

“National Lampoon’s Animal House” (1978) An Interview with Tim Matheson



It was 20 years ago that the Library of Congress added “National Lampoon’s Animal House” to the National Film Registry. Originally released in 1978 and inducted in 2001, “Animal House” remains one of the most quoted and iconic comedy films in history.

In his book, “America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide To The Landmark Movies In The National Film Registry,” author Daniel Eagan says “National Lampoon’s Animal House” has become one of the most influential comedies of the 1970’s. Embraced by younger viewers, it has been used as a blueprint by a succeeding generation of comedy filmmakers.”

In addition to helping launch the careers of Kevin Bacon, Karen Allen, Bruce McGill, Tom Hulce, and Peter Reigert; the film showcases a shift in the American fraternity culture; started an on-the-floor dance craze to the Isley Brothers’ “Shout”; turned the fictitious Otis Day and the Knights into a touring band; and produced a script full of one-liners that are still repeated daily by movie fans and college students all over the world.

Directed by John Landis and written by Harold Ramis, Douglas Kenney and Chris Miller, “Animal House” was born from the popular “National Lampoon” magazine, a spoof on Harvard University’s “Harvard Lampoon.” Harold Ramis knew John Belushi from Second City and “Saturday Night Live,” and wrote the part of Bluto with Belushi in mind. Donald Sutherland, the most famous and highest paid actor in the film, was cast as the beloved professor.

But it may be Tim Matheson’s portrayal of Eric “Otter” Stratton that captures the free-spirit, charming, and just over-the-line antics that fans love about the film. Otter’s dynamic with Boon (played by Peter Reigert) is an easy, free-flowing best-friendship that is at the center of this wonderful band of misfits.

While each character has their own storyline and point-of-view, Otter is seen as the unofficial leader steering and instigating much of the outrageous Delta House behavior. The Library of Congress spoke with Tim Matheson in February 2021 about his behind-the-scenes experiences, the film’s legacy, and its induction into the National Film Registry.



How did you get the part?

I was coming out of doing a bunch of Westerns. I was in "The Virginian" and "Bonanza" for about a year. I was also in a series with Kurt Russell called "The Quest" in 1976. I was in "Yours, Mine and Ours," and voiced "Jonny Quest." I was always playing "nice guy" parts and wanted to branch out. I started taking an improv class with The Groundlings and read the script for "Animal House."

I loved the "Lampoon" [magazine] and it was the funniest and most unique script that I'd ever read. I

wanted so bad to be in this movie. They said they had someone else in mind, but gave me an audition. I knew it was a long shot.

I auditioned with Peter Reigert [Boon]. We hit it off and started bouncing off each other. It went really well. I got a call back to do it again, and that went even better. After that audition, Landis came out and told me "We love you. We're going to hire you!" That was a dream come true.

The chemistry and timing between you and Peter Reigert was so natural. Are you still friends?

Sure, we do Zooms every now and then. He lives in upstate New York. He's gone on to do incredible things. He is such a wonderful actor.

Landis did something really brilliant. "Animal House" was a five-week shoot, but he had the Delta's come in a week early to just hang out. For a week, we ate together, toured the set, watched the Deathmobile being built, and just hung out. We had a bond before everyone else showed up.

When I heard that Donald Sutherland was in the movie, I was so excited. He had been in "M*A*S*H." I studied "M*A*S*H" because of the comedic timing. The dynamic between Boon and Otter is very Hawkeye and Trapper.

When we are kicked out of college and deciding what to do next, it was originally my line to say "road trip." I thought it would be more impactful if Peter and I said it together. It was that kind of camaraderie that Landis inspired and that came from watching "M*A*S*H."

The script and characters have so many great one-liners. Do you think that is part of the film's longevity?

I absolutely do. We were shooting six days a week. They would run dailies [the unedited footage] on Sunday for the crew. We had a sense that things were working because on Monday morning the crew would come to work quoting lines from the film: "Thank you sir, may I have another"; "Is that a pledge pin?" "Seven years of college down the drain." This showed us that it was really connecting and that every character had a spotlight.

What was your favorite line? Favorite scene?

"She was going to make a pot for me." (*laughs*)

To me, the scene at Emily Dickinson College for Fawn Liebowitz was one of the most perfect scenes I'd ever read as an actor. It was so well written. I had so much fun with it, but didn't want to overact it. I knew I had to ride the wave and let it happen naturally.

