

BEETLEJUICE



Life was easier for Michael Keaton back when he was an unknown in a sleeper film called *Night Shift*, his name sitting

on the marquee in letters substantially smaller than those of star Henry (Fonz) Winkler.

Back then he immediately became known as that mixed blessing called a 'scene stealer.' The crime? Grand Theft Comedy, lifting the spotlight away from *Happy Days*' Winkler (who, at the time, was immediately recognizable to any kid with access to a TV).

It was an enjoyable experience "for the purest of reasons," the Pittsburgh native Keaton told USA Today. "I didn't have the responsibility of the lead. I could just go out and cut loose."

Since then the professional wise guy has been a lead actor upon whose neck the fate of his movies were hung — whether they be hits like *Mr. Mom* or *Gung*



Ho or relative fizzles like the hockey movie *Touch and Go* or the dark lottery farce *The Squeeze*.

It's made him mildly neurotic and given him a reputation as a potential trouble-maker on-set, he

admits. "I get excited and express myself. That can cause problems. But after all, it's your face that's up there on the screen."

Which is where the oddly-named 'exorcism comedy' **BEETLEJUICE** comes in. For the

first time since *Night Shift* Keaton accepted a role that is quantitatively small (though it's the title role). Originally he turned it down but then he considered the opportunity for some old-time scene-stealing hamming.

Beetlejuice (or, more properly, 'Betelgeuse,' also the name of a star in Orion) is a 'ghost's ghost', a spectral trouble-shooter hired by a couple of ghosts who are chagrined to see their earthly home fall into the hands of a family of obnoxious preppies.

Knott's Landing's Alec Baldwin and *The Fly*'s Geena Davis are the Maitlands, a couple who motor off this mortal coil courtesy of a traffic accident and end up stranded midway between the here and the hereafter.

Jeffrey Jones, SCTV's Catherine O'Hara and Winona Ryder are the Deetzes, father, mother and daughter, who extricate the Maitland's worldly goods and move in a load of trendy and pretentious furnishings of their own.

Distraught, as well as disembodied, the Maitlands turn to a celestially advertised, 500-year-old "freelance bio-exorcist" named Betelgeuse to rid their house of unwanted humans.

Visually-oriented director Tim Burton (of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* fame) seeks to amaze and amuse in equal portions in this spoof that pulls a switcheroo on the dynamic of *Ghostbusters*.

Keaton, however, sees his character as a klutz of the netherworld. "I based the character on Daffy Duck" he says, "a character who always loses and is beyond mischievous. I am the Daffy Duck of the afterlife."

In the past he has also been the Daffy Duck of nightlife, parlaying stand-up comedy stints between serious acting jobs before his movie career really started going (hence the demand for him as a guest on *Late Night With David Letterman* and as a guest host on *Saturday Night Live*).

"Stand-up was hard" he says. "But I'm awfully glad I did it. I'd like to do it again some day but not right now."

"Sometimes when I talk to other actors they say, 'I never did stand-up,' like it was something they always meant to do but never got around to — like it was something easy they never had time to do."

"And I think to myself, 'Wait a minute! It's not easy. Not at all!'"

— Jim Slotek

