

John Belushi: potential great who didn't have enough time



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I guess in the end it was all that talk about John Belushi playing the role of Ignatius J. Reilly that really got to me when the Saturday morning paper arrived with the bad news.

Ever since it was announced that Scott Kramer had purchased the movie rights to Ken Toole's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "Confederacy of Dunces," everybody had been saying Belushi was the natural choice to play the central character, Ignatius J. Reilly. Nothing was settled on the casting, but Belushi had indicated that if he had the right director, he would be interested.

It was a natural because Belushi loved to play slobs — and he played them well. Anyone who read Toole's outrageous descriptions of the mad, mad Ignatius waddling around New Orleans expelling gas, stuffing his face with hot dogs and guzzling Dr. Nut in between belches, knew that Belushi was perfect for the role.

Even the artist's conception of what Ignatius looked like — featured on the cover of the hardback edition of "Dunces" — looked amazingly like Bluto Blutarski, played by Belushi, during the homecoming parade in "Animal House."

Ignatius, in between burps, gurgles and other assorted social faux pas, pontificated on every subject known to God and man. He was particularly enamored with denouncing the idea of working for an honest living. Mention labor, and Ignatius' valve would conveniently start closing.

Think of the roles Belushi had played. On "Saturday Night Live," he was one of the Not Ready For Prime Time Players along with Dan Aykroyd, Chevy Chase, Gilda Radner and a host of others. He was a Samaurai warrior who grunted guttural sounds and waved his sword. He ran a disorganized Greek lunch counter and couldn't speak English. He did so many different voices that a New Orleans "Yat" accent like Ignatius' would have been duck soup for him.

Remember that scene in "Animal House" with Bluto in line in the Farber College cafeteria right before the food fight? Stuffing his face with everything in the line? Swilling down the jello right off the plate? Putting whole sandwiches in his mouth? Then think about some of Toole's descriptions of Ignatius and the hot dogs.

Belushi loved playing slobs because, he once said, they didn't make people feel inadequate like so many characters in the movies and on television. His people weren't handsome or pretty or well-groomed, well-spoken or well-built. He was ordinary. Fat, unshaven. His characters didn't have to be perfect — and they were far from it. They screwed up regularly, coped with life poorly, were generally dumb, and



didn't follow the rules or mores of society.

On top of that, they were hilarious.

My favorite line from "Animal House" is a bit which my wife and I have appropriated for certain situations. It's when one of us is counting on the other to do something and gets let down. Recall when Kent "Flounder" Dorfman, the fat legacy pledge, borrows his father's swanky car and his Delta fraternity brothers take it for a joy ride? They bring it back with the fenders slightly redesigned. Flounder is in tears and worried about what he's going to tell his dad.

Belushi puts everything in perspec-

tive. He says: "Face it, Flounder, you ----ed up. You trusted us."

After I saw "Animal House," I knew John Belushi was going to make me laugh many, many more times in my life. I was right. I saw "Animal House" five more times. Then I saw "Blues Brothers." A lot of critics thought "Blues Brothers" was a disaster, but then I think a lot of critics are disasters. They thought all it was was a bunch of car wrecks and bad music. I thought it was great.

But by then, I was hooked on Belushi. All he had to do was raise an eyebrow and I would laugh. I saw it three more times. Elwood and Jake blew my mind with the black suits and hats and



skinny ties. They could have wrecked five shopping malls for me.

I only go to movies or watch them on TV for one reason — to laugh, or at least get a smile. There's enough terror and tragedy in the real world without paying to see it. My favorite movies of all time are "Cat Ballou," "The Sting" and "Animal House."

Belushi gave me laughs — real belly laughs, made me cry when he rolled those eyes and lifted those bushy Albanian eyebrows. The scenes in which he smashed the beer can against his forehead and when he fell off that ladder after ogling the girls who were fondling themselves in the sorority house were classics.

So, I figured, there will be much

Far left, John Belushi; left, Ignatius Reilly, the character he won't have a chance to play.

more slapstick like this in the years ahead. A few months ago, I went to see "Continental Divide." Belushi played Ernie Souchak, a.k.a. Mike Royko, a muckraking reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times. Not a great piece of cinema by a long shot, but there was enough entertainment for me. He'll be back doing something that would make Groucho Marx or Ernie Kovacs or Zero Mostel — any of the greats — proud of him, I thought. He is destined to become a comic great, I figured as I left "Continental Divide."

As I often do, I figured wrong. He will be remembered, sure, but 33 is not the place to stop when you think about the legacy that Benny and Groucho left, and what George Burns is still doing.

As when other comics died, I was feeling down, but cheated more this go-round. The others had time. Belushi did not. I wasn't improving my mood one bit. It rained and was gloomy all day Saturday.

Then on Sunday morning, a friend and I started rehashing some of the great lines and scenes from "Animal House." Belushi wasn't in this exchange, but it got me to laughing. Before a typically disgusting Delta party, Boone, one of the Deltas, asks his steady, Katie, if she wants to go. Katie says no, she's tired of seeing guys vomit and pass out.

"You're only six months from graduating, Boone," she says. "Is that what you want to do — get drunk every weekend?"

"No," he replies, "after I graduate, I want to get drunk every night."

From Caroline