



# You Called?

After 27 years, the Ghostbusters are *finally* back...  
With a completely new line-up. Director Paul Feig and his cast explain  
why this all-new origin story is the ideal franchise resurrection

WORDS: NICK DE SEMLYEN



from Bill in terms of doing another one, because his brain was elsewhere. And when Harold (*Ramis*) died (in February 2014) I was kinda depressed, and decided I wasn't going to direct the next film myself. But everybody seemed to agree it's not fair of us just to leave the thing fallow. So finally we made a deal with Sony: they were free to expand what the series could be."

Here at Ghost Corps, then, is where an array of ectoplasmic projects are in development. There's what Reitman calls the "futuristic" film, to which the Russo Brothers were briefly attached and in which, rumours have swirled, Channing Tatum and Chris Pratt will star. ("A lot of stuff leaked out of here," Reitman frowns. "It involved different teams of Ghostbusters. It's on hold; we'll see what happens with that.") There's another, yet-to-be-announced live-action film, which is "coming along really well". There's an animated feature, which Reitman will co-direct. And a TV show is in the works, which may have a more global flavour: "There's remarkable ghost lore in every tradition. It's totally different in China and Japan and Korea, and there's extraordinary opportunity in that."

But before any of that can happen, a different project has to become a sizeable

hit. Rarely has there been so much pressure on one movie — or one team.

**Paul Feig strides across** the cavernous building where much of *Ghostbusters 2016* is being shot, a former Reebok warehouse not far from Boston. The director clearly has no need of a walking stick, but he's holding one anyway: a remarkable thing with a skull atop it. "It's a medical student's cane, over 100 years old," he explains. "I collect antique walking sticks — I've got about 60 of them. When we moved here my wife discovered an antique store, run by a woman whose father has an astonishing collection. We arranged a meet and it was like one of those movies where guys show up to do a gun deal in a hotel. He opened up these suitcases, and this was one he had in there."

The relentlessly well-dressed filmmaker behind *Spy*, *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat*, Feig feels like a natural choice to shoot the first new *Ghostbusters* movie in 27 years — and not just because he likes skulls. He grew up obsessed with Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd's *Saturday Night Live* skits. He loves improvisation (Murray, famously, made up most of Peter Venkman's lines on the 1984 film). He's so into hardware he once built his own robot ("It was this weird thing with a bowl for a head... I think he's out in

some landfill somewhere") and is made as giddy by the Ghostbusters' tech, their ecto-insulated encapsulators and P. K. E. valances, as their jokes.

Still, he initially turned it down. "I was in Budapest making *Spy*," he recalls, "when I was contacted by Ivan, who at that point had another script." Written by Gene Stupnitsky and Lee Eisenberg, veterans of the US version of *The Office*, it involved the original Ghostbusters (minus Ramis) passing their slime-jars to a new team. "I was flattered, but I'm always so leery of reunion shows. I prefer an origin story."

Then, in July 2014, midway through his morning walk and still mulling over the possibilities, Feig was hit by an idea. "I thought, 'What if you knocked it sideways and cast it with all the funny women I love working with? That I know how to do.'" For him, the idea of replacing Murray, Aykroyd, Ramis and Ernie Hudson with four female comedians was not a cute gimmick, but an organic twist on the formula. After all, Feig has done more than anyone to put "funny women" in the spotlight, from giving his muse Melissa McCarthy her breakout opportunity in *Bridesmaids* to writing juicy roles for Kristen Wiig, Sandra Bullock, Rose Byrne and more.

He mentioned this thought to his agent, and within minutes had an

he Ghostbusters are back in business. *Empire* can testify to this, since we're standing outside the supernatural exterminators' iconic Hook & Ladder 8 firehouse HQ, next to not one but two parked Ectomobiles. Walking in, we clock gleaming white surfaces, a Terror Dog head mounted on the wall like a hunting trophy, and a receptionist behind a vast desk. Although she doesn't yell, "We got one!", it's enough to make us wonder if we've accidentally stepped through a portal to the seventh dimension.

This, though, is not on a New York street but the Sony lot in Culver City, Los Angeles. There's no sign of Ray sliding down the firepole or Egon inspecting spores, moulds and fungi. Instead, we're greeted by Ivan Reitman, director of the first two *Ghostbusters* movies. "Welcome to Ghost Corps," he smiles. "Sorry about the mess. We're still moving in."

Open only since October and overseen by Reitman and Dan Aykroyd,

this is mission control for all things *Ghostbusters*. When not decorating their offices — Reitman's has an unopened LEGO firehouse set on the floor; Aykroyd's has portraits of famous supernaturalists on the wall, plus a Bill Murray mug on his desk — the pair devote their time to plotting the course of the *Ghostbusters* Cinematic Universe, a slimier version of what Marvel has achieved. It's an astonishing turnaround for the duo, who since the 1989 sequel had strived to pull off another film, but until recently had all but given up the ghost.

