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Stars shine anew with Spade

By TRIPP WHETSELL

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

David Spade offered a group of grown-up ex-child actors a simple deal to do cameos in his new movie, "Dickie Roberts: Former Child Star": Appear during the closing sequence while the title song plays and earn \$10,000.



David Spade as 'Dickie Roberts: Former Child Star'

But not everyone wanted the part.

"We came up with a lot of former child stars we wanted to put in the movie, but most of them got nervous and said no," says Spade, the former "Saturday Night Live" player whose sitcom, "Just Shoot Me," won't be back when the TV season starts next week.

"Everyone from Ron Howard to Jimmy Walker from 'Good Times' turned me down, because they were scared and took the attitude that they didn't need it or we were making fun of them," he says.

"Plus, you've got to get people to say, 'I'm not working, I'm not doing anything,' so it was a double-edged sword."

Ron Palillo didn't have that problem.

"It was like a huge class reunion of everybody that had ever been in a sitcom from the 1970s," says Palillo, who played nerdy Arnold Horshack on "Welcome Back Kotter."

You'll recognize Gary Coleman, Todd Bridges and "Dennis the Menace's" Jay North in "Dickie Roberts," which opens Friday. Barry Williams (Greg on "The Brady Bunch"), Danny Bonaduce (Danny on "The Partridge Family"), Dustin Diamond (Screech from "Saved By the Bell"), Leif Garrett (teenage heartthrob singer of "I Was Made for Dancin'") and Corey



Feldman (Mouth from "The Goonies") also play themselves.

The "SNL" influence includes Rachel Dratch, Jon Lovitz and producer Adam Sandler.

Spade plays a 35-year-old former child actor whose star has faded since his heyday as a pre-teen heartthrob of fictitious '70s sitcom, "The Glimmer Gang." He flubs a comeback attempt, onscreen director Rob Reiner tells him, because he never had a real childhood. So Spade pays a "normal" family to adopt him for a month.

Any similarities to "Joe Dirt" - Spade's 2001 critical flop about a belligerent janitor who dreams of finding the parents he lost at the Grand Canyon when he was 8 years old - are a coincidence, he says.

Spade says he and writing partner Fred Wolf (a former head writer on "SNL") "were trying to beat around ideas and think of new characters that people would buy me as."

"One night I called Fred up and said, 'Dude, did you see that Leif Garrett episode on 'Behind the Music?' A week later, he was like, 'What's up with Corey Feldman? He's a mess.'"

"So we set out to do that and create a composite of every child star you've ever heard of. Childhoods are ripe for the picking. They're just all out there and no one's doing anything."

It was an acting challenge that Spade took seriously.

"I think at least the central character is showing how much of a rough ride child stars can have," he says. "It's very believable, it's really funny and the Dickie Roberts character is so out of his mind that it's like Corey Feldman meeting Steven Spielberg for 'Saving Private Ryan' with a hat and gloves on saying, 'No, I'd be good.'"

Spade, a veteran of L.A.'s comedy-club scene, was an "SNL" regular from 1990-1996. His snide commentaries on showbiz, "The Hollywood Minute," made him a star.

The show also brought him together with Chris Farley. They became fast friends and made a pair of big-screen comedies: "Black Sheep" and "Tommy Boy."

Farley died of a drug overdose in 1997. Six years later, the memory of it is still too painful for Spade to discuss.

But just before Farley's death, Spade landed the role of smarmy office boy Dennis Finch on "Just Shoot Me."

The show's cancellation after seven seasons leaves Spade even more sympathetic to the plight of former child stars suddenly deemed no longer ready for prime time.