

## Blu-ray Review: Bill Murray's Deft Debut Can't Salvage Dopey 'Meatballs'

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on July 3, 2012 - 10:05am

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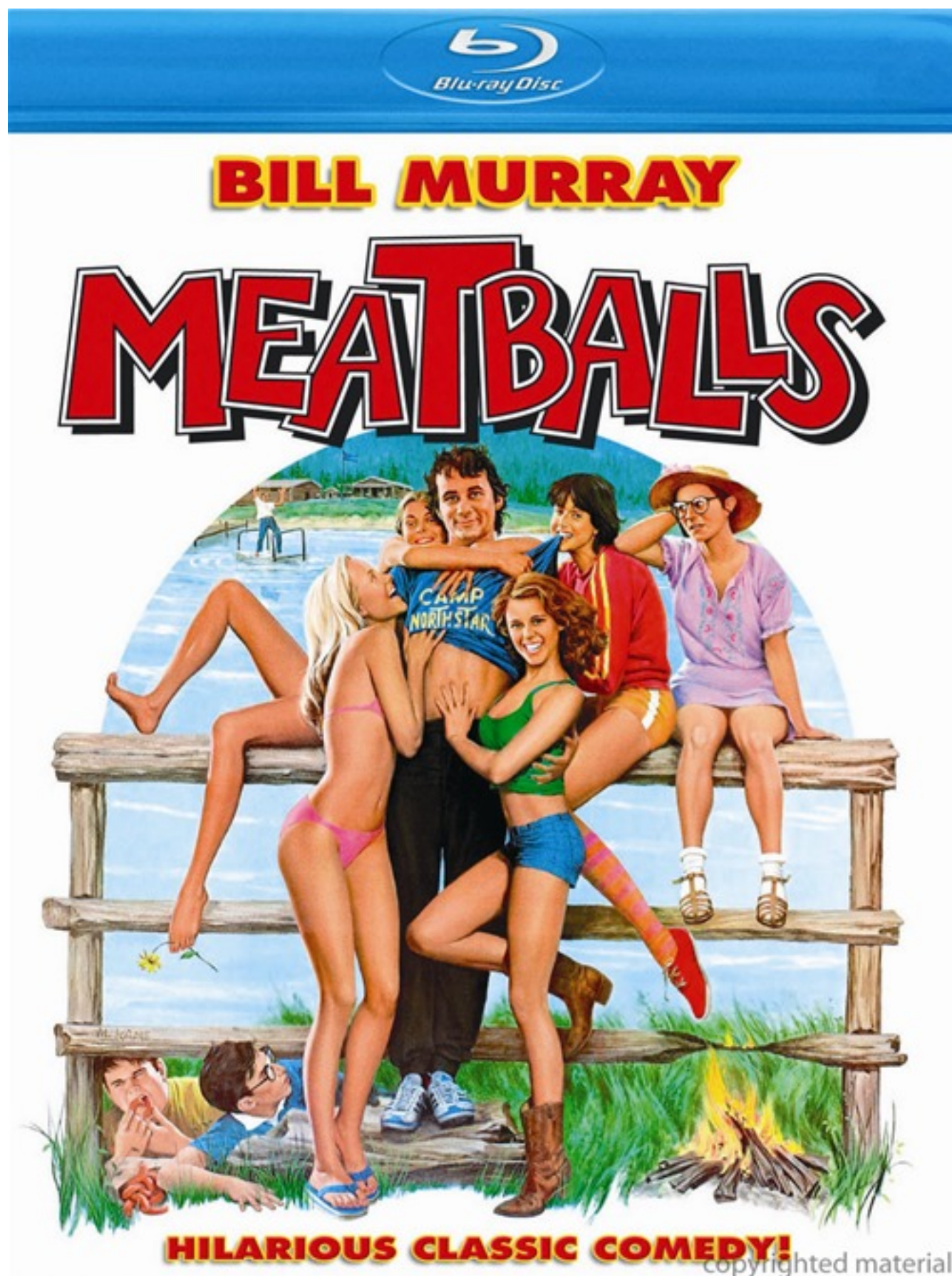
CHICAGO – Now that Wes Anderson's marvelous "Moonrise Kingdom" has finally received a much-belated wide release, it's an ideal time for audiences to revisit Bill Murray's first cinematic excursion to summer camp. Ivan Reitman's 1979 hit, "Meatballs," is famous primary for giving the SNL vet his first starring role, which is appropriate considering Murray is the only reason worth watching it.