"It was partially our fault," Reitman explains. "We made this very complicated deal when we did *Ghostbusters II* which gave each of us (*Reitman, Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Harold Ramis*) equal power. That froze everything, because any one of us could block something from happening. Finally, a few things came to a head. We couldn't get any traction

**Above:** Spirited away: Ghostbusters Patty Tolan (Leslie Jones), Abby Yates (Melissa McCarthy) and Jillian Holtzmann (Kate McKinnon) head to a ghost emergency.

**Right:** Director Paul Feig inspects the new Proton Packs.

excited Amy Pascal, then the head of Sony, on the phone. Feig called his writing partner Katie Dippold and arranged to meet with her on the convention floor at Comic-Con. Next to a *Guardians Of The Galaxy* space-pod in the Marvel section, to be precise. “I have to laugh,” he says, “because whatever haters we have, this was hatched right in the middle of their enclave.”

Haters, it’s fair to say, they do have. Since the minute it was announced, online comment sections have festered with rage about the project. Infuriated a *Ghostbusters* movie is being made without Bill Murray at its centre, and pushed to apoplexy by the fact its stars are female, enough people have derided Feig’s film, sight unseen, to agitate a river of pink slime. (“In July we will see if women really can do anything as good as men. If their purpose was to make a shitty film, I guess we can already say they did it way better,” reads a measured response on YouTube from ‘Dr. Hatespeech’). “As soon as it was announced, someone on Twitter said he hoped I got a mild flu,” remembers the director. “There was another guy who wanted Katie and me to die under a truck and taste our own blood.”

Responding to those who say, “It’s *Venkman*, not *Venkwoman*,” Pascal tells *Empire*, “I know people are talking about this being the ‘girl version’, but this is no more a chick flick than *Gravity*. They’re scientists, they’re Ghostbusters, and I just want that to be a normal thing.”

Having disconnected their internet, Feig and Dippold began the script in October 2014, keeping Hallowe’en decorations up at Dippold’s house throughout the writing process to enhance the mood. “We had a skeleton watching over us until Christmas,” she laughs. “I’m a huge horror fan, so for me the most fun part was the scary-ghost stuff, finding insane situations into which to drop these four funny people.”

Feig already had his stars in mind, all with *Saturday Night Live* experience: Wiig as everyscientist Erin Gilbert, McCarthy as her ghost-enthusiast best friend Abby Yates, Kate McKinnon as zany nuclear engineer Jillian Holtzmann, and relative newcomer (albeit, at 48, the oldest of the group) Leslie Jones as subway employee Patty Tolan. Continuing the gender-flipping, Chris Hemsworth would play dim-witted but enthusiastic secretary Kevin. The story being crafted around these heroes was a reboot, not a sequel — “I wanted to start with a clean slate... In this world, >



Ghostbuster/scientist  
Erin Gilbert (Kristen  
Wiig) comes  
face-to-face with  
ghostly apparition  
Gertrude Eldridge.



# BEST IN SHOW

WE PICK OUR FAVOURITE SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE SKETCHES FOR EACH OF THE NEW GHOSTBUSTERS



**Kristen Wiig: Surprise Party**  
Wiig's best characters are completely deranged. Here, Sue can't cope with the prospect of an impending surprise party she's helping to throw, and mentally collapses at the promise of balloons and clowns.



**Melissa McCarthy: Women's Group**  
McCarthy's roster of SNL sketches is short, but she makes her characters count. Take troubled, combat trouser-wearing PJ, who derails a gentle women's group's discussion with her plans to avenge her father's bloody death.



**Leslie Jones: Crazy Bitches**  
Jones' SNL persona is frequently furious. Sliding in as a "relationship expert", she explains exactly what about men makes women crazy. "Every girl grew up with some uncle staring at them at Thanksgiving, saying how much you've grown..."



**Kate McKinnon: Cecilia Gimenez**  
One of SNL's great chameleons — her Justin Bieber is spot on — McKinnon's best moment sees her becoming a crazed version of Cecilia Gimenez, the Spanish woman who became famous for 'repairing', i.e. ruining, an ancient portrait of Jesus. **OLLY RICHARDS**

there's not yet proof of ghosts," says Feig — with a combination of nostalgic beats (Slimer's back, as is Mr. Stay Puft, though not in the form you might expect) and fresh material.

As they typed, the co-writers felt enormous pressure on their shoulders. Then one morning a FedEx delivery arrived. "I was particularly stressed that day," Dippold recalls. "I opened up the package and inside was a copy of a book about ghosts Dan Aykroyd's dad had written. Attached was a note from Dan: 'Dear Katie, I'm here if you need any help, but most of all just enjoy yourself.' That was an important reminder: first and foremost, *Ghostbusters* is meant to be fun."

