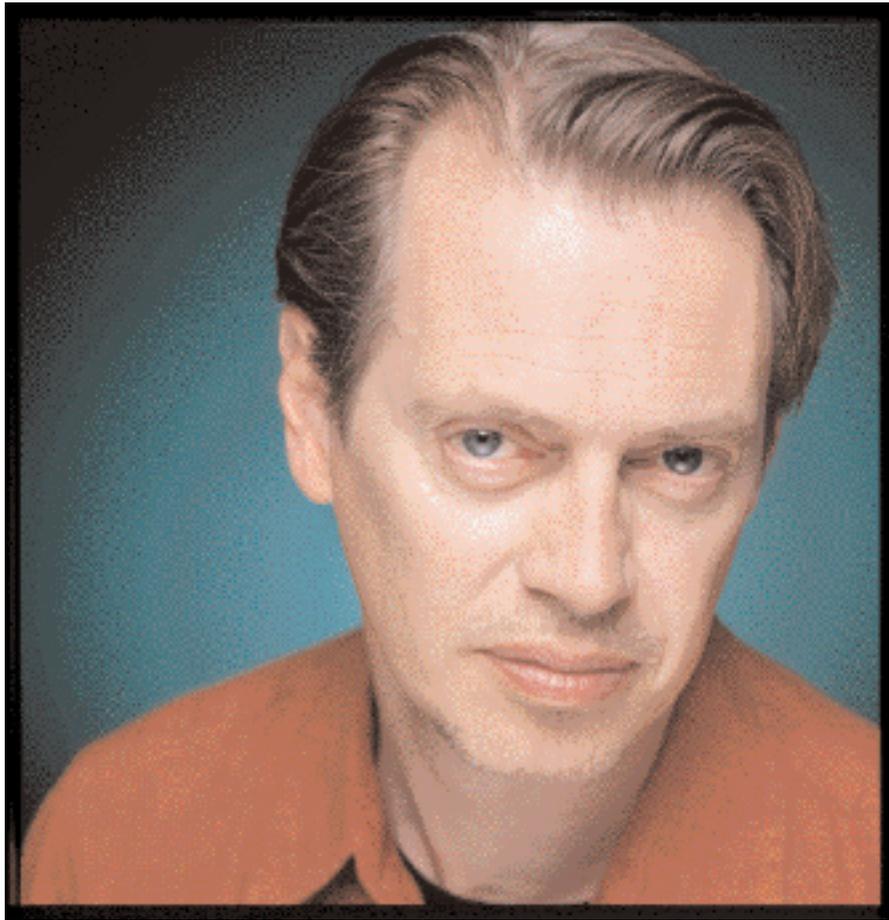


>>brief encounters

Indie poster boy Steve Buscemi on filmmaking, celebrity culture, and putting out fires
By Harlan Jacobson



Working Class Act

STEVE BUSCEMI'S CAREER IS AN AMERICAN SPIN-OFF OF THE sea change in acting wrought by Alec Guinness 50 years ago. Buscemi's sourpuss "full-on human rat mode," as *Variety* put it recently, ratchets down mythic-sized characters to everyday guys working their humdrum psychopathic cons in plain sight. His characters are the alchemy of turning tragedy into dark comedy. Buscemi stars in two new films, both of which premiered at Sundance this past January: *Interview*, which he also directed, and, 11 years after starring in *Living in Oblivion*, Tom DiCillo's *Delirious*. Both films are about media corruption, with Buscemi playing journalists at opposite ends of the food chain. In *Interview*, a remake of the Dutch film made by Theo Van Gogh, who was murdered in 2004 by a Muslim fanatic, he's a serious journalist who's been sent as punishment to interview a celebrity-fluff actress (Sienna Miller) and agonizes about being inside the room. In *Delirious* he plays an oily paparazzo who's outside and wants in.

There are endless things to say about Buscemi, closing in on 50 later this year—from his early days as a stand-up comedian in the East Village in the Eighties to his work both in front of and behind the camera on *The Sopranos* to his still unrealized dream project, an adaptation of William Burroughs's *Queer*—and it's a little odd interviewing him about *Interview*. In the real world, Buscemi is hard to reach, doesn't do much publicity, wouldn't meet in person—in short, the whole process of setting up the interview took on many of the trappings of how art and media have been derailed by celebrity culture, which of course is at the heart of *Interview*. Get him on the phone, or see him at Sundance responding to audience questions, however, and he's a straight shooter, earnest and open. The face of the new independent and quasi-independent American cinema for nearly 20 years, he remembers where he came from when the gates finally swing open.

Before his murder Van Gogh was planning to remake *Interview* in English. Why did you step in?

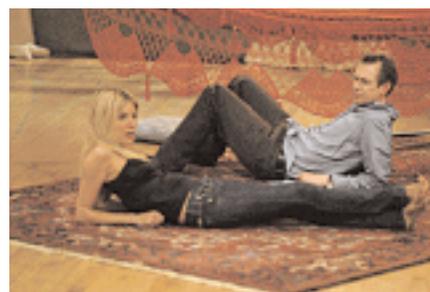
I didn't know his work at all. Bruce Weiss, the producer, called me about the project, explaining that Theo wanted to remake three of his own films in the States, and that they were trying to honor that using American directors. At first I was just curious to see the films . . . and I chose *Interview*. It was my favorite of the three.

