

Harold Ramis Interview: A Lifetime of Achievements With a Chicago Look at 'Year One'

Submitted by [Ebeth](#) [1] on June 19, 2009 - 5:21pm

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CHICAGO – Kicking off the Chicago-based “TBS Presents A ‘Very Funny’ Festival: Just for Laughs” on June 17, 2009, Harold Ramis presented his film “Year One” at the Music Box Theatre. Starring Jack Black (“High Fidelity”) and Michael Cera (“Juno”), “Year One” touts itself as a comedy of the ages – the dark ages – as it follows Zed (Black) and Oh (Cera) on their accidentally religious quest.

At the opening, “Just for Laughs” presented its first-ever lifetime achievement award to the humble and well-deserving Ramis in honor of the awe-inspiring career of this actor, writer, director and producer. A Chicago-native Ramis said: “It’s so nice that this is happening at home.”



Writer, director and actor Harold Ramis strikes a pose for his hometown HollywoodChicago.com lens before being honored with the Just for Laughs lifetime achievement award at the Chicago

premiere of his latest film “Year One” on June 16, 2009 in Chicago.

Photo credit: [Joe Arce](#) [13] of [Starstruck Foto](#) [20] for HollywoodChicago.com

Best known for his role as Egon in the “Ghostbusters” series, the list of Ramis’s accomplishments on and off screen is plenty. He’s the writer and director on classics like “Caddyshack,” “Groundhog Day” (which he also produced), “Analyze This” and “Analyze That”. He’s a writer of films such as “Animal House,” “Stripes,” “Back to School” and the “Ghostbusters” series (among others).

In this week’s HollywoodChicago.com interview with Ramis, he glided in – with a paper cup of coffee in hand – and his cosmic-calming smile while bestowing a personal greeting to all around the table. He sat back and relaxed in anticipation of the casual conversation that was to come.

This writer began with discussion of “Year One”. When asked about the seemingly dangerous cast of characters joining Ramis for the film (humorously including Michael Cera’s wig), Ramis responded with stories about the animals on set.

“You’re warned as a director to avoid the “ABCs” of directing – *animals*, *boats* and *children* – and I’ve done them all. But in this movie, animals were gonna be a big part of it. We hired a wrangler, Bobby Colorado, and she’s quite a character. She lives in Texas with about 500 animals of her own. And we rented a boar. In Los Angeles, you can rent a boar.”



Jack Black stars in Columbia Pictures’ comedy “Year One”.