As far as "snobs vs. slobs" farces of the '70s go, "Meatballs" is a passable but wholly unremarkable escapist lark. It assembles a series of misfit stereotypes—the clueless nerd, the fat kid, the guy who can't help blowing stuff up—and has them go through the motions. There isn't a single gag involving the hapless counselors-in-training at Camp North Star that is the least bit funny or surprising. Half of the film's 99-minute running time is so tiresome that it will undoubtedly lead some viewers to switch it off.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

What nearly salvages the film is Murray's go-for-broke performance as camp counselor Tripper. His looseness and detachment are so infectious that they make the clichés a little easier to bear. Unlike "Dead Poets Society," which took its teenage caricatures seriously, Murray sees the material for what it is, and acts accordingly. His passionately dispassionate mantra, "It just doesn't matter," set the tone for Murray's entire career. Tripper views stodgy rules as antithetical to what his camp represents: a carefree sanctuary from a world overburdened with rules. He couldn't care less if his campers win sports competitions, and is far more interested in scoring chicks than game points. His character is so credible and compelling that he makes the young ensemble seem even more artificial in contrast. Spaz (Jack Blum) is an especially unfortunate creature, with his thick-rimmed glasses bound together with masking tape and perpetually clueless facial expressions. Every time he opens his mouth, the film comes to a crashing halt. This portrayal of a socially awkward guy with glasses is so outdated in the age of Apatowian humanism that it registers as not only unfunny but flat-out embarrassing.



Meatballs was released on Blu-ray and DVD on June 12, 2012.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Entertainment

Yet there is one other saving grace of "Meatballs," and his name is Chris Makepeace. As a child actor, Makepeace sported the sort of natural screen presence that instantly put him on par with any of the Phoenix kids (he went on to star alongside Matt Dillon in Tony Bill's underrated gem, "My Bodyguard"). One can easily spot Murray's face brightening during his scenes with gloomy camper, Rudy (Makepeace), who he first approaches with the classic line, "You must be the short depressed kid we ordered." Rudy predictably befriends Tripper, but Makepeace sells every moment. The way he shyly glances at the judgmental faces of his peers before his eyes spark with delight in Murray's presence is completely endearing and never less than believable. Buried somewhere within this tired exercise in neutered raunch lies a sweetly winning film about embracing the inconsequential pleasures of summer before the bracing chill of autumn sets in. That film briefly materializes whenever Murray and Makepeace share a warm laugh together.

"Meatballs" is presented in impeccable 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles and includes a recycled audio commentary track where Reitman and co-writer/producer Dan Goldberg commemorate the film's 25th anniversary. Reitman hints at the fact that he was unhappy about not getting the chance to direct "Animal House," since he was chiefly responsible in its creation. That could be why "Meatballs" plays so much like "Animal House" watered down for younger audiences. No wonder Murray initially wanted to have nothing to do with the project. It's funny to hear how Murray was just as inaccessible at the beginning of his career as he is now. Reitman sent drafts of the script to various baseball parks for Murray to reluctantly read (he had no agent back then, either). Once Murray was allowed to improvise his scenes, he ended up coming up with all of the film's best bits. I'm surprised he didn't get a writing credit.

'Meatballs' is released by Lionsgate Entertainment and stars Bill Murray, Harvey Atkin, Kate Lynch, Russ Banham, Kristine DeBall, Sarah Torgov, Jack Blum, Keith Knight and Chris Makepeace. It was written by Len Blum, Daniel Goldberg, Janis Allen and Harold Ramis and directed by Ivan Reitman. It was released on June 12, 2012. It is rated PG.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]  
Staff Writer  
[HollywoodChicago.com](#)  
[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [13]

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