**Empire soon gets to** witness the fun for ourselves. Among the sets spread across the Norwood building are an authentically grubby New York subway tunnel and an even grubbier

abandoned Chinese restaurant ('Zhu's Authentic Hong Kong Food') that doubles as our heroes' HQ. But most impressive is a two-storey Art Deco lobby, which today is bathed in an eerie Slimer-green glow. This is the Mercado Hotel, in which two of the new Ghostbusters — Kristen Wiig and Melissa McCarthy — are currently on patrol, brandishing charged-up proton guns for their pursuit of an entity named "Rowan". A class-5 free-roaming vapor? An electrokinetic spectre? An octopus that can predict football results? It's anyone's guess.

Feig, who in his three-piece suit looks like he could be reprising the '84 film's snooty concierge, signals for the cameras to roll. Wiig and McCarthy say their scripted lines. Then they start to throw in their own variations. Before long, Feig and Dippold are scribbling lines on Post-It notes, which are whizzed across to the actors. The result is a

lengthy succession of takes that feature, among many others, the following "alts":

- "Eat my stream, a-hole!"*
- "Eat my proton!"*
- "Show yourself, you little troll..."*
- "Come out, Rowan. There's a toilet that needs unclogging."*
- "Rowan, collect your virginity from the lost and found."*
- "I can do this all day, Rowan. Busting makes me feel good."*
- "I actually feel kind of terrible. My knees are clicking, my biceps are on fire and my hands are cramping up..."*

Eventually, a chandelier crashes down and the pair let loose their proton streams. It turns out there are a few perils when it comes to shooting a *Ghostbusters* action sequence. One is obvious: don't cross the streams. "Oops, I just killed you!" beams McCarthy, having accidentally sliced through Wiig's

Above left: Paul Feig directs on-set at Ghostbusters HQ.

Above: Chris Hemsworth aka dim-witted Kevin, given the once-over by Erin, Abby and Jillian for the job of secretary.

legs. Another concern: not looking like a complete berk. "I've had some trouble with my proton face," says Wiig. "I found I was making a face that was not anything I'd want to see really large on the screen, so I had to find a new one for myself. I just could not go with the original."

As for the final alt line quoted above, there's some fact mixed in with the fiction. "At one point I had to tell Paul, 'Hey, I'm a comedian. I'm not a fucking stunt person! What the fuck, yo?'" laughs Leslie Jones, who says she lost around 50lb during the shoot. "He'd always be like, 'You can do it, Jones. Come on.' We've been doing some Van Damme shit on this one."

In this *Ghostbusters* film, the slimings are more vigorous ("Water actually activates it, so if you think you have it all off and then you get wet, the slime comes back," says Wiig ruefully). There are possession scenes. There will even be a bout of hand-to-ghost-hand

combat in Times Square, thanks to new tech dreamed up by Holtzmann (and approved off-screen by an MIT professor of engineering). "I mostly drew details from my own little bank vault of weirdness," says McKinnon of her bizarre-looking, fingerless gloves-wearing character, who is fast becoming an internet favourite. "In my youth, all I did was take apart electronics and pretend each circuit board was its own world."

At Feig's insistence, wherever possible the ghosts have been played by actors on set, sometimes performers on stilts. "In the original they were kinda cartoony, which I like," he says, "but I want everything in this movie to be as real as a movie based on fake stuff can be." According to the cast, it worked. "The first ghost we saw, we were all legitimately scared," says McCarthy. "With the make-up and the costumes and the light, they looked pretty darn terrifying. One ghost chased me down

# SLIME AND SLIME AGAIN

## PREPARE TO MEET SLIMER 2.0

→ “If I saw a *Ghostbusters* reboot, there are a bunch of things I’d be really bummed about if they didn’t show up,” says Paul Feig. “So we’ve put them in, but we’ve given them our own spin.” Hence the new Ecto-1: not the famous Miller Meteor 1959 Cadillac, but a ’93 Caddy Fleetwood hearse. The proton packs are jazzed up (check out that psychokinetic energy sink!). The jumpsuits now have hot-orange piping. And most excitingly of all, cinema’s greediest ghost is now even uglier.

“We have six effects houses working on the movie, and the thing all of them wanted to do was Slimer,” says VFX supervisor Peter Travers. In the end the coveted job went to Sony Pictures Imageworks and MPC. “When we started research we realised that he’s amorphous — even within the first movie there are multiple puppets that look radically different — which gave us free rein to make him a little grosser. We’ve added random bits of hair in weird places, like he’s an old person. And we’ve added a bunch of goopy slime to him, just pouring off his arms. I mean, he is called Slimer.”

