

Director lampoons stereotypes

By KEVIN HARDEN
Of the Emerald

There are about a dozen clichés that could be used to describe John Landis. He's young, successful, rich and nearly famous. He's everything People magazine could ever say about him; if they ever say anything about him.

But, no matter what the catch phrases and banality used to describe him, John Landis tried not to be stereotyped. Especially as a stereotypical comedy director.

Although that may seem impossible for a 28-year-old who spent the last two weeks jetting from coast to coast promoting "National Lampoon's Animal House," Landis is planning a coup against the comedy director image.

Landis, who was in Eugene for a two-day "Animal House" promotion during the weekend, told the reporters that though his directing days are certainly not over, they may be numbered.

Landis, John Belushi of NBC's "Saturday Night Live" fame and three National Lampoon writers made their home in Eugene last Fall for six weeks as they, and nearly 1,000 extras pieced together the "Animal House" plot.

For most of the actors portraying rowdy fraternity brothers in the movie, it was their first screen appearance. But for Landis, it was the third feature film he has directed in eight years.

Landis began his directing career with "Schlock," a movie about a lethal but lovable ape-man who spent most of his time alternately terrorizing and enchanting residents of a small California town. Working with a \$60,000 budget, Landis both directed and starred as the ape-man.

Next Landis directed "The Kentucky Fried Movie," a mildly successful anthology film based on live theater material written and performed by the Kentucky Fried Theater group from Los Angeles.

Plans to enter drama



Courtesy photo

Two years and a large bank account later, Landis was picked by National Lampoon publishers to direct "Animal House."

Although the majority of movies Landis has worked in have been comedies, it may be time for him to break out of the comedy director mold. After a stint as director for an upcoming Lily Tomlin comedy, Landis will attempt to bury his stereotype and make a drama; maybe two dramas.

Landis and Tomlin will begin in January to film "The Incredible Shrinking Woman," a full-fledged kitchen comedy remake of the classic science-fiction male version of the movie.

That movie, Landis says, will include not only more women cast and crew members than ever before, but will also have a budget that is estimated to be more than four times the \$2.8

million used to produce "Animal House."

After "Shrinking Woman," Landis plans to take his own nine-year-old script to England and film what he hopes will be one of the scariest horror movies ever made.

"I'm going to make a very serious horror film that I hope will scare the shit out of everyone," Landis explains. That film, "An American Werewolf in London," will have the same effect on moviegoers' hearts that "Animal House" had on their funny bones.

The only way to describe "Werewolf," which isn't set for production until 1980, is to imagine the horror of being attacked by some extraordinary monster and trying to laugh in spite of it, Landis says.

After "Werewolf," Landis plans to make his life-long project a reality. With the help of

Mark Twain, he will remake "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court."

His movie, Landis predicts, will be truer to Twain's novel than the 1950s version which starred Bing Crosby. That production was "light-hearted and cute," Landis says, while the novel is actually a biting indictment of organized religion, the monarchy and government of every kind.

Until then, Landis and Universal Studios will continue to plug "Animal House" from New York to Los Angeles.

Is it a success? That is hard to answer, Landis says. "The reviews we're getting right now are real interesting. Some of them are schizophrenic. Yet I read what I think is a good review of the film."

Several Hollywood directors, themselves successful, have told Landis that "Animal House" is either the greatest

film since "Patton" or is "socially irresponsible." Whatever that may mean, Landis says, "Animal House" is a good movie.

"I like the movie very much. I've seen it work and it works well on different levels."

Those levels, he explains, include political statements about America's history, rowdy and raunchy humor and traditional comic techniques.

"The movie has a strong political slant to it. It has a lot to say about a pivotal year in American history."

The 1962 setting for "Animal House" was important, Landis explains, because it was chronologically the last year of the 1950s. After that year, the nation began to change and evolve into what today could be called a political and social lull.

"Back then it was like today," Landis says. "The whole nation was sinking into an ooze and started making heroes out of real villains like Anita Bryant and whomever."

Because of that setting, "Animal House" will be a timeless movie, Landis predicts. "Fifty years from now, 100 years from now, people will see it and laugh because it's a movie and it can be preserved to make people laugh."

No matter how timeless it will be in the next century, ABC Television thinks "Animal House" is worth something more than just a two-hour movie. The network which made "American Graffiti" into a series ("Happy Days") has purchased the rights to a similar series based on the "Animal House" movie.

Although the movie actors will probably not work in the television series, Landis says he would like to direct the series. National Lampoon writers Harold Ramis, Doug Kenney and Chris Miller, who wrote the "Animal House" movie script, will probably also be hired to write for the TV series, he says.



Courtesy photo

review

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This really isn't a review. I mean, to review "National Lampoon's Animal House" after all the time that was spent filming in and around Eugene, would be like kissing your sister: you never know how good it will be and when you finally do it you are disappointed.

Of course, that isn't to say that "Animal House" is a disappointment; quite the opposite: It's just that if someone were to give "Animal House" a bad review in a Eugene newspaper, that person's sanity (as well as physical health) would no doubt be in question.

In all honesty, speaking as a writer who watched about one-fourth of the filming in and around the campus, "Animal House" is hilarious. It's not the funniest movie ever made, but it will probably be the funniest movie ever made in Eugene.

There are very few problems with "Animal House" that won't be addressed by some other reviewer in some other city. One thing that may be the film's minor drawback is the speed of the plot. National Lampoon writers Harold Ramis, Doug Kenney and Chris Miller whipped the plot through so many twists and turns that it thickens enough to make six dozen pancakes.

The poor actors, who spent 30 out of 32 rainy days filming nearly 30 set-up shots a day, looked as if they were running an obstacle course trying

to make it to the next plot change and story climax (among other things).

But the speed of the plot, with its twists and shouts, didn't seem to detract director John Landis from putting together a very entertaining film. No, entertaining isn't the right word. It's more like rabid comedy with a zealous message.

One more problem, but it kind of goes along with the rest of this sort-of review, so don't worry: the names on the credits need to be reversed. John Belushi, for all his Neanderthal glory, is not the star of this movie. That spot belongs to either Thomas Hulce (Pinto) or Stephen Furst (Flounder). They made the movie more delightful than Belushi's grunts, groans and minimal dialogue.

Now that we're finished with all that, let's get to the good part. Nearly everyone who was in Eugene during October or November knows, or thinks they know, the "Animal House" plot. But what they don't know is how it all fits together.

There are some overtly political statements woven into the patchwork plot. Most of all, there is one simple lesson to be learned from that woven garment: the characters that the National Lampoon writers created eventually do something "worthwhile" with their beerish lives.

Is there a moral? I certainly hope not. There is no room for morals in this movie.

"Animal House" opens in Eugene Aug. 18, nearly a month after it has been showing in Portland, New York and Los Angeles.