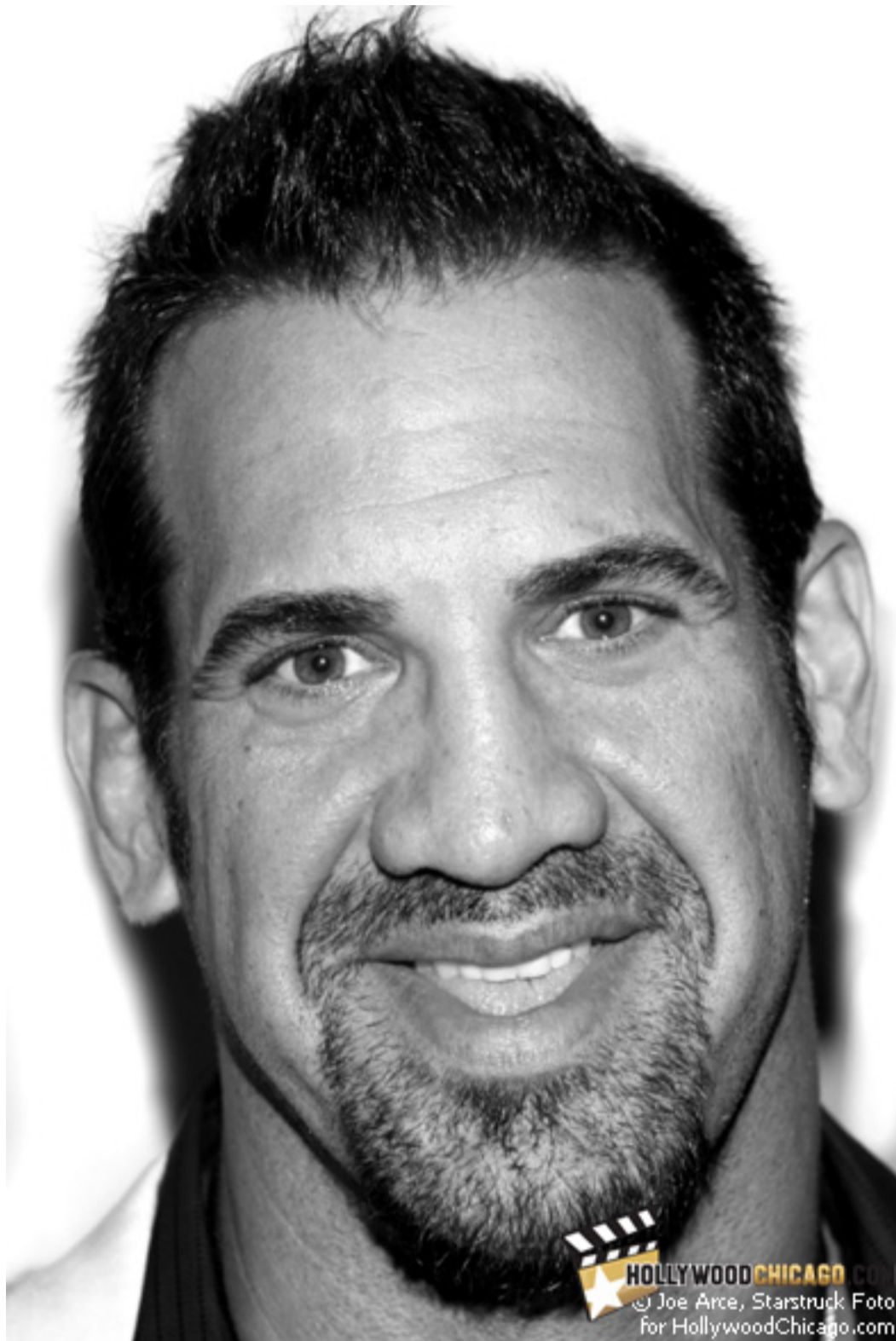
Photo credit: *Suzanne Hanover, SMPSP*

This writer responded, laughing: “What’s the boar’s day rate? Does he have his own trailer?”

Ramis responded: “I said we needed a cougar, and it was like: ‘Well, we got you the cougar from ‘Talladega Nights’”. This cougar worked with Will Farrell. Even I haven’t worked with Will Farrell! And then the cougar wouldn’t do anything we wanted it to do. We had to animate the cougar with CG. It turns out the cougar was constipated.”

This reminded Ramis of his days filming “National Lampoon’s Vacation”. He said: “I had a camel. We were ready to shoot the scene and I said: ‘ Cue the camel. Where’s the camel?’ They said: ‘Eh. The camel won’t walk on sand. He’s not comfortable on sand. He was raised in Burbank.’”

Though Ramis says Michael Cera didn’t mind the animals on the “Year One” set, Jack Black was “terrified of them all. There’s a young lion and tiger. He (Jack) said: ‘I’m not walking by them cause what if they, like, turn on me?!’ I said: ‘We couldn’t even get the cougar to jump on a stunt man. They’re not gonna turn on you.’ Same with the python. Jack was terrified of that albino python at the beginning of the movie.”



Actor Matthew Willig up close just before greeting fans on the red carpet at the Chicago premiere of “Year One” on June 16, 2009 at the Music Box Theatre.

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Continuing discussion about the “Year One” cast, this writer referenced Harold’s acceptance speech the night before: “You said last night when you accepted your award that you often recommend to people that they ‘identify the most talented person in the room and – if it’s not them – go stand by that person’. On set, when you weren’t standing alone, who did you tend to be standing near?”

“Well, you know, I can only think of one comedy director who does it all. That’s Woody Allen. He trusts his own instincts totally. I come from the kind of comedy where it’s only funny and as good as the people around you. People think directors tell actors what to do, but essentially a big part of the job is hiring the person who’s already doing it right or already doing it better than you even imagined it.”

Ramis continued: “We hired Jack and Michael because they’re brilliant. My quote is true. In this case, I hire the most talented people around and then I go stand next to them to try to get them to embody the script as best we can do.”

Moving to his partner, he went on: “Judd (Apatow) was a juggernaut already when I started this project. He had become rightfully famous for television work that wasn’t quite successful but was really respected and then his films just started to produce. It kind of echoed something we’d experienced 20 years before. I didn’t have any alliances like that any more. I don’t ‘hang out’ with Ivan Reitman and Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd any more. We don’t make many movies together, but Judd is now in the prime of that.”



Olivia Wilde stars in Columbia Pictures' comedy "Year One".

Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover, SMPSP

"I was one draft into this movie when I thought: 'I can't do this alone.' I thought I need a partner – a real strong producing partner – someone with a lot of studio credibility and a lot of connection into the contemporary comedy world. And who better than Judd?"

Observing the fact that "Year One" relies strongly upon religious humor and citing previous statements made by Ramis regarding "looking at religion more philosophically than in fundamental ways," Ramis was asked about his views on religion as comedy.

"There's all kinds of laughter. I don't believe in laughing with contempt at things. I don't think anything I've ever done has been cruel in that sense," Ramis said. "I try not to make fun of people. Can I say this? *(laughs)* Maybe I make fun of people all the time."

Ramis continued: "I want for the audience what I want for my own sons. I want my own kids – even though they're growing up way over-privileged – to think critically about the things they're told and what they're being sold by this culture and by our government. I think it'd be a better world if people were more aware and thought and functioned more independently."



Michael Cera (left) and Jack Black star in Columbia Pictures' comedy "Year One".

Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover, SMPSP

"I read a lot of history," Ramis said. "I'm a keen observer of what's going on. I see that fundamentalism and orthodoxy just lock people into these ideological positions. There's no common ground. It's like: 'This is what I believe, and if you don't believe it, you are wrong. You are the devil. You are Satan.'"

Harold addressed the issue of "chosenness" in "Year One": "For Jews, chosenness is a big issue. I had my rabbi come to the New York screening of the film. He embraced me after saying: 'Thank you for deconstructing the notion of chosenness!' He was thrilled with it in that sense."

"But the movie's post-denominational and post-ideological," Ramis said. "It just says whatever you believe, have your belief, but it doesn't absolve you from acting responsibly. If you're gonna make meaningful social change, it's not going to be because of or through ideology or orthodoxy. It's going to be because you're willing to take action and do the right thing. It's simple."

Ramis was then asked about his concerns regarding technology's influence on the experience of watching movies and particularly on viewing movies at home as opposed to in the theatre.



Director Harold Ramis on the set of Columbia Pictures' comedy "Year One".

Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover, SMPSP

"There's a kind of sociological component to it," Ramis said. "Older people don't like to go to the theatre. It's a hassle. A lot of older people see serious films (i.e. foreign films, independent films and art films). And those experiences can be solitary. But young people aren't staying home."

"My kids have an 80-inch screen. They don't say 'come on over and let's watch a movie'. In the first run of movies, young people want to come out and see a picture and have the whole experience of laughing with a group of their friends and then trading lines on the way out. Later when people revisit movies, they carry with them whatever that experience was and they can laugh alone. Maybe even now they hear the stuff they couldn't hear when people were laughing. In all our best films, hopefully there were lines the audience misses because they were still laughing at previous moments."

To close, this writer asked the question on most of the minds of our readers: "Do you have any little 'Ghostbusters 3' tidbits?"

"I don't know," Ramis said. "Has there been a formal studio release or was I the release? (*laughs*) I decided I wasn't going to be coy any more. The studio has hired two writers – my co-writers Gene Stupnitsky and Lee Eisenberg – who are writers and producers on "The Office". Together we wrote a story for a potential sequel. Ivan Reitman and Dan Aykroyd are consulting and Bill Murray has said he'd be in it. And we're going to introduce three new Ghostbusters. At least three..."



Jack Black (left) and June Raphael star in Columbia Pictures' comedy "Year One".

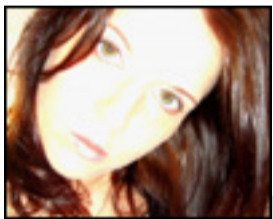
Photo credit: Suzanne Hanover, SMPSP

When asked about a release date, Ramis responded: "It'll never come out if the script isn't really good or if there isn't a real strong group will to do it because no one needs to do it. The beauty of it is that – as much as there are people in the audience who would want to see it – we don't want to embarrass ourselves. We know there's affection for it, but it's whether we want to do it or not."

Here's hoping "there's something strange in the neighborhood" in the near future.

Ramis – currently a resident of Glencoe, Ill. – closed with conversation about the Chicago area and humored this writer by swapping stories about mutual affection for Taylor guitars. He left as casually as he'd entered and was off to another round of promotion for his new flick.

"Year One," which stars Jack Black, Michael Cera, Oliver Platt, David Cross, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Hank Azaria, Vinnie Jones, Juno Temple, Olivia Wilde, Matthew Willig and Horatio Sanz, opened on June 19, 2009 in theatres across the U.S. The film is rated "PG-13" for crude and sexual content throughout, brief strong language and comic violence.



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