Originally inspired by John Belushi, for the first two films the toothy, gibbering, potato-shaped blob was achieved largely with puppets. The new movie combines old technology (a fully articulated Slimer was built and operated by *Ghostbusters* veteran Rick Lazzarini) with new (CG augmentation) to create the most disgusting and deranged version yet.

“The guy is a loose cannon,” says Travers. “I think that’s where we’ve pushed the performance: he’s just not mentally there, he’s crazy, he’s completely unpredictable. You can stuff five emotions into a two-second shot.”



a subway tunnel; only afterwards did I realise it was a guy called Dave who I’ve known for 15 years.”

Another way Feig has shaken up the formula: for the first time, the primary villain of a *Ghostbusters* film is a human. Yes, that “Rowan” the team are hunting in the Mercado turns out to be a regular bloke, albeit a super-smart and better-equipped scientist (played by Neil Casey) bent on paranormal mischief. “Rowan is the ultimate loner,” says the director. “A regular New Yorker whose goal is to bring some things back to this world. He wants to trap ghosts, but for a different purpose...” And that’s all Feig will reveal about this still very much locked-down plot point.

Overseeing the mayhem with his walking stick and carnation, he looks the picture of unflappability. “The man’s ridiculous. It’s sweltering hot and I’ve never seen one drop of sweat,” marvels Amy Pascal, who resigned from Sony amid

the 2014 hacking scandal, and is here today in a producer capacity. But under the surface, Feig reveals in a quiet moment, he’s paddling like a desperate duck.

“Each day I wake up thinking, ‘Don’t let this be the day I screw it up. Make sure you get enough stuff! Shoot it right! Get the right performances!’ It’s just the fear of, ‘Is this the day it’s not going to happen?’”

### Six months later, Feig’s

still got the fear. It’s March 2016 and, with *Ghostbusters* well into post-production, he’s at his office in Burbank, LA. Like its resident, Feigo is a mix of quirkiness and sophistication: there is an enormous print of a £20 note by artist Paul Rousso (“I change it to a \$20 [bill] when I’m meeting an American,” jokes Feig, an Anglophile) and a nameplate on the desk that reads “Chief Business Gentleman”.

Top: Secretary Kevin proves to Erin and Patty that he’s not just a pretty face — he can order in takeaway too. Above: Director Feig has a shot at brandishing a Proton Gun.

Above: Erin, Abby, Jilian and Patty discuss bustin’ tactics.



Well into mixing the film’s sound and approving its 1,600 or so visual-effects shots, the director looks relaxed enough. But he admits to still having jitters, no doubt increased by the pushback against the film, which has only intensified since marketing began. And in disturbing ways: “I had this guy send me a picture of a Nazi shooting a black woman in the head,” reveals Leslie Jones. “I can’t believe some of this stuff. It’s just a movie. It’s literally just a movie. We’re not writing a true story about people killing ghosts, you know? *Minions* ain’t real either!”

Feig is stoic. “As much as I’ve been confronted with really terrible stuff, I’ve had encouragement too,” he insists. “It all comes from a place of passion. I’m just trying to stay vigilant and make the right decision about a million things. The minute you relax, the chances of it going in the toilet are very high.”

Only time will tell now whether *Ghostbusters* will be a hit that launches a thousand spin-offs, or whether a mob of misogynists is about to have a great summer. But nobody can accuse Feig of not giving it his all. Among his achievements — redesigning the Proton Packs (they’re now synchrotron, not cyclotron, as we’re sure you surmised from the photos); making Boston look like New York; directing Slimer — was obtaining the blessings of the original cast and crew. Reitman and Aykroyd, obviously, with the latter even contributing some lines of technical dialogue. Harold Ramis’ wife and children, says Pascal, dropped by the set on two “super-emotional” days. And Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Sigourney Weaver and Ernie Hudson all agreed to do cameos, albeit not as their original characters.

“You just try not to vomit. I mostly succeeded in that,” says McKinnon of shooting scenes with her comedy heroes.

“It was crazy, crazy, crazy.” Even Chris Hemsworth, the mighty Thor, was thunderstruck: “I hadn’t met Bill before. It was so cool to see it through his eyes and listen to him talk about how the outfits were similar or the packs were different.”

It being Bill Murray, naturally, it nearly didn’t happen. “My wife used to manage his brother Joel way back when,” says Feig, “but we never actually crossed paths until the 40th anniversary party for *Saturday Night Live*. I mustered up the courage to go over to say hello, but when I mentioned the film he sort of said, ‘Oh yeah,’ and darted off. I was like, ‘Oh no, I just blew my chance with Bill Murray.’ We were hearing on the grapevine that he might show up, but until the day before we had no idea whether he would. He did. And it was really special.” Feig may have intended this to be an origin story, but he’s managed to make it a reunion show, too. A supernatural feat. ■