life.

**Was there a lot of adlibbing during filming?**

Oh yeah. With Murray you're going to get that. Sure, lots of improv, lots of changing and fixing things at the last minute.

**Did you keep any props?**

I had a jumpsuit for a while, but that's it. I have no memorabilia at all, not even a poster. I'm about the future, not the past. I don't really watch the movies. I've had to see the ones I've written but I see them once, that's it. I'm not a nostalgic type.

**Bill Murray has publicly stated his disappointment that the *Ghostbusters II* that was planned was quite different to what wound up on screen...**

He was disappointed with it. I think it was an excellent companion to the first movie, but I guess he thought there were going to be things in there that weren't. To me it was very successful — it was the movie we wanted to make, it was a committee decision to take it the way we went. There's great stuff in there — the baby out on the balcony, Vigo, Peter MacNicol's performance, the scene where I'm possessed... funny, funny stuff. The dancing toaster, the river of slime, Van Horne station... there were really great elements in the picture and I don't think it deserves the slugging that Billy gave it.

**Right, the million dollar question: what's up with *Ghostbusters III*?**

We're just perfecting the script and we're going to hand it to a new generation. Think like with *Star Trek* — that's the way it's gonna be. So it's not going to be like the first two movies, you're not going to see the same people. Prepare yourself for an all new cast, all new situations, new physics. A new situation completely.

**Can we expect to see the original cast turn up?**

Some.

**But no Bill Murray?**

Billy is always welcome, we would love to have him walk through the door. I would love to have everybody from the first movie in it, but we'll see what happens. Billy's done the role twice, he's moving on to other things. He's a terrific dramatic actor and I can see why he would not want to reprise the role. I'm his friend first before I'm a colleague and whatever he decides to do is fine with me — we have a friendship that will survive everything. I love the guy, and if he wants to join us at the last minute, we'll make a hole for him.

**Sigourney Weaver let slip that in an early *Ghostbuster III* draft Bill was going to appear as a ghost...**

I wrote a part for him that was... it was one of the greatest parts written for an actor and he didn't want to do it. It was great, just great. It was funny and poignant and he would have only had to work a half day. It had a lot of impact, and I'm sorry we didn't get him for that. That is a disappointment.

**Who's currently working on the script?**

Well me, Ivan and Harold ③ will be working from a draft that's been generated by Etan Cohen who did *Men In Black 3*. Also we had Gene Stupnitsky and Lee Eisenberg from *The Office* and we'll be drawing on some of their materials. So it'll be an amalgam of everyone's work. ▶

**In terms of fun, *The Blues Brothers* must've been a blast — hanging with your best friend and a bunch of blues and soul legends, crashing lots of cars...**

From a multitasking point of view it's my favourite work. We got to sing, dance, act, write, produce, play an instrument, crash cars, and work with Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and James Brown, who ended up becoming a great friend of mine. He had tremendous energy. I miss him a lot.

**It must've been a bit intimidating to be around all those legends...**

Of course. Recording with Ray Charles we had to have it right, and performing with James we had to have it right, and Aretha, we couldn't waste her time. So it brought us to our 'alert status' in terms of performers. We were not apathetic on that set.

**Talking of 'alert levels', is it correct that part of the production budget for *The Blue Brothers* was set aside for cocaine?**

That's true. At the time it was a very popular powder — not for me so much but unfortunately for my deceased partner, it turned out in the end. That was just a license that we took at the time, and it probably helped us get through three, four, five in the morning shoots. But I do have to say I never liked that substance at all. I didn't see its worth, but you know, 'Peruvian marching powder' is what they call it. It beats a coffee I guess, if coffee's not working. Those days are long, long over.

**It's true that John used to go missing on set?**

Oh yeah, he'd walk off. One night he walked off in the middle of the night when we were shooting the mall scene and we couldn't find him. Of course there were no cell phones then, but I saw this path leading through the abandoned parking lot, and it lead to a row of houses where one had a light on in the living room. I knocked on the door and said "We're shooting a movie nearby and we're looking for one of the actors," and the man said "Oh yeah, Belushi! He's on my couch asleep. He came in and raided my fridge about half an hour ago." He was America's guest — he could walk in anywhere and be welcome.

**Everyone wanted to party with John Belushi.**

That's what killed him. They thought that by giving him the blow that they were doing him a favour, but that's what his vulnerability was.

**For a long time you guys were synonymous as a double act. Once he died was it difficult to adapt to being on your own?**

Everything ended then, basically. I was 29 and he was 33, we were planning more records and movies, then it was all gone. It was like seeing a friend die in battle next to you, but you have to keep moving. I went back home to Canada, saw my folks and then moved on to *Ghostbusters* and finished that.

**You had John earmarked for a role in *Ghostbusters*?**

Yeah. I was writing a line for him when I heard he died.

**Carrie Fisher was in *Blues Brothers*, who you were then dating... Princess Leia! When she looked like Princess Leia!**

**So you were dating Princess Leia and you were a Blues Brother.**

**You must've felt like the coolest man alive back then...**

We had a lot of fun. Carrie is a brilliant woman. She's so funny, so smart, so literate. I learned so much from her. We got blood tests and rings, and we were going to get married and then something happened and she went back to the guy she'd been with before, but we remain friends to this day.

**What's your relationship with Chevy Chase like? You guys were on *Saturday Night Live* together, then both appeared in *Spies Like Us*, and you directed him in *Nothing But Trouble*...**

I love Chevy. He's tough to handle, because he's — what should I say — "set in his ways", but if you're patient and you know how to do it you can get a great performance out of him. He's one of the funniest and most gifted physical comedians alive.

**He's developed a reputation for being very hard to work with.**

You have to handle him correctly and he has to be given a lot to do. The problem with that series [*Community*] is that they held him back. They should have just handed the whole thing to him, let him be the lead, it would've been much funnier.



