

THE BIG INTERVIEW:

STEVE BUSCEMI

“Don’t lean forward; don’t lean forward, they told me not to go like this (he leans forward)”. Steve Buscemi has arrived and is buzzing with an energy that is present in all his film roles – even the one where he doesn’t speak.

Best known as the criminal Mr. Pink in Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs who refuses to tip waitresses in restaurants, Buscemi has acted in over a hundred films including greats such as Fargo, Con Air and The Big Lebowski to name but a few, and is in town to promote his new film Interview, which he directed, acted and wrote in. Still, before we get to that, does Buscemi still see himself purely as an actor?

“I see myself predominantly as a tree”. There is a pause for the laughter to die down. “It is funny though, I haven’t directed all that much but I do think what I want to do next and I do think more of myself these days as a director or somebody who wants to direct more – not that I don’t want to act. In the beginning, directing was really intimidating for me, it still is, but I think I’ve learnt to enjoy it more and I want to do it more. I’m not known as a director; in the States I’m never introduced as actor/director – only actor.

That might be about to change. Interview, a remake of a 2003 Theo Van Gogh film now set in New York instead of The Netherlands, is a masterpiece of direction, with a tight screenplay and pitch-perfect performances by both Buscemi and Sienna Miller who together make up the entire cast of the film. This was typical of Van Gogh, who before he was shot dead in November 2004 by Muslim extremists, was known for putting two people in a room and leaving them to thrash out their differences whilst creating a very intimate portrait of the human mind at work.

In the remake, Miller is Katya, the world’s most famous soap actress (based on Katya Schuurman who played herself in the original), who is interviewed, somewhat reluctantly, by serious and ambitious journalist Pierre Peders (Buscemi). With a storm breaking out in Washington, Peders is desperate to be in the thick of the political scrum, and is not afraid to show his disdain for the cult of celebrity that Katya is currently spearheading. What takes place next is a psychological battle of two wills cleverly played out with bundles of wit and energy, pointing the finger at contemporary stereotypes of men and women, which will have you smiling to yourself as you exit the cinema.

Considering Miller’s somewhat suffocating relationship with the British tabloids, her casting is not only ironic but also inspired. Drawing on her own experiences, one would suspect, of the media, she puts in the greatest performance of her career to date, laying a claim to be one of the more talented younger actresses of her generation and still only in her mid-twenties, but let’s get back to the interview.

Throughout his career, Buscemi has worked with many famous directors, yet is perhaps most celebrated for his relationship with the Coen brothers (Joel and Ethan), contributing as an

actor to six of their films, the last of these a short story in *Paris Je t'aime*, but also *Fargo*, a must-see classic that won two Oscars.

"I auditioned for Miller's *Crossing* (another Coen Brothers film) – this is a character named Mink who talked for like five pages and so I thought well he's probably a fast talker and so I rehearsed it, went in there, did the audition and I had them laughing...they called me in a month later and I did it again, and they said, 'well...you still say it the fastest' and so they hired me and since then just once in a while they've offered me a role which is great, I love working with them and they really do both direct, there's never conflicting direction, they're both always together, and they're pretty low-key and they like to giggle...which can sometimes be distracting".

One of the traits present in many of Buscemi's performances, especially with the Coen brothers, is that he either plays a psychopath or gets beaten up.

"The last thing I did with them, *Paris Je T'aime*, they did one of the short films and so I went from doing a five minute thing in my first film with them where I don't stop talking, to this film where I don't say anything...but I still get beaten up - but yeah I haven't been able to break them out of the habit of abusing me".

Before he broke into the movie scene, Buscemi tried his hand at stand-up and would do the rounds of comedy clubs on the New York circuit. Surely this was valuable training for him as an actor?

"I don't know if it's helped me as an actor. I think it helps me more in these kind of situations or if I'm hosting something, but being a stand-up is like one of the hardest things anybody can do and I stopped doing it because I just felt like I couldn't find my own voice. I used to watch a lot of comics and there were only three or four that I felt were really original and I thought if I can't be like that then I don't want to do it".

Ironic, considering how easily he has found his 'voice' in screen writing. Perhaps in the back of his mind is the famous dictum of Hitchcock's: "to make a great film you need three things – the script, the script and the script". In any case, with *Interview* Buscemi has created a masterpiece that will be a good lesson to any aspiring film maker, especially considering that the budget for the film must have been minimal. The 'three camera' system, employed by Van Gogh, and replicated here with some of the original Dutch crew, whereby one camera is focused on the male lead, one on the female, and the other on them both creating a sense of intimacy, crucially allows a film to be shot in days which is important when budgets are tight.

The only drawback to the film is that being eighty-five minutes long, and based around the lives of two characters, it is never going to be an epic like, say, *Forrest Gump*. Yet what an eighty-five minutes! Theo Van Gogh, I'm sure, would have been delighted with the result.

Ben Lamy