

GHOSTBUSTERS

FROZEN EMPIRE

Co-writer-director Gil Kenan
knows how to chill out

By Jeff Bond

SPOILER ALERT:

Major plot points are discussed



The original *Ghostbusters*, a 1984 sci-fi comedy about a team of misfit scientists (played by Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis and Ernie Hudson), has remained a perennial favorite despite a misfire of a sequel in 1989. But while *Ghostbusters* never die, a female-led 2016 revival undeservedly sent some fans on the warpath, and then in 2021, Jason Reitman—son of original *Ghostbusters* director Ivan Reitman—and Gil Kenan turned death into a fighting chance to live (to geekily reference *Star Trek*) by using the untimely passing of actor-director Harold Ramis in 2014 as a linchpin to reset the franchise with *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*. That film follows Callie Spengler (Carrie Coon), daughter of Ramis' deceased character, Egon Spengler, and single mother to grandchildren Phoebe and Trevor, who all discover their ghostbusting legacy with the help of the kids' science teacher Gary Grooberson (Paul Rudd).



In the current follow-up, *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*, the newly minted Ghostbusters family takes up residence in the original team's NYC fire station headquarters and faces a new threat in the form of ancient evil Garraka, a demon who threatens to freeze the Big Apple—literally—and the world with fear. Unleashed in classic Rick Moranis Keymaster style by a slacker schlub named Nadeem Razmaadi (Kumail Nanjiani), Garraka is so powerful it requires the forces of both the new Ghostbusters and the original surviving team members to vanquish it. While Kenan once again co-wrote the script with Reitman, this time he takes over as director, and he is quick to admit the two learned a lot after two movies about what makes a good Ghostbusters tale. “The first *Ghostbusters* obviously changed the landscape tonally of a Hollywood blockbuster, because it brought in some of the indie sensibilities that were coming from *SNL* and *Second City* and had this streak of independence that felt much more dangerous, grounded and raw,” Kenan says. “That created a relatability that punctured through a lot of the artifice of what was going on in its time and the sense that we’re dealing with characters at the center of the stories that are not superheroes. They’re regular folks who have a job, and their job happens to be to rid New York City of a supernatural scourge. But those folks just happened through circumstance to be on the frontlines of the end of the world. That has always been a unique



GIL KENAN





trait of these films—that these characters are generally like regular folks you will want to hang out with. They’re funny, they care about each other, they’re intrepid, they’re fearless, but they also are no better equipped at confronting pure evil than anybody else in your life, and what makes them extraordinary is they’re intelligent, they have scientific backgrounds, and they are the folks who are able to strap on those proton packs and face down against the unknown.”

The “unknown” in this case happens to be the nefarious Garraka, contained in a copper sphere among the relics of his grandmother’s that Nadeem is selling off piece by piece. Nadeem hasn’t a clue that his relinquishing the sphere will unleash Garraka upon the world, and he’s even more clueless to the fact that he is the Fire Master, the only being in the world who can harness the power of flames to battle Garraka’s freezing powers. Kenan and Reitman started with the idea of New York City under a supernatural deep freeze—an idea that was revealed in the movie’s teaser trailers. “That was actually a kind of primary image, early in our process before we even started breaking story or sketching out what this film would be,” Kenan says. “We knew that our villain was gonna have a new mythology. We knew in true ghostbusting tradition that mythology would reach back into the ancient world. We did a lot of work researching civilizations and drew on some trappings of an ancient Hindu civilization that gave us just enough of a bedrock to build off of that allowed for something that had its own essence, its own flavor. And then the next task was to build the nightmarish vision that would embody that evil tradition, in this case the character of Garraka, who had his own tragic backstory. Like any good antagonist, he had his own bass note that he as a character carries through their arc.”





As Aykroyd's Ray Stantz translates the runes that cover the orb, he uncovers its ancient history as a storage for supernatural spirits—not unlike the Ghostbusters' spectral containment facility—and Nadeem's family lore as essentially ghostbusters of the distant past themselves. "We knew from the beginning that the idea of objects being inhabited by spirits would be central to this story, both in a playful way and also in the form of this brass orb that the character of Nadeem brings into the story," Kenan says. "And we love the idea that in this film, we could explore the suggestion that ghostbusting as we know it is something that has much deeper historical roots. It's an idea these films have never explored before, and it felt like in the way we like to work, the internal stakes—the internal obstacles—are always marching in lockstep with the external or global stakes or obstacles. And it felt right that Nadeem is a character who is struggling to make any sort of meaningful connection with his own family legacy, where he feels like a black sheep or a character who has let down generations of his family—specifically his grandmother, his daddy—that this character through the process of unsuspectingly unleashing an evil force into the city would discover an extraordinary ability in himself."





Frozen Empire leans heavily on OGs—original Ghostbusters—and the supporting cast from the 1984 movie. That includes Murray as Peter Venkman, Hudson as Winston Zeddemore, Annie Potts as former Ghostbusters secretary Janine Melnitz and—Mr. “Dickless” himself—Walter Peck, the unctuous EPA inspector and Ghostbuster nemesis played by William Atherton, who’s revealed early on in the movie as the new mayor of New York City. The production caught at least one break, as Aykroyd was also a producer on the movie and sort of had to be there, but given the plethora of veteran actors playing pivotal roles, did Kenan and Reitman have to wait for all the contracts to be signed before starting their script? “The entire story of this film coming together was extraordinarily fast,” Kenan says. “Almost so fast that nobody had a chance to have other things to do. It was just an incredible whirlwind going from us finishing the screenplay to mounting this production, and the fact that it’s a huge production made that task no easier, as you can imagine. But we cast the net very wide for our actors, both our legacy actors and our new ones. We knew where we wanted to go in every instance, and this was one of those cases where we were very lucky that all of the puzzle pieces fit and some really heroic producing went on to make sure everyone could be there at the right time and at the same time. There were no contingencies. We had one shot at this, and we’re very, very lucky that shot panned out.”



While the original cast provide support (and, yes, sometimes exposition), Callie Spengler and new hubby Gary Grooberson spend the bulk of the story dealing with Mayor Peck's attempts to shut them down, the newly unleashed threat of Garraka and the disaffection of their two kids, who aren't adjusting very well to the move east from the Midwest. Trevor Spengler (Finn Wolfhard) yearns to get behind the wheel of the Ecto-1 and struggles to prove himself by taming the legacy ghost Slimer, who's still hoovering up trash in the bowels of the Ghostbusters' HQ, but 13-year-old Phoebe (17-year-old Mckenna Grace, who took on the role in *Afterlife* when she was 13) has been forbidden by the mayor to ride along on missions because of her age. Feeling underappreciated and lonely, she winds up getting involved in what may be the series' first interdimensional love story—or is it? Phoebe meets a ghost named Melody (Emily Alyn Lind), who died in a fire and still has ghostly blue flames wafting from her body. Melody holds a pack of matches that plays a crucial role in the film's climax, but the character has a hidden agenda and her same-sex relationship with Phoebe is haunting both figuratively and literally. "We're really proud of the fact that in this film we have the first ghost story that has a voice and a kind of breadth of experience to it," Kenan says. "There is a backstory to it. For the first time, it's not just the thing on the other end of your proton wand or the thing you're putting into your ghost trap. It's a character with a story to tell."