The entire scene: "Sophomore Dies in Kiln Explosion"; "She was going to make a pot for me"; "Oh, and can you get three dates for my friends?" (*laughs*). So great, so wrong and needed to be executed perfectly.

I also loved the courtroom scene. It was the only scene with the entire cast. I had a lot of fun lines and we had a great time shooting it.



Was there a lot of improv? Did you have room to improv?

Most of the time we followed the script, but Landis was very smart and kept the cameras rolling. Nothing was done more than two times. Landis wouldn't cut. He would say "Hurry up," "Come back in," "Do it again." So we would run back in and do it again. He was fast and kept it moving. The food fight was one take, because you don't want to do a scene like that again. He may have gone back for a few pick-ups, but all one take.

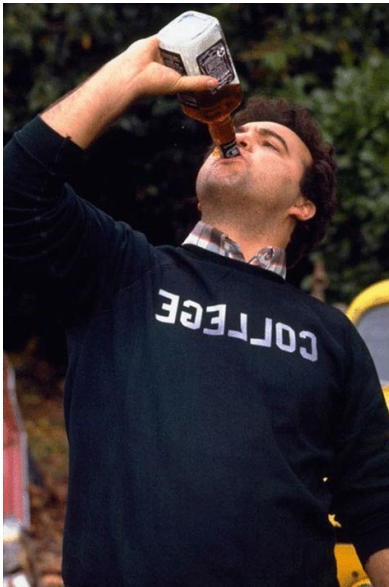
Belushi's cafeteria scene shoving food in his mouth was improv, but he knew where the scene was going; "That boy is a P-I-G pig!" They shot footage of everyone hanging out at the toga party. Bruce McGill playing his throat, and Belushi smashing the guitar on the stairs was improv. I can't remember too many takes that we had to start and stop. This helped with continuity and gave the movie some magic moments. The scene with me and the Dean's wife wasn't really blocked out. I try to hang her coat and missed the hanger, then I try to put ice in the glass and a few cubes pop out. We just kept rolling and those moments came out of it.

In the scene where Verna [Bloom, the Dean's wife] kicks off her shoe, they put a sound-effect of breaking glass to continue the comedic spirit. Landis gets comedy so well, and there are so many wonderful moments like that in the movie.



Let's talk about John Belushi.

I think John is the heart of the movie. John was so sweet and so nice. I think Landis said it best that Belushi was like the Cookie Monster with his sweet lovable comedic demeanor. Belushi was so generous. I had never done a comedy. He was supportive and appreciative of what I was doing and what everyone was doing. The town and the fans loved him. They would line up for hours to get his autograph.



Did he really drink a whole bottle of Jack Daniels?

The scene with John chugging the Jack Daniels happened the first week of shooting. They were going to shoot it from the side and have a funnel on his shoulder, so it would look like he was drinking it. Belushi said, "No I can do it. I can chug it." He asked them to drill a small hole in the bottom of the bottle so he could control the liquid going down his throat. It was not really Jack Daniels, but some kind of tea or colored liquid. He did chug it, though. One take.

Why do you think the film transcends over so many generations?

One of things that the "Lampoon" did was look at pivotal moments in your life, and in this case, captured the underlying college drama. It was also about change. "Animal House" is set in 1962, and the rumblings of change were coming. If you remember in the parade scene, there is a float with the white hand shaking the black hand and then goes apart, the girls are dressed like Jackie Kennedy, and even the Dexter Lake Club scenes have really racist moments.

It's like "Caddyshack" in the sense of white privilege. Fraternities like the Omegas are an elitist, racist, sexist club, whose point is to exclude people that they don't like. Then you have the Delta House where if you apply, you're in. We take everybody. It was that contrast that people identified with.

Twenty years ago, the Library of Congress added "Animal House" to the National Film Registry for being culturally, historically or aesthetically significant. What does that mean to you?

I am so impressed by the breadth and depth of the movies that are inducted into the Registry, and equally as impressed by the hip crowd that appreciates the film. I think you have the edge of history to look back and see that the film still holds up.

I am thrilled and honored that it was voted in. It was singular piece of work with an amazing cast.

Essay and interview by Stacie Seifrit-Griffin with the Library of Congress National Film Preservation Board and the National Film Registry. This interview with Tim Matheson took place February 2021.