**You've only directed one film, *Nothing But Trouble*...**

That'll be the end of it. That ended that career.

**That was it?**

Because the movie was not financially successful I didn't get a second chance. However, now people are coming up to me, especially young people, and saying that they love it. And it is a very serviceable comedy. You hear filmmakers say all the time that the film wasn't properly marketed and all that. It wasn't that, we just came out in the marketplace the same weekend as Jodie Foster in *Silence of the Lambs* and Julia Roberts in *Sleeping With The Enemy*. Then the war started, Desert Shield started. So here we are with this weird dark comedy, and we just got buried. That ended my directing career, and that's that..

**It is a weird film, but then so is *Ghostbusters*.**

Well that wasn't my destiny, I ended up doing something else. But I'm happy with the way things are going now. And I'm enjoying this [interview], this is fun!

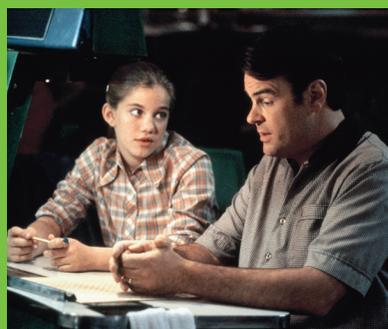
**What was it like working with Eddie Murphy on *Trading Places*? He was pretty much the biggest star in the world at that time.**

You had one of the great, gifted young comedians at the peak of his power, it was wonderful. Again I wish I had the opportunity to work with him again but it just never worked out, it never happened. He's a giant talent, and I miss seeing him on screen. If the right joint project came along I would do it in a second.

**There was a time in the '90s where you were doing more serious roles, like *Driving Miss Daisy* —**

## NOTES

- ③ Ramis passed away on February 24 this year at the age of 69, after this interview was conducted. Reitman will now produce but no longer direct a third *Ghostbusters* film, which Aykroyd now says will be part of a larger slate of movies, a la the Marvel Cinematic Universe.
- ④ Other nominees included Danny Aiello for *Do The Right Thing*, Marlon Brando for *A Dry White Season*, Martin Landau for *Crimes And Misdemeanors* and Denzel Washington for *Glory*. Denzel won.



**Clockwise from top:** Wrangling the Godfather Of Soul (Chadwick Boseman) as James Brown's manager Ben Bart in *Get On Up* (2014); widower Harry Sultenfuss with daughter Vada (Anna Chlumsky) in *My Girl* (1991); Britney Spears's dad Pete Wagner in *Crossroads* (2002); the mentally unhinged – and phallic-nosed – Reeve Alvin Valkenheise in *Nothing But Trouble* (1991); dadding it up again for Melissa McCarthy in *Tammy* (2014); as Boolie Werthan in *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), the role that earned Aykroyd an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

Bruce Beresford, yeah! Australian director!

— **was it a conscious decision to start trying more serious roles?**

Yeah... I mean I chased *Driving Miss Daisy* [Aykroyd was nominated for an Oscar ]. I read they were doing a movie, I called my agent, I did an audition I got the part. *My Girl* as well, my wife's manager actually turned me onto that, got me that part. They were considering actors for the part of the funeral director, and I went in and met with the director and got the part.

**What is your favourite movie out of your filmography?**

In terms of multitasking, like I said, *The Blues Brothers*, just because we had to do everything and all kinds of skills were demanded there. But my favourite character, and one that I'd love to do again, is the Conehead. I really feel like that guy; I feel very alien. That's my favourite part I've ever played and I'd do it again in a second.

## “When Belushi died everything ended, basically.”

**It's a shame Spielberg didn't get you and your Conehead in for a cameo in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*...**

I didn't find out he was releasing the movie until it was over. So I didn't have a chance there.

**Can you tell us about working with Melissa McCarthy in *Tammy*?**

I play her dad in the movie. I think she's one of the most gifted writers and comedians and up there with Chevy Chase and Buster Keaton as one of the most gifted physical comedians I've ever seen. She's a brilliant person; she directed the movie with her husband Ben Falcone. I like to work with the young people and I will go out the door for a young filmmaker now and again if it's the right project. It's not something I'm chasing right now, believe me I'm busy with the vodka.

**Speaking of playing people's dads, you played Britney Spears' father in *Crossroads*...**

I did. She asked me to do that, and I have great respect for her as an artist and that was a nice little project, and I kept telling my kids I was working with Britney Spears, that got me some points.

**Was she familiar with your films?**

Not really, her mother was the one that cast me in that film.

**Her mum was a fan?**

Yeah, and I threw a birthday party for her at the House Of Blues in LA. We had a big birthday party for her mum there during filming. She was responsible for getting me that part!

**Now it's turned 30, do you have a favourite *Ghostbusters* memory?**

Yes. I remember I had a high-rise apartment I rented on the 50th floor of a building on 57th street overlooking Columbus Circle and I had my Dad and a few friends there. We watched the crowd surge into Columbus Circle fleeing the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man — obviously he was put in later. But it was amazing to see all this urban panic from up that high, like these ants in Columbus Circle heading up Central Park. We had about 2000 extras, so that was really vivid and just brought home how fortunate I was to be in that industry.

**And another stint behind the camera is definitely off the cards?**

Yeah, I don't think I'll be given the chance to do that again, but that's okay. I'm very grateful for my time in the motion picture industry. I loved my collaborations, I loved being part of that community, I have nothing bad to say about it and I have no bitterness there at all. I'm just happy to be doing what I'm doing.

**GHOSTBUSTERS 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION AND GHOSTBUSTERS II ARE OUT ON BLU-RAY ON OCTOBER 23. TAMMY IS IN CINEMAS NOW.**