What was it about the film that resonated with you?

I liked all the comments that it made about celebrity and media and the relationship between this journalist and the starlet, and all. But I more liked how it was like watching a couple going through a breakup even though they were just meeting for the first time.

The film is almost about the power of acting to disarm you.

She takes him up on his challenge and outsmarts him. She's a lot more than he bargained for. He really underestimates her, prejudices her, and she plays her hand very well. You learn more about him in the film than you do about her. You think she's revealing a lot, or that



he's uncovering a lot, but he's not.
Why did you make the changes you made from the original?

We decided to open it up. The original didn't have the scene in the restaurant; the journalist went directly to her house. That really wouldn't happen here on the first interview, unless he was doing a really long profile of her. I didn't want to copy the original step by step. I wanted to stay true to the spirit of the relationship, and also shoot it in the way Theo shot his later films with the three-camera method, mostly handheld. We also used his Dutch camera crew and DP Thomas Kist.

Did the three-camera method pose a challenge?

Yeah. At first I thought one would be getting a close-up, one a medium, and one a wide, but you really can't do that or they'll be getting in each other's way. So you get three in close and pull out wider. The interesting thing was that Theo liked to shoot the close-ups first. The actors are rarely off-camera, so you have to do these really long takes and get all the coverage at once.

It took you nine days to do this. And Theo ...

He did it in like four or five nights. We did add a location. But in general he worked much faster than I do. Also, I was acting in the movie.

You've worked with directors who've been funded both by Hollywood and abroad—Jim Jarmusch, the Coens, Tarantino. You've been at the heart of indie cinema. Who do you like working with and why?

Certainly everyone you mentioned. And working with Alexandre Rockwell on *In the Soup* [92], I really learned a lot about responsibility, about how much responsibility he gives to actors. He really allowed me to create that guy with him. Tom DiCillo does the same thing. Robert Altman—I was lucky to work with him in *Kansas City* [96] right before I directed *Trees Lounge* [96],

and I just loved the atmosphere he created on set. He made everyone feel like we were all in this together. He told me he didn't care if the film made a nickel, but he wanted it to be successful on his terms. And then he corrected himself and said, "On *our* terms." I've never forgotten that.

At the heart of *Animal Factory* [00] is something that courses through your other films: that the rich somehow always manage to crawl over the back of the workingman. It's true of *Trees Lounge*, which is sort of like a Brooklyn country-and-western song: guy loses his job, his girl, his dog, ends up on a stool in a bar. And it's true of *Lonesome Jim* [05], in which Casey Affleck plays a kid who can't make it out in the world and comes home. All share a real working-class milieu. Why is that important to you?

Because it's where I come from. It is what I know. It's where I'm comfortable. These people are having a hard time, looking to make a connection. What is it in us that will sometimes sabotage that?

You were born in Brooklyn?

Born in Brooklyn and grew up mainly in Long Island, from the time I was eight.

What kind of work did your dad do?

He was a sanitation worker for 30 years.

Did your mom work?

She was a hostess at a Howard Johnson's for about five years, but mainly she raised four boys. A civil-service job was really impressed upon my brothers and me. When we each turned 18 we were made to take whatever civil-service test was available. For me it was the Fire Department. It took them four years to get to my number on the list. By that time I was living in the city, and I decided to take the job. And I did that for four years. Engine Company 55 in Little Italy.

Was your dad proud?

Oh, absolutely. He was really shocked

when I said I was leaving. At the time I left, I'd made only one film, *Parting Glances* [86], which hadn't been released yet. I was banking on that to jump-start my nonexistent film career. [laughs] In his eyes, it was a really risky thing to do. In my eyes, it seemed like the right thing to do. Looking back on it, I can see that it was pretty risky.
Having worked as a fireman for four years, when 9/11 occurred, it must have affected you enormously.

The first number of casualties that came in was like 100 firefighters. And that's what made it real. The other numbers of civilian deaths was so surreal to me I couldn't wrap my head around it. But when the numbers of firefighters started coming in, and guys that I knew and worked with, that's what made it very real for me.

Did you go down to your engine company?

Yeah, I went the next day to my firehouse, just to get information, and ran into a firefighter friend of mine, and he told me that they had lost five guys. Then he drove me into the site. I went there with my old gear, and I walked around for a couple of hours and found my company. I worked with them that day and the next four or five days.

It's a little odd interviewing you about *Interview*, actually ... The whole minuet of the past month or so bears right on point about the film. You don't do a lot of press.

It's not my favorite aspect of this business, that's for sure. It's also the number of interviews that are required these days to promote an independent film ... This is the only interview I'm doing today, so it's okay. It's when you're doing several in a row, after a while the experience just gets surreal. You find yourself saying the same things, and wondering if you're repeating yourself within the same interview. It just gets bizarre. And also you just get tired of hearing yourself talk. □